SEXUAL ASSAULT SUPPORT SERVICE INC AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION CONSTRUCTING SAFER WORKPLACES EVENT REMARKS BY HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS AC GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA HOBART, TUESDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2026

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you for inviting me to officially open this important forum, bringing together people committed to building a safer, more respectful and inclusive construction industry.

I acknowledge the Palawa people, the First Peoples of Lutruwita/Tasmania, and express my gratitude for the opportunity to live, work and play on this beautiful land. I recognise their deep and enduring connection to Country and pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal people here today.

As Patron of the Sexual Assault Support Service, I am particularly pleased to be opening this important conversation, hosted by SASS in partnership with the National Association of Women in Construction, or NAWIC.

I also acknowledge Keystone for its support and warmly welcome everyone joining us from across the construction, infrastructure, workplace safety, education and workforce development sectors.

There is an important conversation to be had today — and, more importantly, action that needs to be taken. Tasmania's construction industry is fundamental to our State's future. The people working in this sector build the homes, roads and essential infrastructure our communities depend on. Attracting, developing and retaining skilled workers is essential.

But are we creating workplaces where everyone feels safe, respected and able to succeed?

For too many women, the answer is still no.

National research by NAWIC and TDC Global found that 88 per cent of women surveyed had experienced microaggressions in construction, while 8 per cent had left the industry citing these experiences, poor workplace culture and limited opportunities.

Further research by Our Watch found that women in construction are nearly four times more likely to experience workplace sexual harassment than men. This is deeply troubling. We are losing valuable skills, experience and potential because workplaces are failing to make everyone feel welcome. Sexual harassment is not simply an interpersonal issue. It is a workplace safety issue that affects people's wellbeing, confidence and careers. It must be taken seriously and, above all, prevented.

I am encouraged by the growing recognition across the construction sector that safer workplaces require us to examine not just individual incidents, but the cultures, behaviours and systems that allow harm to occur.

Sometimes inappropriate behaviour is obvious. At other times, it is subtle, deeply embedded or dismissed as simply part of the culture — ‘the way we do things around here’. But just because something has become normal does not make it acceptable.

Changing this requires honesty, courage and leadership. Recent legal and regulatory reforms have strengthened employers' responsibilities to prevent sexual harassment and manage psychosocial risks. But legislation alone will not change workplace culture. That requires a genuine commitment to doing things differently.

Here in Tasmania, our relatively small and interconnected community can also make it difficult to speak up. People often know one another, work across the same projects and move between organisations. Concerns about relationships, reputation or future employment can discourage people from reporting harmful behaviour. And we must never lose sight of this: an absence of complaints does not mean an absence of harm.

The responsibility for preventing sexual harassment must **never** rest with those who experience it. They should **not** have to find the courage to speak up, carry the burden of resolving the situation or risk their careers to feel safe at work.

That responsibility belongs to **all** of us, particularly those with the power to shape workplace culture and influence behaviour.

So, what does meaningful action look like?

In construction, identifying hazards and preventing physical injuries are fundamental. We would never accept a workplace that knowingly exposed people to unnecessary physical danger.

Surely, we must bring that same mindset to psychological safety.
Respect, dignity and freedom from sexual harassment should be just as fundamental to workplace safety as wearing a hard hat or following site safety procedures. Prevention needs to be built into the way we work.

As Governor, I often speak about the importance of genuine listening. Listening without judgement and seeking to understand someone's experience creates opportunities for meaningful change.

We should make conversations about respectful workplace behaviour part of everyday working life. People need to understand what is acceptable, what is not, and what they can expect from colleagues and leaders. But conversations must be supported by action.

People need trusted and accessible reporting pathways, clear expectations of behaviour and confidence that concerns will be heard and addressed appropriately. Supervisors and managers must have the skills to model respect, challenge inappropriate conduct and respond when problems arise. Most importantly, leaders must recognise that prevention cannot simply be delegated to a policy, a training session or a human resources department. It is a core leadership responsibility.

Industry partnerships, education and shared resources are also essential, particularly in supporting smaller businesses to put effective prevention measures in place.

Ultimately, culture is shaped by what we say, what we do and, just as importantly, what we are prepared to overlook.

As you take part in today's discussions, I encourage you to consider not only what your organisation currently does, but what more it could do.

I encourage you to think about those just starting out in construction. Their early experiences shape whether they feel respected, safe and valued at work. No young person should believe that harassment or disrespect is simply part of having a career in this industry.

We have an opportunity and responsibility to create an industry where everyone is valued, can speak up without fear, and never has to choose between their safety, dignity and career. That is the standard we must work towards.

The partnership between NAWIC and SASS is an important step towards making that ambition a reality. By bringing together construction industry knowledge and specialist expertise in preventing sexual violence, this partnership provides a valuable foundation for practical action, stronger support and lasting cultural change.

I commend both organisations for bringing people together to have these important conversations.

My hope is that today's forum will do more than raise awareness. I hope it challenges assumptions, strengthens resolve and leaves everyone with a clearer understanding of what they can do differently when they return to their workplaces.

Ultimately, the measure of today's success will not be what you all discuss in this room, but what changes on worksites, in offices, in boardrooms and across the industry when we leave.

Everyone deserves to go to work feeling safe, respected and valued. This should never be an aspiration; it must be the standard. And it is our shared responsibility to make that a reality.

It is now my great pleasure to officially open Constructing Safer Workplaces.

Thank you.