

Southern Courier (Online)

Women on the agenda

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A community initiative of The Big Issue.



Women on the agenda

- [Business](#)

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With less than a month to go until Australians take to the polling booths to vote in the 2010 Federal Election and gender is on the agenda more than ever before, Minister for the Status of Women, Tanya Plibersek, took time out from her campaign commitments today to attend a round table discussion on the issue of women's homelessness, hosted by The Big Issue.

Coinciding with the launch of The Big Issue's new social enterprise set to address the needs of some of the country's 46 000 + women, the event saw a panel of high profile experts come together and discuss the issue of growing social problem of women's homelessness, exploring some practical solutions and hearing from a range of panelists including three women, who themselves, have been – or are – homeless.

Minister Plibersek spoke in detail about the Government's commitment to ending homelessness and its focus on providing funding and support to social enterprise initiatives such as The Big Issue's Women's Subscription Enterprise, which will provide homeless and disadvantaged women with economic empowerment through employment in a safe, secure, supportive environment.

"In the past homelessness has been solely the responsibility of the housing part of Government but in order to meet our 2020 targets we need to see health doing its share, education is doing its share,

employment doing its share," The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP said.

"While these targets are ambitious, they are achievable. But, the only way to achieve them is if every area of the Commonwealth Government, every area of the states and territories and very importantly the

community and businesses, start working together to help us meet those targets."

When asked how it feels to see initiatives such as The Women's Subscription Enterprise come to life, the Minister replied passionately "it's the reason why I got into politics".

"I can sign off on the letters to support initiatives such as these, but when I sit in a room today with these brave, inspirational women and see firsthand their excitement at having an opportunity to feel included back into society, that is when I remember why I got into politics."

While the Minister's presence in the room saw a rise in questions from attending media, other distinguished panelists in today's round table event made for interesting discussion, including that of former Australian Democrats leader, Cheryl Kernot.

"Social businesses and social enterprise are meeting the market requirements in the areas where there are unmet social needs," Ms Kernot said.

“The Women’s Subscription Enterprise is not a charity, it’s a for-profit social purpose business and that is a really important model; a new model that has real social value.

“The Big Issue has grappled with the market failure of our employment system around homeless people and I congratulate them for doing something about it.”

Natalie Susman, Head of The Women’s Subscription Enterprise for The Big Issue, told the audience The Big Issue recognised more than two years ago that homeless women presented with a range of different issues to homeless men and therefore selling on a street corner was not an option for many of them.

“Once we became aware of the gap in our service delivery, it naturally became incumbent upon us to find a solution,” Ms Susman said.

“For those that know a little about homelessness, you will know that it is a complex issue to which there is no one simple solution.

“However, what we have become very good at The Big Issue, is providing opportunities for disadvantaged people to access work, earn an income and be reconnected with society. And that’s how

The Women’s Subscription Enterprise was born.”

Since 2008 The Big Issue has been working tirelessly to bring The Women’s Subscription Enterprise to life and while today’s event marked the start of a new era for the organisation, it is also the beginning of a year long challenge they have in selling 9 000 subscriptions to The Big Issue magazine to ensure its ongoing sustainability.

“In the next year we will open three distribution centres in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, employ 90 homeless women, and sell 9,000 subscriptions,” Ms Susman said.

“And the last one is definitely the most challenging.

“We are asking the Australian business community to throw their support behind this initiative and join us on this incredible journey.

“For every 100 subscriptions sold we can employ one woman and give her hope for a brighter future.”

Sally Herman from Westpac sat on the panel and pledged commitment to support the initiative, with Westpac purchasing 100 subscriptions to initially kick start the program, and paving the way for the

employment of the enterprise’s first homeless woman.

And while the message sent out today was about access to income and employment, Dr Shelley Mallett also highlighted that the initiative would see big returns, well beyond dollar figures.

“Financial income brings with it choices. Women have choices on where and how they can live, how they can care for their children,” Dr Mallett said.

“More than anything women tell us that the biggest impact comes from feeling valued, valuable and contributing to society.”

For women like 44 year old Clarissa, who has spent more than 25 years living a life of disadvantage, she could not agree more.

“This will get me off the streets, into a safer environment, provide me somewhere I can feel equal with other women and hopefully it will lead on to bigger and better things,” Clarissa said.