As we approach the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, we can take some satisfaction in what our efforts have achieved.

- However, we cannot be complacent, there remains much work to be done.

Advancing gender equality is a priority for Australia both domestically and internationally.

Violence against women and girls is rooted in gender inequality, and eliminating it is essential if ICPD commitments are to be achieved.

Violence against women and girls is a grave violation of their human rights. It strikes at the heart of families, communities and countries. Violence against women and girls, and in particular harmful practices, undermine their right to decide whether, when or how often to marry, and whether, when or how often to become pregnant.

We know that women experiencing violence are less likely to seek health-care services, including maternal health care, and are less likely to be able to negotiate sexual relations, including protection from HIV and sexually transmitted infections and use of contraception.

Australia has a longstanding commitment to the promotion and delivery of sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are critical to empowering women, improving gender equality, and reducing maternal and child mortality.

Women’s control over their bodies is a prerequisite to full gender equality. We know that evidence based, accurate and accessible information is critical for women and girls to be empowered to make informed decisions about their bodies, to be protected and to enjoy healthy and satisfying sex lives.

Information for boys and men is also important, especially when it reinforces the right of everyone to have autonomy over their body. Ensuring universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health and rights is key to the advancement of women.

Women and girls need access to information, services, and commodities across their life cycle – not just during their reproductive years – and especially when they are at their most vulnerable, for instance during conflict or in the aftermath of natural disaster.

We recognise that eliminating violence against women and girls requires co-ordinated multi-sectoral approaches combined with attitudinal changes across all aspects of society - family, work and politics,

It takes significant and long term political, community and individual commitment to drive these attitudinal changes. We should be clear sighted about that and form realistic plans that can make a genuine difference.

And the cost of not acting is profound – in terms of health, in terms of development and in terms of economic cost borne through the health system and lost productivity. Whichever way we look at it, it is clear that upholding women’s rights, and eliminating violence against them is absolutely in all of our national interests.