

8 March 2010
Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General
International Women's Day message

Poverty has a woman's face – radical change is required

How much has changed in the course of a century? 100 years after Clara Zetkin, the pioneering socialist, convinced the world community to declare 8th March as International Women's Day, we are still shamefully failing some of the most dispossessed and disenfranchised people in our societies: women.

What priorities continue to allow half a million women each year – one every minute – to die from complications in pregnancy and childbirth? For every 100 such deaths, 99 are in the developing world, and - within that - 66 in the Commonwealth. Cutbacks in primary health have meant that poor women's access to maternal services has become even more limited. Others of our statistics are equally stark: two-thirds of our Commonwealth children out of primary school are girls; and two-thirds of our citizens living on less than one dollar a day are women, as are two-thirds of those in the Commonwealth carrying the HIV virus.

Millions of women and girls do not receive the dividends of development which are enjoyed by men and boys. We can measure this fact when we look at the status of the Millennium Development Goals, and particularly the fifth Goal, on maternal health.

This is why we need to support global voices calling for a radical change to the existing policy frameworks that have failed women.

If we in the Commonwealth call for women's political involvement, then we must meet our own targets of 30% female representation in parliaments and in local government. Thus far, only 6 of our 54 members achieve this.

And if we truly believe in gender equality, we must ensure that women's concerns are reflected in every aspect of our societies: in governance, in education, in health, in employment, in food and agricultural security, and more.

The Commonwealth has long put women high on its agenda. That is where they will be again in June 2010 in Bridgetown, Barbados, when our Women's Affairs Ministers will be joined by senior officials, experts and women's activists. The theme of that meeting is that women are crucial and pivotal agents of transformation in economic recovery.

For the first time, Finance Ministers and Women's Affairs Ministers will sit together at the same table, and ask themselves how our public finances can be put to this end. The meeting will also see the launch of a new project

which will ask why Ministers of Women's Affairs have limited influence in cabinet decision-making, and which will share the best practice of national strategies which can place women at the centre of national life.

With its own work among its 54 member governments to empower women, the Commonwealth is fully committed. The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality, 2005-2015, is well under way, with programmes on Gender and Democracy; Gender and Human Rights; Gender and Economic Empowerment; and Gender and HIV/AIDS. We constantly ask ourselves how we can do better; and we join hands with activists across the globe in renewing our Commonwealth determination, individually and collectively, to count women in.

International Women's Day 2010 falls on the same day, 8th March, as Commonwealth Day. It is a happy convergence of ideals.

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Background notes

<p style="text-align: center;">THE WORK OF THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT ON GENDER EQUALITY</p>

The Commonwealth Secretariat's work to protect and promote the rights of women is based on the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality, 2005-2015, and the Commonwealth's commitment to the third Millennium Development Goal to 'promote gender equality and empower women'. Its focus is on:

- Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict
- Gender, Human Rights and the Law
- Gender, Poverty Eradication and Economic Empowerment
- Gender and HIV/AIDS

The team supports gender mainstreaming in Commonwealth member countries through:

- Strengthening the capacity of governments, especially National Women's Machineries (NWMs)
- Advocating for non-discrimination and gender responsive policies and laws
- Forging strategic partnerships to promote gender equality
- Facilitating information sharing and initiating strategic research.

**** Past and present work ****

Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict

- Advocacy towards a minimum 30% representation of women in decision-making in parliament and local government
- Establishment of the Caribbean Institute for Women's Leadership
- Establishment of a Commonwealth Group on Gender, Peace and Security
- Contribution to global efforts towards implementation of UN-SCR 1325 on women, peace and security

Gender, Human Rights and the Law

- Advocacy towards reconciliation of customary norms and practices with statutory laws and CEDAW, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
- Capacity building for magistrates, customary chiefs and faith leaders on gender-responsive adjudication, and the protection of women's rights to land and other resources
- Contribution to global efforts towards advancing the rights of indigenous women, through dialogue and capacity building
- Strategic partnerships with development agencies, professional bodies and grassroots groups, towards the implementation of CEDAW

