Zonta Australia
Zonta Says NOW Think Tank
MARCH 2026 UPDATE

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Gathering at the Waterhole



What a month to be a Zontian.

This image of ten zebras gathering at a waterhole feels like the perfect way to open this edition. Like these zebras, women from around the world are gathering right now at the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) in New York. This is the world's largest annual gathering dedicated to gender equality. You can follow progress on this live blog and also register to attend hundreds of virtual events hosted by the NGO CSW70 Forum. The Zonta Says NOW team presented virtually yesterday. CSW ends on 20 March, so there is still time to be part of it.

This edition has plenty to keep you informed and inspired. New data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows the world is generally going backwards on women in politics, but not Australia! The latest gender pay gap figures are out, and while there is cautious progress, the numbers are still sobering. On climate, Australia is navigating significant legislative change and preparing for a remarkable role on the world stage at COP31 in November.

Speaking of COP31, we are delighted to welcome Kate Thwaites, Australia's Special Envoy for Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience, as a guest speaker at our April Think Tank. She will be joined by Sally Quinn from Green Collect, who is the *2025 D23 Women Taking Climate Action* awardee.

If you missed our February Think Tank with Dr. Margaret Moreton from Gender and Disaster Australia, the video is now available and is well worth watching. We also have details of events from more of our allies.

Finally, it's not too late to submit your entry for the Zonta Says NOW Virtual Art Gallery's 2026 Collection, so get out the brushes, needles, pens, or camera and share how you feel about the world today.

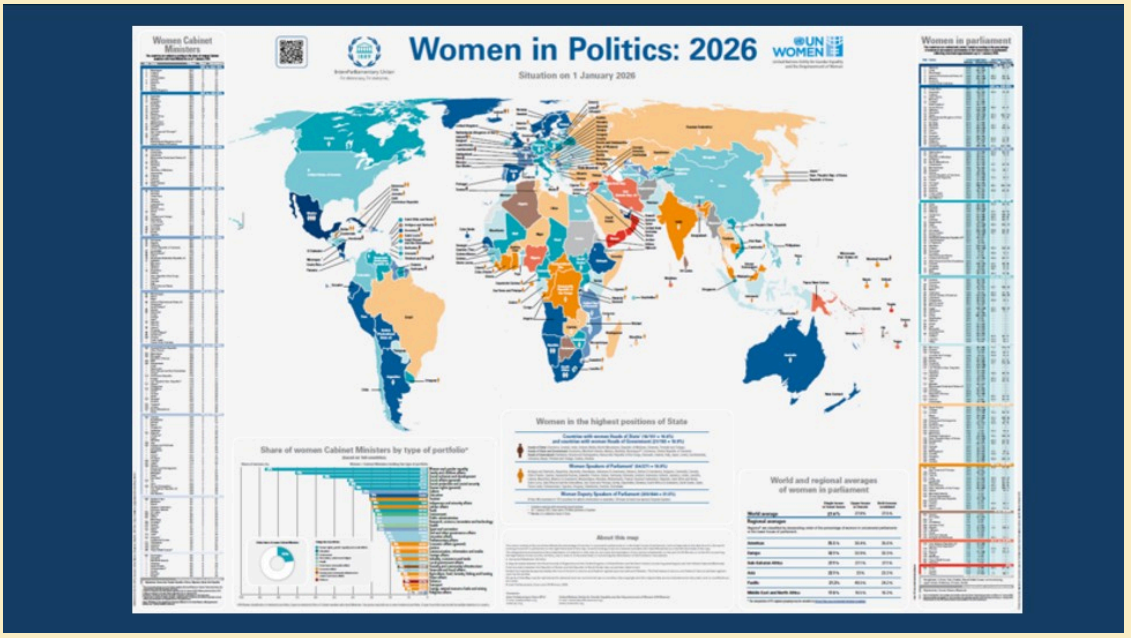
As always, there is much to celebrate, much to advocate for, and much to do.

Keep breathing, keep smiling, and have fun!

Carole
Carole Theobald
Chair, Zonta Says NOW Working Group
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Women in Politics 2026



The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women released their annual *Women in Politics 2026* map on International Women's Day. From the map, we can see that globally, women hold just 22.4 per cent of Cabinet posts — down from 23.3 per cent last year. Only one in seven countries is led by a woman and 101 countries have never had a woman leader.

Australia now ranks fifth in the world for women in Cabinet at 54.5 per cent, and equal ninth for women in a lower house of parliament at 46 per cent.

Interestingly, the Senate has 56.6 per cent women, and women make up 49.5 per cent of parliamentarians in both houses. This is mainly due to Labor's gender quota policy, which progressively raised the number of women MPs to 50 per cent by 2025. This shows that structured targets work.

