

# Reflections and Key Take Home Messages from Women Deliver

Melbourne Australia 26<sup>th</sup> April 2026 – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2026

Dear Salla

Thank you very much for inviting me to represent Zonta International at Women Deliver 2026 in Melbourne.

I was also fortunate to attend alongside Sharyl Scott, Zonta UN ESCAP Representative and representative of Zonta Australia, Carole Theobald, International Zonta Says NOW Chair and Lyn Foley, Remarkable Women Powerful Stories. Together, we formed a strong and collaborative Australian Zonta presence as we navigated the wide range of advocacy, partnership and networking opportunities throughout the conference while also fulfilling our respective Zonta International responsibilities.

Among the more than 6,500 participants from over 170 countries were approximately another 10 passionate Zontians from across most Australian states, providing a visible, engaged and well-connected Zonta presence throughout Women Deliver 2026.

Following my attendance at CSW70 earlier this year, Women Deliver 2026 reinforced that the global gender equality movement is entering an increasingly contested and politically complex phase. While there remains enormous energy, innovation and commitment across civil society, the conference also highlighted growing concern regarding backlash, shrinking civic space and the increasingly organised and strategic nature of anti-gender movements.

At the same time, the conference demonstrated the resilience, sophistication and interconnectedness of the global feminist movement. There was a strong emphasis throughout the conference on intergenerational leadership, Indigenous knowledge, care economies, climate justice, bodily autonomy and the strengthening of democratic and public institutions. The conference carried both urgency and realism — a recognition that progress toward gender equality is neither inevitable nor secure.

One of the strongest and most inspiring themes throughout the conference was the power, confidence and sophistication of adolescent voices. The Girls Deliver Pre-Conference in particular demonstrated a significant shift away from viewing girls as passive recipients of policy and programs toward recognising adolescent girls as informed political actors and leaders in their own right — and they have stepped into that space strongly and with impatience. Their advocacy was articulate, intersectional, unapologetic and deeply grounded in lived experience. There was a clear expectation from younger generations that institutions move beyond consultation toward genuine shared leadership, accountability and power-sharing.

Importantly, the prominence of youth leadership throughout Women Deliver was not tokenistic. Young women and girls were shaping agendas, challenging systems and

demanding measurable accountability from governments, multilaterals and NGOs alike. The launch of the Adolescent Girls' Manifesto reflected this shift very clearly.

Another important observation was the increasing and deliberate use of the terminology “adolescents” and “adolescent girls and young women” rather than simply “girls” or “youth”. This reflects an evolving international policy and development framework that increasingly recognises adolescence as a distinct developmental, social and political cohort with specific rights, vulnerabilities and leadership capacities. The terminology acknowledges that adolescents occupy a unique space between childhood and adulthood, particularly in relation to bodily autonomy, SRHR, education, digital safety, climate vulnerability and civic participation.

This shift in language may also hold implications for organisations such as Zonta International. While Zonta's longstanding commitment to “women and girls” remains powerful and globally recognised, Women Deliver highlighted the extent to which international advocacy spaces are increasingly differentiating adolescents and young women as distinct cohorts requiring tailored engagement, policy responses and leadership pathways. There may be value in considering how Zonta's advocacy language, programs and partnerships continue to evolve in ways that both honour Zonta's heritage and reflect contemporary international discourse and emerging feminist leadership frameworks.

A second significant theme throughout the conference was the increasing focus on financing, philanthropy and power. Across many sessions there was acknowledgment that philanthropic funding has become increasingly influential in shaping priorities within the gender equality sector. While philanthropy continues to play a critical and often positive role in sustaining advocacy and innovation, there were also nuanced — and at times uncomfortable — discussions regarding unintended consequences, particularly where funding priorities influence agendas, shape narratives or unintentionally distort local priorities and grassroots leadership.

Related to this was a recurring discussion around “gender washing”. Several speakers reflected on the reality that while gender equality language is now widely adopted across institutions — albeit with increasing pushback — this does not necessarily translate into meaningful shifts in decision-making power, resource allocation or structural reform. In some forums there was palpable frustration that women and girls continue to be invited into spaces without substantive redistribution of authority. Put simply, the language of inclusion has advanced faster than the reality of power-sharing.

