

## My Reflections of Women Deliver

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In April 2026, I had the privilege of attending the Women Deliver 2026 Conference in Melbourne — or Narm, as it is known to the local First Nations people. More than 6,100 people from 198 countries came together for five extraordinary days of conversation, collaboration, and courage.

Long after the statistics fade, what stays with me most is how the conference made me feel. I may forget the exact words spoken on stage, but I will always remember the emotions they stirred — hope, grief, solidarity, discomfort, inspiration, and determination.

The Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre was transformed into a vibrant gathering place filled with energy and ideas. More than one hundred organisations showcased their work in a huge exhibition space that included a Climate Hub, First Nations Hub, Youth Zone, Arts Zone, and many informal meeting spaces. I spent a great deal of time in the Climate Hub, where conversations flowed easily and connections formed naturally among people united by a shared commitment to justice and equality.

Zonta Australia had a visible presence too. We created badges, flyers, and table toppers that sparked many conversations and helped raise awareness about Zonta's work and values.

At its heart, Women Deliver is much more than a conference. Held every three years in different parts of the world, it brings together activists, policymakers, academics, community leaders, and young people to imagine and shape a more equal future for women and girls. The 2026 conference focused on four major themes: adolescent girls' rights and sexual and reproductive health, climate justice, countering anti-rights movements, and strengthening multilateral action and feminist leadership.

What made the event so powerful was not only the content, but the atmosphere. For a few days, it felt as though we were living in the kind of world we all hope to create — inclusive, compassionate, respectful, and united. There were First Nations women, disabled people, young women, old women, and members of the LGBTQI+ community. There was childcare. Translations were available through the app. Everyone was equal. I had never been to such an inclusive conference. Individually, we may be whispers, but together we become a voice impossible to ignore.

One of the most moving experiences for me was the pre-conference gathering, *Decolonizing Futures: First Nations Indigenous Women Advancing Treaty and Global Solidarity*. Hosted by First Nations women from Australia and the Pacific, the session opened with ceremony, dance, song, and exchanges of gifts. Delegates wore traditional dress and flower garlands, creating a sense of pride, culture, and belonging that filled the room.

The discussions were deeply emotional and confronting. I listened to Indigenous women from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Fiji, Peru, and the United States

speak about colonisation, dispossession, treaty rights, self-determination, and survival. Again and again, speakers returned to the themes of dignity, belonging, and the importance of ensuring that Indigenous women are not merely consulted, but recognised as leaders and decision-makers.

Several moments remain etched in my memory. Canadian speaker Cora McGuire-Cyrette said, “We are the leaders our ancestors prayed for.” June Oscar from Australia spoke powerfully about the “Killing Times” and the attempts to erase Indigenous culture and identity, yet also about love, healing, and the strength carried through generations of women. Rosalie Gonzales from the United States reminded us that self-determination is about power — about who gets to decide.

I left that session carrying a profound sense of sadness and reflection. I felt deeply aware of the privilege I have inherited through colonial systems that caused enormous harm to Indigenous communities. Yet I also came away understanding that privilege can be used constructively — to listen, to amplify voices, and to support healing and justice.

Throughout the session, Pacific Island women would spontaneously burst into song, a beautiful reminder that culture and identity can survive even through generations of oppression. Their resilience was extraordinary. At a time when many Pacific nations are now also facing existential threats from climate change and rising seas, their determination to protect both culture and country was inspiring.

Another memorable pre-conference session focused on feminist climate justice. Here, participants sat around tables covered in butcher’s paper and sticky notes, sharing stories of climate action from around the world. We explored adaptation, resilience, and what communities need in order to thrive in the face of climate change.

What struck me most was the sense of connection. By the end of the session, strangers were greeting one another like old friends in the hallways and cafés. At one point, participants broke into an impromptu song led by climate activist Mishy Singano:

“Everywhere we go, people want to know who we are, so we tell them —  
We are the feminists, the mighty, mighty feminists, fighting for justice and for liberation.”

It was impossible not to feel uplifted by the sense of solidarity in the room.

The opening ceremony set the tone for the entire conference. Held in a plenary theatre seating more than 5,000 people, it featured an impressive lineup including Australia’s Governor-General Sam Mostyn, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Tuvalu Prime Minister Feleti Teo, and Dr Maliha Khan, President and CEO of Women Deliver.

Across the conference, the quality of speakers and moderators was exceptional. Justin Trudeau, Helen Clark, Jacinda Ardern, Australian political leaders in gender

and climate justice, South Pacific island women on the climate frontlines, women from war-torn regions, leaders of grassroots organizations and international NGOs.

Sessions were carefully structured, often pairing difficult conversations about injustice with practical examples of solutions and hope. Interspersed between discussions were poetry, music, dance, and storytelling that gave the event warmth and humanity.

Some of the most powerful sessions featured women speaking about conflict, displacement, and survival. We heard from a Rohingya woman whose mother fled Myanmar carrying five children across the border, terrified that if she let go of one child she might never see them again. Women from Gaza, Afghanistan, and Tigray shared stories of loss, war, and unimaginable hardship. Their courage in speaking openly about trauma and resilience left the audience visibly moved.

Again and again, speakers reinforced the importance of women's leadership. One quote that stayed with me came from Liz Broderick: "Rights are fragile, solidarity is fierce." Another memorable message was, "The best policies are those designed by the people you want to reach."

I was also struck by the strong emphasis on intergenerational leadership. During one Welcome to Country, a three-year-old granddaughter wandered onto the stage and grabbed the microphone. Instead of being hurried away, she was embraced as part of the moment. It challenged my own upbringing, where children were often expected to remain silent, and reinforced a powerful message repeated throughout the conference: decisions about young people must include young people.

The conference also highlighted the importance of collaboration. One exciting development was the launch of the Feminists Climate Collective (FeCC), bringing together eight Australian organisations working on climate justice. Their message was clear: no single organisation can solve these issues alone. Collaboration, shared leadership, and systems change are essential.

That message resonated strongly with me. Too often, organisations work in silos, even when pursuing similar goals. Women Deliver demonstrated the power of partnerships and collective action. I hope Zonta can continue building stronger alliances in this space, because meaningful systems change will only happen when we work together.

Some of my most memorable moments actually happened outside the formal sessions — in corridors, queues, and lifts. Those spontaneous conversations with women from the Pacific, Africa, North America, and beyond became some of the richest parts of the experience. The conference created an environment where connection felt natural and purposeful.

The closing ceremony was emotional and uplifting. Delegates contributed to the final Melbourne Declaration throughout the conference, and at the closing event representatives from many sectors — including young people, First Nations women, diplomats, and men's advocacy groups — stood together to share their commitments to the future.

The conference concluded with music, dancing, and celebration led by performer Madame Gandhi. It was a joyful ending to an event that had challenged hearts and minds in equal measure.

Looking back, Women Deliver was one of the most inspiring events I have ever attended. It reminded me that while the challenges facing women and girls are immense, so too is the collective strength of those working for change. The conference created space not only for difficult truths, but also for hope, creativity, solidarity, and action.

I would strongly encourage Zontians to learn more about Women Deliver and, if possible, attend future conferences. Every aspect of gender equality was explored through respectful and open dialogue, and the relationships formed there have the potential to spark collaborations and change across the world.