



Commonwealth Secretariat

Briefing Note – Gender Equality

The challenge

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, and girls and boys. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both men and women are taken into consideration in decision-making processes.

The challenges faced by the Commonwealth Secretariat in attaining gender equality are social, economic and political, particularly conflict, globalisation, poverty and HIV/AIDS. The main challenges include the following:

- Differential access to services between women and men.
- High maternal mortality.
- Barriers to education for girls.
- The impact of conflict on women and girls.
- Unequal representation and participation in leadership and decision-making.
- Discriminatory laws and harmful traditional practices.
- Lack of gender perspectives in trade negotiations.

The Commonwealth strategy

The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 (PoA) provides the framework for gender equality work within the Commonwealth. The PoA covers four critical areas of concern:

- gender, democracy, peace and conflict;
- gender, human rights and the law;
- gender, poverty eradication and economic empowerment; and
- gender and HIV/AIDS.

The Secretariat's work is guided by international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995.

The Secretariat works to:

- Provide technical assistance, training and advice on gender equality policies for member countries.
- Build strategic partnerships for successful pilot projects.

- Raise awareness through advocacy and strategic collaboration with various organisations and partners, as well as at key meetings.
- Encourage governments to achieve the target of 30 per cent women's representation in the political, public and private sectors, set at the 5th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (5WAMM) in Trinidad and Tobago in 1996.
- Urge governments to include women at the highest level of peace-building, peacekeeping, conflict mediation and resolution processes.
- Help countries to implement ratified international legal instruments and harmonise national laws with international standards.
- Promote women's economic empowerment through gender responsive budgets, increased access to trade and enterprise through gender and trade initiatives.
- Enhance integration of gender issues on HIV through research, information dissemination and policy advocacy.

Key principles

Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth and a key factor for achieving socio-economic development, democracy and peace. Gender equality should inform all the systems, structures, law, policy and budgetary decisions by governments.

The practical response

Mid Term Review (MTR) of the implementation of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015: The MTR will assess progress by member countries on gender equality and women's empowerment, and the impact of the Secretariat's work. The outcomes will inform the strategic direction for advancing gender equality in the future.

Study on Institutionalising Gender Responsive Budgets (GRB) in the Commonwealth: Finance ministers noted the significant role of gender budgets in stimulating equitable and sustainable growth and development and endorsed a proposed dialogue with women's affairs ministers at the 9WAMM next year on the gender-related aspects of the global economic crisis.

Since 2006, the Secretariat has developed a capacity-building project in gender and trade where activities include developing training resources, research, international advocacy as well as capacity-building.

It has convened a series of regional colloquiums on Gender, Culture and the Law. The next in the series will be held in Papua New Guinea in February 2010. The colloquiums provide a forum for dialogue between national women's machineries, ministries of law and justice, the judiciary, and traditional and religious leaders.

Support was provided to launch the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership (CIWIL) in July 2009. The institute will promote women's capacity and skill to participate and be represented in democratic activities in the region.

A project on 'Women's Unpaid Work in HIV Care' aims to implement recommendations to address gender issues identified in the 2005-2015 PoA.

The Secretariat has supported member countries in implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for the full participation of women in peace processes and negotiations.

A project of the Kenya Women Judges Association on strengthening the 'Jurisprudence of Equality Programme' has been funded by the Commonwealth.

We have developed a Gender Management System (GMS) – a network of structures, mechanisms and processes for advancing gender issues in government policies, plans and programmes.

The Secretariat's Gender Section works with other internal divisions to mainstream gender. Projects include work on gender, culture and the law, gender and trade and gender responsive budgets, gender policy for public administrations (i.e. the Ghana Institute of Public Management and Administration), electoral observation missions, and CEDAW.

Ministerial meetings or other highlights

The 8th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (8WAMM) was held in Kampala, Uganda, in June 2007. 9WAMM is scheduled to take place in June 2010 in Barbados.

Annual consultations take place with National Women's Machineries in the wings of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York.

Relations with other bodies involved in the sector

We work with United Nations agencies such as the UNDP, UNIFEM, UNFPA, and UNCTAD. We also work with the World Trade Organization, and regional and other organisations like the African Union, OECD, CARICOM, African Development Bank, and the UK's Department for International Development.