This led to one of the most important reflections from the conference: the issue of power itself. Women Deliver 2026 repeatedly returned to questions of who holds power, who defines priorities, who controls funding and whose voices are ultimately legitimised within international gender equality work. There was strong recognition that systemic inequality cannot be addressed solely through programs or representation alone — it also requires confronting entrenched political, institutional and economic power structures.

Alongside these discussions was a strong and consistent call for nation states to meet their obligations on gender equality, rather than relying excessively on civil society or philanthropy to fill gaps. Many speakers stressed that gender equality must remain a core responsibility of governments, embedded within legislation, policy, budgeting and accountability frameworks. This was particularly evident in discussions around SRHR, child marriage, girls' education, climate justice and humanitarian settings. There was concern that in some countries governments are retreating from commitments while expecting NGOs and philanthropic actors to sustain progress.

The conference also reinforced the importance of regional and local leadership, particularly from the Pacific and Global South. There was strong emphasis on Indigenous knowledge, community-led solutions and locally driven approaches rather than externally imposed models. This aligns strongly with Zonta's unique position as an organisation that combines international reach, UN partnerships and grassroots community presence through clubs.

Women Deliver 2026 also reinforced the importance of Zonta International's current governance review and the broader discussion regarding future organisational structures and sustainability. The conference demonstrated how increasingly influential global advocacy spaces are operating through coordinated national and regional voices capable of engaging strategically with governments, multilaterals, philanthropy and civil society partners at multiple levels simultaneously.

From an Australian perspective, the establishment of Zonta Australia as a national advocacy body has already strengthened our ability to engage credibly within these environments while remaining connected to grassroots club advocacy and local community action. Events such as Women Deliver highlighted the growing importance of nationally coordinated advocacy structures that can both reflect local lived experience and participate effectively in international policy and partnership discussions.

Importantly, this does not diminish the value of Zonta's longstanding district structure or club-based model which remain central to Zonta's identity and grassroots legitimacy. Rather, Women Deliver reinforced that there may be increasing opportunities for country-based structures to amplify Zonta's collective voice, strengthen strategic partnerships and position Zonta more effectively within contemporary international advocacy and governance environments. This appears highly consistent with many of the themes emerging through the current Governance Blueprint for the Future discussions.

One additional outcome of Women Deliver 2026 was the development of the Melbourne Declaration, which emerged progressively throughout the conference process and reflected many of the key themes discussed across plenary sessions, side events and stakeholder forums. The Declaration emphasised gender equality, bodily autonomy, climate justice, democratic participation, Indigenous leadership and the importance of sustained investment in women and girls. Given the broad alignment between the Declaration and many of Zonta International's longstanding advocacy priorities, there may be value in Zonta International considering whether

further engagement with the Declaration, including potential endorsement or signatory participation, may be appropriate as the initiative evolves.

Thank you again for the opportunity to represent Zonta International at Women Deliver 2026. It was both professionally and personally valuable and reinforced my strong belief that Zonta International remains uniquely positioned to contribute meaningfully to the evolving global gender equality landscape through its combination of international credibility, grassroots reach, trusted partnerships and long-standing commitment to advancing the status of women and girls worldwide.

Kind regards

Bridget Mather  
Chair, Zonta Australia

## Program of Events Attended or Presented

The following provides a summary of key events, presentations, meetings and discussions attended during Women Deliver 2026, together with selected observations and reflections relevant to Zonta International and Zonta Australia.

### 1. 26 April 2026 – Presentation: *The Girls Deliver Pre-Conference*

This pre-conference set the stage for the main Women Deliver 2026 conference (27–30 April) by providing a space for intergenerational dialogue and direct advocacy led by girls themselves.

The Girls Deliver Pre-Conference, held on 26 April 2026 in Narrm (Melbourne), opened Women Deliver 2026 by centring adolescent girls (11–23 years) as leaders rather than passive beneficiaries. The session launched the *Adolescent Girls’ Manifesto*, demanding action on safety, bodily autonomy, education and climate justice.