Gender, Poverty Eradication and Economic Empowerment

- Gender and Trade – successful completion of a DFID-funded project focused on capacity-building for officials, producing a comprehensive tool kit for training, improving women’s skills in handicraft and increasing their market access, and researching Economic Partnership Agreements.
- Gender Responsive Budgeting – provision of training to member countries; initiation of work on the gender impacts of revenue collection; advocacy with Finance ministries.
- Aid Effectiveness – strategic partnerships for high level advocacy with UNCTAD; advocacy with OECD Gendernet.
- Public-Private Partnerships – initiation of key work on global philanthro-capital and gender equality.

Gender and HIV/AIDS

- Ensuring a gender perspective in HIV intervention through a partnership in a multi-agency initiative in the Caribbean, and the convening of policy dialogues in Asia.
- Strategic research on the gender and policy dimensions of unpaid work in HIV care.

**** Future directions ****

- Economic Development: Commonwealth work will focus on strengthening institutions and building capacity on: Gender Responsive Budgeting; Trade; Public Private Partnerships
- Political Development: Commonwealth work will focus on enhancing accountability and participation through gender mainstreaming in: Democratic Governance, Decision making, Climate Change and Peace;
- Social Development: Commonwealth work will focus on raising awareness and building capacity through advocating for: Gender, Culture and Land rights, Social Inclusion, Violence and Vulnerabilities

**** Issues ****

Progress towards achieving the third MDG has been slow, and Commonwealth countries continue to face challenges of gender inequality and discriminatory policies that prevent the advancement of women. These include: differential access to services and resources for women and men; the prevalence of discriminatory laws and harmful traditional practices; the feminisation of poverty; high maternal mortality; the denial of education for girls; the lack of a gender perspective in trade negotiations; the widespread HIV/AIDS prevalence among women and girls; the increased prevalence of conflict and its impact on women; and the unequal representation and participation of women in decision-making and leadership levels.

In the majority of Commonwealth countries, limited resources and weak institutional capacities continue to be a major barrier and obstacle to achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment.

COMMONWEALTH WOMEN'S AFFAIRS MINISTERS MEETING, 2010

The Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (9WAMM) will take place in Bridgetown, Barbados from 7-9 June 2010. The theme is "*Gender Issues in Economic Crisis, Recovery and Beyond: Women as Agents of Transformation*".

The meeting will comprise the Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers' Meeting itself (8-9 June), and a Senior Officials' Meeting (7 June). 9WAMM will be preceded by a Partners Forum for civil society, lawyers and judges, parliamentarians, young people, and the private sector (4-6 June).

The Meeting will seek to address measures for accelerating progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment in relation to the MDGs and the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2010. It hopes to broaden the global focus and debates on policy responses to the economic, food and climate crises, and to ensure that gender equality remains a priority. It will highlight the significant role of women as agents of change in the recovery process. The meeting will also explore innovative financing mechanisms for achieving gender equality.

For the first time, there will be an exchange between Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers and a select group of Commonwealth Ministers of Finance, Central Bankers and Permanent Secretaries of Finance.

The outcomes of the meeting will be fed into the preparations for the June G8 and G20 Summits to be hosted by Canada, and the September UN High Level Review of the MDGs in New York.

CABINET STRATEGY PROJECT

Ministers responsible for Women's Affairs around the Commonwealth are largely marginalized from national decision making processes. The current efforts to develop new policy approaches following the financial crisis of 2009 provide an opportunity to develop a more inclusive model for development.

The Commonwealth Secretariat is therefore embarking upon a research initiative to identify successful Cabinet strategies which have been employed by Women's Affairs Ministers to further women's empowerment. It will draw on the experience of countries such as Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the Nordics, which have been successful in significantly improving the life chances of women in their societies.

The research is intended to promote best practice for the ideal placement and configuration of the Women's Affairs Ministerial portfolio, and the accompanying institutional arrangements for gender equality. It will also demonstrate practical examples of best practice in the governance of gender equality, as well as providing a comparative analysis of what works and what does not work, in diverse development and cultural contexts.