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Key Note Address to  
Local Government Managers Australia  
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Good morning and it's a pleasure to be the key note speaker here at the Local Government Managers Australia Women in Local Government Management Forum.

I would like to congratulate the Local Government Managers Australia for adopting a strategy for Women in Local Government Management.

A couple of years ago I co-chaired an inquiry titled *At the Table* which was an inquiry into women's representation on regional and rural bodies of influence- which I will be talking about this morning.

It is encouraging to see that organisations like LGMA take equal representation on boards and management positions seriously and are actively creating policies to encourage more gender diversity in the workplace at a higher management level.

In the *At the Table* report we conducted a questionnaire and asked the question:

- Why do you think numbers of women on regional boards/ Committees or other decision making bodies are lower than their participation in the workforce and the community?
- Over 50 % responded with Boardroom culture and over 40% cited women's views of themselves, which is very alarming.

Many women are educated enough and qualified to take on these positions yet many perceived their 'lack of acceptance' and 'lack of confidence' as a reason why women were not being represented in positions of influence.

This is not about creating quotas- this is about education and creating policies and strategies for getting the best people for the job needed whether they are male or female.

We want to see an equal race.

I would now like to talk about my involvement in the *At the Table* report and how the report came about.

In November 2004, the Hon John Anderson MP, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services recognised leadership development activity did not translate into significant numbers of women on bodies of influence in regional areas.

Mr Anderson commenced work straight away to increase the level of women's participation within organisations in the rural industry and regional development sectors.

This work culminated in a report titled *A Snapshot of Women's Representation on Selected Regional Bodies*.

When this report was launched in June 2005, Mr Anderson announced that the Howard Government would hold an inquiry into women's representation on rural and regional bodies of influence in Australia.

In December 2005, the Minister for Transport and Regional Services was the Hon Warren Truss MP. Mr Truss announced the terms of reference for the inquiry and inquiry panel membership.

The Inquiry was chaired by Ms Heather Ridout, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Industry Group and Mr Dennis Mutton, Chair of the Grape and Wine Research Development Corporation and me.

The inquiry was to report on:

- The position of women in decision-making in rural and regional Australia
- Factors assisting and impeding the broad participation of women in bodies of influence in rural and regional Australia
- Strategies for industry and governments aimed at increasing women's representation for the longer-term sustainability and competitiveness of rural and regional Australia.

The inquiry consulted a wide range of stakeholders and there were a number of organisations that provided the Inquiry with submissions such as

- The Australian Government Office for Women
- Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
- Australian Women in Agriculture
- WomenSpeak Network
- And the, Australian Institute of Company Directors, among many other organisations and individuals

The report reinforced the panel's thoughts that regional and rural women are heavily involved in small business, agriculture, environmental management, their communities and families

Many women are well educated, broadly experienced and deeply committed and would no doubt make a valuable contribution to any board, advisory body or local government authority.

Participation rates for women on decision making bodies of influence in regional areas are particularly low.

This under-representation is a significant issue for both industry and governments, and has been for many years.

The panel heard of the many barriers women face in getting a seat at a decision making table.

The women that responded to our inquiry cited their frustration at the slow pace of change over two decades.

Governments, Businesses and communities are not tapping into the wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise that women have to contribute- and as a result the decisions made by organisations are not as well informed as they could be

When releasing the report we were very mindful that we did not want this to be a token report that gathered dust and saw no change over the next decade.

There is a whole new generation of professional women coming through the ranks in business and industry across Australia and it is extremely important that these women have the opportunity to take the seat at the table of a body of influence and not be discouraged by 'board room culture' or 'lack of confidence'.

We want every woman in business and industry to feel confident when 'mixing it with the boys' and show that they have plenty to offer.

Regional and rural women responded very strongly to the inquiry. The key messages we received were that women have waited far too long and have been too patient and that governments, industries and communities are losing out by not taking advantage of their capacity to contribute to decision making in rural and regional Australia.

There were many consistent messages emerging through responses to the inquiry. While there were other issues identified, issues were predominantly raised around the following themes.