#### Key Synopsis of the Girls Deliver Pre-Conference (2026)

- **Core Theme:** Shifting from treating girls as “passive beneficiaries” to recognising and empowering them as leaders within the gender equality movement.
- **The Adolescent Girls’ Manifesto:** Written by girls aged 11–23, the manifesto was unveiled as a central document highlighting their demands for safety, education and climate justice. (Attached in email)
- **Focus on Accountability:** The Adolescent Girls Investment Plan (AGIP) hosted a strategy session focused on “girl-centred accountability”, ensuring governments turn promises into action.
- **Key Participants:** The session brought together global youth leaders, advocates and organisations, including UNFPA, Plan International and the Population Council, to discuss the current ecosystem of girls’ rights.
- **Regional Focus:** As part of the first Women Deliver conference hosted within the Oceanic Pacific region, the event highlighted local, Indigenous, regional and global perspectives.

#### Presentation During this Pre-Conference – A Partnership Between UNFPA and Zonta International

**Session title:** *Adolescent girls, bodily autonomy and SRHR: Strategising to counter the pushback and rollbacks*

This session will look at the pushback and rollbacks adolescent girls’ advocates are facing regarding their bodily autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) to identify collective political and accountability strategies to counter regressions and safeguard their human rights.

## **2. 26 April 2026 – Bilateral Meeting with UNICEF**

### **Participants**

- Sanjay Wijesekera (Regional Director UNICEF)
- Veronica Kamanga-Njikho – Coordinator of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage
- Saadgi Sanjay Rajani – Chief of Partnership
- Sharyl Scott – Zonta Australia (D24) / Zonta Australia at UN ESCAP Bangkok
- Bridget Mather – Chair, Zonta Australia

### **Agenda Overview**

1. Zonta's strategic priorities
2. Advocacy avenues
3. Opportunities for alignment
4. UNICEF to express sincere appreciation for the strength and impact of the Zonta partnership and reconnect and exchange
5. UNICEF to share updates on global priorities, including the Adolescent Girls Agenda
6. UNICEF to share regional priorities across Asia and the Pacific

In essence, this was an informal meet-and-greet between parties. Topics discussed included:

- An overview of Zonta International from a governance perspective
- Exploration of models such as Zonta Australia at a global level
- Interest in whether these developments may create future partnership or funding opportunities for UNFPA/UNICEF engagement at national levels. It was clarified that there was no change to the way international projects are determined and that Zonta International would remain the appropriate avenue for progressing those discussions.
- It appeared that UNICEF within the Pacific region is expanding its footprint, possibly reflecting broader pressures currently affecting the UN system. While somewhat unclear, there did appear to be increasing geographical reach and responsibility among senior staff.
- Nepal appeared to be of particular interest and concern.

## **3. 27 April 2026 – Private Briefing on Girls' Education & Women's Economic Participation in Afghanistan**

### **Invitation**

*Dear Bridget,*

*I am pleased to invite you to a private, high-level briefing convened by UNICEF Australia on new and emerging analysis examining the costs of inaction on girls' education and women's labour force participation in Afghanistan.*

*This closed-door discussion will bring together a select group of UNICEF's key public and private sector partners for an early exchange on the findings, their implications, and what they mean for our collective engagement going forward. The research offers a clear perspective on what continued exclusion means not only for girls and women, but for Afghanistan's broader social and economic trajectory.*

*Sanjay will be joined virtually by colleagues from UNICEF Afghanistan, who will share initial insights and reflections, and open a candid dialogue on how we, as partners, can respond with greater urgency, coherence, and ambition.*

**Date:** 27 April

**Time:** 08:00 am – 09:00 am

**Location:** MCEC, Clarendon Room G, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre

*We would very much value your presence and perspective in this important conversation. Tea, coffee, and a continental breakfast will be served.*

*Please RSVP to Saadgi Rajani ([srajani@unicef.org](mailto:srajani@unicef.org)) and Philippa Lysaght ([plysaght@unicef.org.au](mailto:plysaght@unicef.org.au)) by 20 April 2026. If you are unable to attend, we would appreciate if you could nominate a member of your team.*

*Warm regards,  
Mwango Mainda  
On behalf of Sanjay Wijesekera  
Regional Director, South Asia  
UNICEF*

This briefing focused on the current situation facing women and girls in Afghanistan and flagged the release of the *Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation Report No. 3, 31 March 2026* (attached in email).

