

OPINION

Improving women's lives for 100 years

JUDY GORTON



On Friday, Zonta International, a human rights organisation dedicated to improving the lives of women, will celebrate 100 years of service to the community and to the world.

Zonta International began in Buffalo, New York in 1919 when a group of professional women decided that they wanted more of a voice to ensure that women were recognised on an equal basis with men. Achieving the right to vote was the first step.

Today the organisation of 28,000 members in 63 countries is proud of its rich history that extends beyond the work carried out in each individual Zonta club around the world.

Since 1923, Zonta International has fulfilled the promise of its founders by providing more than \$US41 million to empower women and expand their access to education, health care, economic opportunities and safe living conditions.

While Zonta has enabled women to continue to make strides in overcoming gender barriers, there is still much work to be done.

The future of Zonta lies with younger women and our centenary anniversary celebrations are an opportunity for us to highlight local service and advocacy projects particularly through our grants and scholarships that provide educational

and professional opportunities for women, especially in fields where women are under-represented: science and engineering, aerospace-related fields, business and public affairs.

At the international level, Zonta's work in partnership with United Nations agencies to end child marriage is focusing on one of the most appalling acts of violence against very young girls and occurring to varying degrees in most countries.

In today's world we face many disruptions — disruptions of our democratic rights, disruptions caused by technology and by climate change to name just a few.

As the problems become more complex we need a diverse range of people to find those solutions.

Zontians around the world are working to encourage women and girls to enter STEM subjects. We need diversity in design and safety so that we do not, for example, continue to produce cars that are built to the safety specifications of the average man.

We need design that includes us all. Young women find it difficult to be what they cannot see, and Zontians work to create a world where girls can envisage all that they can be.

The Zonta Clubs in WA work on many difference local projects including scholarship programs, working with both refugee and migrant women as well as women from our indigenous communities.

Clubs have been at the forefront of the debate on family and domestic violence, and being visible through our international campaign Zonta Says No to Violence. Zontians support refugees

for women and Zonta House Refuge is well known for its award winning programs to assist women in WA.

Zonta collaborates with like-minded organisations that has resulted in the establishment of the WA Women's Hall of Fame; advocated for women in jail; and for domestic violence victims left in limbo by visa restrictions.

We have established youth organizations to develop leadership skills in both high school and university students. These Z and Golden Z students are mentored by Zonta members and many are involved in the assembly of birthing kits to save the lives of mothers in developing countries as well as supporting other local projects. The Australian Birthing Kit Foundation grew from an idea proposed by two Zonta members and now is supported by Zontian's across Australia. Approximately 2 million kits have been assembled and distributed, and many village women have been trained as birth attendants.

To honour and celebrate the work of Zonta International in WA, Women's Interests Minister Simone McGurk is hosting a reception at Parliament House. Zonta members from across the State will attend. She has been a great supporter of Zonta and is familiar with work carried out by our volunteers.

We are very proud to be involved in an organisation that works to improve the lives of others and always welcomes women and men to support our cause.

Judy Gorton is a director of Zonta International and Zonta International Foundation