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UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
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Indigenous Women

**Statement by Ms Shirley McPherson
Chairperson of the Indigenous Land Corporation
on behalf of the Australian Delegation**

(Check against delivery)

Mr Chair, Distinguished Delegates

The special theme of this, the third session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, is devoted to Indigenous Women, and was prompted by a recognition of the significant contributions made by those women to their communities and of the special challenges that they face. As an Indigenous Australian woman it gives me great pleasure to address the forum on behalf of the Australian government.

We wish to address the question of the rights of Indigenous girls and the relationship between traditional cultural practices and human rights. This is indeed a landscape of risk (to use the Chairman's words) for many Indigenous girls. The landscape is threatening. Many Indigenous girls are caught between their own culture and the non-Indigenous world. Their rights must be protected and guaranteed.

In my own country there remains a profound gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. But it is a gulf that is steadily narrowing. For example:

- The proportion of Indigenous girls who completed high school has risen from 32 per cent in 1996 to 42 per cent in 2002.
- The number of Indigenous females enrolled in higher education has increased by 74 per cent in the past decade (and the number of graduates has increased even more dramatically).

That is not to say that all is good news. My young colleague, Tania Major, who is also here with me, could tell you that of the 15 students in her class at school in far north Queensland, she is the only one who went to university – or even finished high school. She was the only girl in her class who did not have a child by the age of 15.

For both Tania and I, education and personal determination have been the path to freedom. Tania trained as a criminologist and I trained as an accountant.

Tania and I represent a new wave of Indigenous women emerging today in Australia.

For example:

- in the last five years the number of Indigenous women with jobs increased by 27 per cent;
- the unemployment rate for Indigenous teenage girls dropped by almost a quarter; and

As a result the median income of Indigenous women has risen by more than 20 per cent in real terms over the past decade.

Australian Indigenous women are now:

- University Professors
- Magistrates
- Members of Parliament; and
- senior officials in government.

For my part, for example, I am Chair of the Indigenous Land Corporation – a government corporation which has an annual budget of \$50 million to buy back land for dispossessed Indigenous people and to assist in the management and development of that land.

None of this is to say that all Indigenous women enjoy the same degree of opportunity. While many Indigenous women are doing well, too many others remain dependent upon welfare payments, live in substandard housing or in communities providing few basic services. Levels of violence against Indigenous women are unacceptably high, and the number of Indigenous women in contact with the criminal justice system is increasing.

Having said that, however, the question for the Permanent Forum is to identify ways in which the United Nations “system” can better address the needs of Indigenous women. One such area is the plight of girls who are expected to become wives in early marriages.

There is no room to fudge basic human rights issues in deference to outdated traditional cultural practices. Recently in Australia we had a case of a man in his 50s attempting to use traditional law as a defence for having sexual relations with a 15-year old girl who was his “promised” wife. Fortunately the higher courts rejected this argument and subsequent legislation has now put the matter beyond doubt.

Indigenous girls now have the same legal protection as other girls.

Mr Chair

If we are really here today to take seriously the fundamental human rights of Indigenous girls who will eventually become the Indigenous women of tomorrow, we cannot compromise on this critical issue, or any other breach of human rights in the name of traditional practice. Any Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples must enshrine

child protection and reject those traditional practices that are harmful. I therefore call upon this Forum, in its coordinating role, to request the Working Group to address this issue.

We recognise that government alone cannot solve all the problems that we face – and that, much as we may wish, improvements do not come overnight. To attain the long-term gains that will deliver improved outcomes and advance equalities for Indigenous People requires a partnership of shared responsibility. Not only a shared responsibility between Governments and Indigenous people; but also a societal partnership that acknowledges the role of men and boys. Significant efforts are being made within Australia to develop such approaches, and by working in partnership with government our communities are seeking to build a better future for our people. Indigenous women are playing a major role in this process. We are proud of their efforts.