There was some Q&A following the presentation, although limited broader discussion. The briefing was attended by the Australian Ambassador for Gender Equality, Michelle O'Byrne. This role sits within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and carries an international rather than domestic focus.

#### **4. 27 April 2026 – High Level Ministerial and Parliamentary Forum SRHR – Driving Equality, Ensuring Justice**

*(Attendance and interest only.)*

The session focused on bridging policy with practice, ensuring sustainable SRHR financing and addressing regional disparities, particularly within the Oceanic Pacific.

#### **Details / Outcomes / Key Commitments**

The forum served as a high-level call to action to embed SRHR into national development strategies, resulting in several key actions:

- **Agenda:** Bridging policy with practice, ensuring sustainable SRHR financing and addressing regional disparities, particularly within the Oceanic Pacific.

- **Substantial Funding:** The Australian Government pledged \$90.2 million to advance gender equality and reproductive rights in the Indo-Pacific, including \$62.5 million for women’s rights organisations and \$27.7 million for Pacific and Southeast Asian reproductive health initiatives.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Strengthened regional cooperation to protect SRHR amid growing global opposition.
- **New Resources:** Launch of the “Safe Abortion Calculator” and “Just the Numbers Australia” to support advocacy and investment cases.
- **Convenors & Participants:** Hosted by AFPPD and APGPD, with participation from leaders including Prime Minister Feleti Teo of Tuvalu and Australian Minister for International Development Dr Anne Aly.

## 5. 27 April 2026 – UN80 DSG CSO Roundtable

A dynamic and at times fiery session involving Amina J. Mohammed (UN Deputy Secretary-General) and civil society representatives.

## 6. 28 April 2026 – Presentation: *No Time to Lose: Scaling Solutions and Financing to End Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings and Beyond*

### Agenda and Event Details

- **Focus:** Scaling up financing and locally rooted solutions to end child marriage in humanitarian contexts.
- **Co-hosts:** UNFPA, UNICEF, OAFLAD, Zonta International, Girls Not Brides, Accelerate Research Hub and the Governments of Australia, Canada, Sierra Leone and the UK.
- **Key Themes:** Bridging the gap between existing solutions and necessary funding, with strong emphasis on youth leadership and consultation with those closest to the issues.
- **Session Objectives:** Sharing concrete experiences from country-level programs and co-creating a Call to Action focused on protecting girls.

This session ran significantly overtime and, as a result, there was limited discussion following the presentations. However, it provided an excellent overview of the current global landscape.

It also reinforced for me the unique position Zonta occupies through its combination of global UN engagement, international partnership projects and the grassroots strength and legitimacy provided through clubs. Zonta International was clearly held in high regard by speakers throughout the session.

## 7. 28 April 2026 – Julia Gillard in Conversation with Julie Inman Grant

*(Live recording for Gillard’s “A Podcast of One’s Own”)*

### Julia Gillard Bio – Interest Only

- Former Prime Minister of Australia
- Ambassador for Women Deliver
- Founder and inaugural Chair of the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership (GIWL) at King’s College London
- Chair of Wellcome (appointed April 2021)
- Patron of CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education)

### **Julie Inman Grant – Australia’s eSafety Commissioner**

The discussion focused heavily on the rise of technology-facilitated abuse and the need for new approaches to gender equality.

#### **Key Topics Included**

- The “manosphere” and online misogyny
- Tech-facilitated abuse, including deepfakes and doxxing
- The “chilling effect” on women entering leadership and political roles
- Targeting and abuse directed toward regulators
- Strategic backlash against gender equality
- Institutional sexism and historical reflections from public life

The conversation reinforced that gender equality is not a “luxury issue” and requires active, bold and strategic resistance to organised rollback efforts.