But numbers alone are not the whole story. Women's Agenda reports that globally, 76 per cent of women parliamentarians report being intimidated, and research shows that 90-99 per cent of online deepfake content targets women — non-consensual, sexualised, and designed to silence them. In Australia, threats against federal politicians have nearly doubled in two years, with almost three violent or menacing threats reported to police every day.

This is why the *Belem Gender Action Plan*, adopted at COP30, matters so much. This nine-year framework (2026-2034) explicitly protects women environmental defenders, negotiators, and climate activists. For the first time, it includes care work, women's health, and violence against women as climate issues.

Our Pacific neighbours make the urgency clear. These are the countries facing the most severe climate impacts on Earth. Yet Vanuatu has one woman among 52 MPs, PNG has three, and Tonga has one. The Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu have zero women in Cabinet. How can we help Pacific women's voices be heard at COP31?

Women in Politics 2026 Map

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The Numbers Behind the Gender Pay Gap



There are two key sources of gender pay gap data in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) measures only full-time base salaries, whereas the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) provides a more comprehensive picture, including part-time and casual workers, as well as total remuneration.

The ABS latest data puts Australia's national gender pay gap at 11.5 per cent. Full-time working women earn an average of $247.20 less than men every week, or $12,854 less every year. State figures vary considerably. Western

Australia has the largest gap at 19.3 per cent, driven by male-dominated mining and construction. Tasmania records the smallest at 0.6 per cent. New South Wales sits at 11.4 per cent, Victoria at 11.2 per cent, Queensland at 10.7 per cent, Northern Territory at 10.3 per cent, South Australia at 7.3 per cent, and the ACT at 5.6 per cent.

The WGEA Employer Gender Pay Gaps Report finds that more than 50 per cent of Australian employers have a gap larger than 11.2 per cent in favour of men. There is a fascinating Employer Data Explorer where you can search for the gaps in specific industries.

Large employers will soon be required to commit to three gender equality targets over three years, a world first. But the stakes go beyond the workplace. Women's lower earnings and smaller superannuation balances leave them with far less capacity to recover from climate disasters. Closing the gender pay gap builds the economic resilience women need to survive in a changing climate.

Check the WGEA website

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Australia's Climate Laws: Where are We Now?



The landmark *Climate Change Act 2022* anchors Australia's climate commitments, legislating a 43 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030 and net zero by 2050, and requiring the Climate Change Minister to report annually to Parliament.

The most significant recent reform is the *Environment Protection Reform Act 2025*, the biggest overhaul of national environmental law in a generation. It establishes a new *National Environmental Protection Agency* (NEPA), commencing 1 July 2026, and streamlines federal-state approval processes. However, advocates note the framework contains no "climate trigger". This means that projects will not automatically face federal review based on climate impact alone.

The most pressing question now is Australia's 2035 emissions reduction target.

The Climate Change Authority has advised a target of 62 per cent to 70 per cent reduction on 2005 levels, which the Albanese Government has accepted. Australia's ambitious 2035 target is no coincidence. It was set by a parliament where women finally have a seat at the table

However, the Climate Council notes that modelling from four separate organisations shows cuts of at least 75 per cent by 2035 are technically and economically achievable, with a 75 per cent target potentially delivering $227 billion more in GDP than a weaker one.

Under the Paris Agreement, all countries must submit updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) every five years, with each round required to be more ambitious than the last. Australia's NDC is due this year, making the decision on the 2035 target particularly significant.

This brings us directly to COP31. Australia has secured the role of President of Negotiations at COP31, to be hosted by Turkiye in Antalya from 9 to 20 November 2026.

Australia will shape and guide global climate decision-making, which is a remarkable position of influence for a country of our size. The Prime Minister announced that a special pre-COP event will be hosted in the Pacific, spotlighting the climate crisis facing island nations with a dedicated session on climate finance for Small Island Developing States.

At our April Think Tank, Kate Thwaites, Australia's Special Envoy for Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience, will speak about Australia's climate leadership and the road to Antalya. Come with your questions.

Follow progress on COP31 here

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April Think Tank



We have two outstanding guest speakers at our April Think Tank and we can't wait to introduce them to you.

Kate Thwaites is the Federal Member for Jagajaga and also Australia's Special Envoy for Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience. Appointed after Labor's re-election in May 2025, Kate is at the heart of Australia's role as President of Negotiations at COP31 this November. She will speak about Australia's climate leadership, the road to Antalya, and what gender-equal climate action looks like in practice. Read our Climate Laws article for background.