- Support for women- Women indicated that they were more likely to succeed if they have solid support from their families, their communities and their industries. Like men, women do better when they are encouraged, given opportunities to develop and perform and recognised their achievements.
- Public and family roles- There was a strong view that men are predominately perceived as the public face of a partnership and women as the care givers and supporters, providing strategic advice and influencing in the background.
- Organisational cultures that exclude women- Many women reported feeling alienated, excluded and devalued by a boardroom. This included negative reactions from women and men who perceived women as tokens.
- Reliance on known networks- Many women involved in the inquiry were strongly linked to women's networks, but had more tenuous links with other, more influential networks.
- Lack of women in top management- There are very few women in Australia who occupy chief executive or senior executive positions. This is true of major capital cities but even more the case outside major cities.
- Inadequate signposting of entry points- Throughout our consultations women have found it difficult to identify opportunities to take on positions on bodies of influence.

- Confidence of women- As mentioned before lack of confidence and the women's view of themselves and feeling 'under qualified' was a reason behind a woman's absence from a decision-making body.
- Access to information and leadership development- Access to affordable local training and development opportunities relevant to women's interests, development needs and circumstances is a significant issue. Many rural women cited distance, time and costs of attending courses as a problem in their area.
- Costs of participation- Many women fill multiple roles: wife, business partner, mother, carer, employee or business owner and volunteer. Balancing these competing priorities in a rural area can be time consuming and complex, especially where access to services and support is limited.

The *At the Table* report, published in August 2006, recommended thirteen key actions for governments which included:

- **Recommendation 1-** Strengthening, implementing and monitoring policy to increase the number of appointments to women on boards including those from regional, rural and remote Australia.
- **Recommendation 2-** Ensuring transparent and competitive selection processes.

- **Recommendation 3-** Ensuring access to the widest possible selection of candidates when making board appointments.
- **Recommendations 4-** Assessing the composition of current boards and identify gender and skill gaps.
- **Recommendation 5-** Using transparent and competitive processes to fill board vacancies.
- **Recommendation 6-** Where organisations make direct appointments to fill board vacancies, internal governments should require recommendations for such appointments to include advice concerning the process that has been followed to identify the widest pool of candidates , where the appointment would not improve the gender balance of the board, the reasons why this has not been achievable
- **Recommendation 7-** Implementing electronic registers of women who are interested in being appointed to government boards
- **Recommendation 8-** Publicly reporting on an annual basis on board and committee composition across government agencies.
- **Recommendation 9-** Undertaking research on the value that gender balance adds to companies' performance and good governance, and develop and publish guidance on achieving greater diversity in membership of advisory forums.
- **Recommendation 10-** Demonstrating diversity in their communications, representing women as active participants and decision makers, including in non-traditional roles.
- **Recommendation 11-** Providing and administer additional resources in the order of \$4.5 million per annum to develop

the leadership potential of women in regional and rural Australia.

- **Recommendation 12-** Continuing to sponsor rural and generic leadership development programs and increase sponsorship available to regional and rural women to undertake courses relevant to their development needs.
- **Recommendation 13-** Establishing a webpage linking women to information on
  - a) Training and development
  - b) Resources to assist women interested in board and local government membership and;
  - c) Role models, mentoring and networking

The report also handed down recommendations for representative organisations in general as well as actions for organisations operating in rural and regional Australia.

The previous Howard Government responded to the *At the table report* in the 2006 Federal Budget by committing \$4.5 million dollars over 4 years to increase the number of women on boards and other decision making bodies in regional Australia.

The policy, announced by the office of the Minister for Transport and Regional Services at the time, the Hon Mark Vaile MP, was titled *The Regional Women's Action Plan for Women's Representation in Decision Making*.

The policy consisted of 4 targeted strategies:

- An information strategy targeted at regional boards to promote the value and diversity in decision making and to provide regional boards with opportunities to meet with women from regional Australia to build confidence in the skills of these potential board candidates
- Influencing demand by educating organisations on the business benefits of greater participation by women in board decision making and providing opportunities to recognise and showcase excellence in boards
- Providing transition pathways for women to participate on decision making bodies
- Establishing networks and enabling environments for regional women and increasing promotion of board opportunities to women participating in the networks.

Finally we had a defined strategy in place to promote diversity in leadership in regional Australia.

The Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) under the Coalition Government established the Regional Women's Advisory Council.