## **8. 29 April 2026 – Invitation Breakfast: UNFPA/UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and Girls Not Brides**

### **Invitation**

*Dear Bridget,*

*I hope this email finds you well.*

*On behalf of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, we are delighted to invite you to a closed-door breakfast dialogue for funders and governments taking place at Women Deliver 2026.*

*This will be an informal, targeted conversation over breakfast with a small group of key funders and government partners. There will be no speeches. Participants are encouraged to come ready to connect, exchange and engage in open dialogue.*

**Date:** *Wednesday, 29 April 2026*

**Time:** *7:30–8:45 am (Breakfast served from 7:15 am throughout the meeting)*

**Location:** *Crowne Plaza Melbourne*

*(Approximately a 2-minute walk from the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre)*

#### **Why does this conversation matter?**

This breakfast is designed to leverage the Women Deliver moment as a shared space to:

- Strengthen connections and affirm our shared intent to end child marriage

- Create a relational bridge on the next steps for collective action to unlock, protect and better align funding to end child marriage

We hope you will join this energising and purposeful dialogue by representing Zonta and we look forward to connecting over breakfast in Melbourne.

Please RSVP by Friday, 24 April, to enable us to finalise the planning for the meeting.

Warm regards,  
UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage & Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage  
Jose-Roberto

This provided an opportunity to meet several UNFPA regional representatives, including Bidisha Banerjee Pillai (Director Pacific Sub-Regional Office and Country Representative Fiji).

The session was intentionally informal, with no formal speeches and only a brief presentation outlining recent global statistics regarding reductions in child marriage.

I was seated with the Solomon Islands Minister for Gender Affairs, the Hon Cathy Launa Nori, whose government currently has legislation progressing through Parliament to increase the legal marriage age for girls from 15 to 18 years. The proposal reportedly has bipartisan support and broad community backing.

## 9. 29 April 2026 – Feminist Calls to Action on Gender and Climate Justice for COP31

*(A Zonta Australia interest)*

Carole Theobald (Zonta Says NOW) has strong connections with a number of organisations involved in this work.

Feminist leaders, particularly from the Oceania-Pacific region, issued urgent calls to action linking gender justice with climate action ahead of COP31.

### Key Themes and Calls to Action

- **COP31 Preparation:** Although COP31 is no longer being held in Australia, the session provided valuable networking opportunities and reinforced calls for gender action plans and Indigenous knowledge to remain central to climate decision-making.
- **Building Community Resilience:** Advocates emphasised moving from passive inclusion to active leadership, ensuring women and gender-diverse people drive climate solutions.
- **Gender and Climate Backlash:** Workshops focused on identifying and resisting anti-gender and anti-climate-action backlash through broad alliances.
- **Financing and Accountability:** Strong calls were made for gender-just transition funding to reach local communities and Indigenous stewards.

- **Intersectionality:** Discussions reinforced that climate change is fundamentally a human rights issue requiring feminist, economic and peacebuilding perspectives.

## **10. 29 April 2026 – CARE**

*(Zonta International cc'd into invitation from April Calnin, CARE USA)*

Sharyl Scott and I met with:

- Esther Watts, Associate Vice President of Program Strategy and Partnerships
- Zara Rapoport, Global Policy Director, Women and Girls

I also met CARE Australia CEO Morgana Ryan, whom I intend to follow up with further.

Overall, the discussion was low key but there was clear interest in continuing and potentially strengthening the relationship at both international and Australian levels. There was also acknowledgment that the organisation had lost some momentum in recent years for a variety of reasons and was now focused on rebuilding that momentum.

## **11. Meeting with ActionAid Australia – Maeva Freeman**

*(Head of Partnerships & Impact at ActionAid Australia)*

Carole Theobald and I met with Maeva Freeman and colleagues. As with several other meetings throughout the conference, this provided a valuable networking opportunity as Zonta Australia continues establishing its national presence and strategic relationships.

We also attended a function involving their philanthropic partner Koda, which appeared to be a highly sophisticated partnership model.

There were many sessions across the conference, and I feel we only touched on some superficially. The most dynamic and inspirational sessions were often the plenary presentations, particularly:

- *Shaping a New World Order: People-Driven Multilateralism*
- *Women Are Not Negotiable: Conflict, Power and Accountability*