Sally Quinn is the *2025 District 23 Women Taking Climate Action Awardee*. She is also the Co-Founder and CEO of *Green Collect*, Melbourne's award-winning circular economy social enterprise. Green Collect processes more than 150 tonnes of stationery, electronics, furniture, clothing, and homewares every year. They also employ people who have faced barriers to employment, including homelessness, mental illness, and refugee resettlement. Green Collect was named Australian Social Enterprise of the Year in 2019. Sally will speak about the intersection of environmental sustainability and social justice, and why she believes the two are inseparable.

Two speakers. Two perspectives. One powerful afternoon.

Register for the April Think Tank

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Reflecting on February's Think Tank



If you missed our February Think Tank, the video is now available and it is well worth watching.

Our guest was Dr. Margaret Moreton, the CEO of *Gender and Disaster Australia*, and many members commented afterwards that her talk was one of the most thought-provoking they had heard. What made it so powerful was the way Margaret wove her own lived experience into the research, making visible what statistics alone never quite can.

Margaret spoke about the reality that disasters do not affect everyone equally.

Women face heightened risk of violence in the aftermath of floods and fires. Children carry their own particular vulnerabilities. Men, under the pressure of societal expectations to be strong and in control, can become more aggressive when they feel helpless, and at the same time, are far less likely to seek help for their mental health. Suicide risk among men rises significantly during disaster recovery, yet stigma keeps many from reaching out.

She also raised a group that is too often completely invisible in disaster response. LGBTQIA+ people are frequently excluded from relief and recovery systems, through assumptions embedded in forms, shelters, and support services, leaving some of the most vulnerable without access to help.

Margaret encouraged all Zontians to subscribe to the new *Gender and Disaster Australia* newsletter, *The Coolchange*, and to attend the upcoming free webinar with Professor Michael Flood — details in our Allies section below.

View the February Think Tank video and slides

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Fantastic Plastic - Art as Advocacy



The Zonta Says NOW Virtual Art Gallery's 2026 Collection will be launched on Earth Day, 22 April — so get your entries in now!

As this photo shows, art takes many forms. This striking piece is a fashion statement crafted from repurposed plastic waste, with hand-painted feathers and flowers made from discarded plastic bottles. Artist Sonya Z Phillips from the Zonta E-Club of Atlantic Coast, USA, calls it *Fantastic Plastic.* She describes it as a visual reminder that beauty can arise from adversity, and that every discarded fragment holds the potential for rebirth.

The work is particularly timely. Netflix has just released a documentary called *Plastic Detox*, which follows six couples with unexplained infertility as they reduce their plastic exposure to improve their chances of conceiving. The film was financed in association with the Minderoo Foundation, which undertakes world-leading research on plastics and health.

Sonya's dress and this film are telling the same story — our relationship with plastic has consequences we are only beginning to understand.

Art reaches people that data and policy cannot. It makes the invisible visible.

Visit the Virtual Art Gallery for submission guidelines and to view previous years' collections.

Zonta Says NOW Virtual Art Gallery

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What Are Our Allies Doing?



The organisations we work alongside are doing extraordinary things. Here is a snapshot of what's coming up:

- Women's Climate Congress on 31 March hosts a free *Women's Climate Conversation* featuring Fleur Newman — UNFCCC Unit Lead for Gender, Children, Youth and ACE, and a central figure in developing the Belém Gender Action Plan. A rare opportunity to hear directly from someone at the heart of global climate and gender policy. Free, with donations welcomed. Register here.
- Women's Environment and Leadership Australia (WELA) celebrates its 10th Anniversary on 19 March — congratulations to a remarkable organisation! On 14 April, they host *Tools for Changemakers: Courageous Conversations* online ($45). And don't miss their new podcast, *There Will Be Dancing*. Three episodes are available so far, including a powerful conversation with Anjali Sharma. Listen to podcasts here.
- 1 Million Women's latest blog explores how First Nations knowledge is revolutionising renewable energy in remote Australia. This is an inspiring look at Indigenous-led solutions to the clean energy transition. Read here.
- Gender and Disaster Australia, on 19 March, hosts a free *In Conversation Webinar* with Professor Michael Flood — a leading international researcher on men, masculinities, and gender. His scholarship and public education are widely used reference points for violence prevention work with men and boys. Register here. And don't forget to register for their new *Coolchange* Newsletter here.

Many Zontians and allies will be at the Women Deliver in Melbourne from 27-30 April. Check out the program of speakers. It includes four former prime ministers, CEOs of major international agencies, and a host of women leaders who are walking the talk.

The solutions are out there, the conversations are happening, and the doors are open. All you need to do is walk through them.

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