The 12 Council Members were chosen because of their expertise in key issues facing regional Australians such as agriculture, health, education, business, social welfare, regional development, indigenous issues and industry.

The Council met on a quarterly basis, with an agenda of developing inclusive leadership, growing business and connected communities.

The Council last met in September 2007, but has been in recess since the most recent federal election. The current Government have assured us they will consider options for the best way forward for the Regional Women's Advisory Council following the Rural Women's Summit.

Within the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government (formerly DOTARS), the Regional Communities Section has the lead role in working with women in regional Australia to find practical ways to address issues of concern to them. The Section works closely with other agencies responsible for policy and programmes affecting rural women.

The Office for Women sponsors the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation Rural Women's Award which is designed to recognise and encourage the vital contribution women make to rural Australia.

I am pleased to hear that the current Government and the Office for Women have taken this issue seriously and continued the work and build on the foundations the Coalition Government lay.

The current Government have several strategies in place to address some of the recommendations that were made in the *At the Table* Report. These strategies are:

*AppointWomen.* *AppointWomen* addresses **Recommendations 1, 3 and 7** and is a free and confidential on-line registration database for women who wish to be considered for an appointment to an Australian Government board or decision-making body.

Also in accordance with **Recommendation 1**, the Government held the National Rural Women's Summit on 27 and 28 June 2008.

The Summit was part of the strategy to increase participation of women on regional and rural bodies and to strengthen the voice of rural women at the national policy level.

Following the Summit, the government examined the establishment of a National Rural Women's Network, within the context of the evaluation of the National Women's Secretariats, which I believe will be undertaken in the second half of this year

The evaluation will take into account the Government's election commitment to establish the Network and the role of the existing National Rural Women's Coalition.

In order to further increase board diversity, the Australian Government, in conjunction with all state and territory governments, is committed to the *National Strategy for the Increased Participation of Women on Boards*.

The Office for Women is working with all jurisdictions to examine and develop opportunities to increase the participation of women on boards, in line with the aims and objectives of the *National Strategy*.

The *National Strategy* is currently being redeveloped with a view to Women's Ministers reviewing the strategy at their meeting later this year.

In line with **Recommendation 2**, on 5 February 2008 the Government introduced a policy implementing transparent and merit-based assessment in the selection of most Australian Public Service (APS) agency heads and other statutory offices working in, or in conjunction with, APS agencies.

A key part of this policy is encouraging Australian Government departments to use the AppointWomen service, ensuring that more women, whose areas of knowledge and expertise complement the existing profile and responsibilities of each board, are considered for appointment.

In order to address **Recommendation 8**, The Office for Women administers the Government Boards Reporting System, or 'GovBoards', which records the details of every appointment to a Commonwealth Government board or decision making body.

The Office for Women uses this system to monitor and report on the number of women who hold positions on Australian government boards and decision making bodies.

This is used to inform the Australian Government on the level of women's representation in decision making roles across Australian Government agencies.

In line with **Recommendations 13**, the Office for Women website is currently undergoing a substantial review and will include material on women's leadership and board participation in rural and regional areas.

To address **Recommendation 9**, the Australian Government, through the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, conducts and publishes research into the benefits of diversity on boards.

EOWA also reports regularly on the board diversity of ASX 200 companies, in order to assess the levels of women's representation in senior positions in the private sector.

To generally address the issue of women's representation on bodies of influence, the Office for Women is currently undertaking a scoping study for a program that aims to skill 'grass-roots' women and provide capacity building training to women's non-government organisations (NGOs).

The purpose of the scoping study is to investigate, recommend and develop modular leadership and skills training program for women that also develops and strengthens their networks and provides them with the skills and opportunities for better engagement in their communities.

The recommendations I have discussed with you today may not cover all the recommendations of the *At the Table Report*, but they do

continue on from the work instigated by the Coalition Government several years ago.

It is heartening to see that this report has not been left to gather dust and its recommendations are being taken seriously by both sides of the political spectrum.

I want to hear in the next decade, women in industry commenting on the progress we have made in a positive manner.

I again would like to congratulate the LGMA for raising awareness through this forum and for their strategy for Women in Local Government Management.

Thank you for listening and it has been a great pleasure to be here today.

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