



Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting

*"Gender Issues in Economic Crisis, Recovery and Beyond: Women as
Agents of Transformation"*

Bridgetown, Barbados, 7-9 June 2010

**WELCOME ADDRESS AT OPENING CEREMONY
BY H E KAMALESH SHARMA,
COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY-GENERAL**

Acting Prime Minister Stuart, Hon Minister Lashley, Acting Chief Justice, Ministers, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen – let me add my own welcome to the 9th Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting, or 9 WAMM. We thank the Government of Barbados and the people of Barbados, who have made us so welcome and deeply appreciate the care, attention and meticulous arrangements made.

And let me first of all – most appropriately at a Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers gathering in the Caribbean – congratulate publicly our new Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office – Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar. We look forward to working under her leadership.

I thank also the Commonwealth Secretariat team for their preparations and contributions. It is a full 30 years since we employed our first adviser on women’s affairs. The Commonwealth has always pioneered new ideas, often for others to run with them globally. Let that be a leitmotif of this Meeting, too.

This Ministerial meeting has a special importance, bearing in mind that half of our Commonwealth population receives considerably less than half of our attention, and faces considerably more than half of our challenges.

I never cease to stress that the status and opportunities of women are the surest indicator of the health of a society. Where women prosper, societies prosper; and where women suffer, so too do the societies in which they live, whether the men realise it, or not.

Women are the barometers of society: they measure its internal pressure levels, and their fortunes can be the clearest forecasts of good or bad things to come.

2010 is a milestone in assessing progress. In March, the UN Commission on the Status of Women launched the new gender equality body which has already attracted close to \$1 billion of resources. This was, no doubt, a response to the realisation that, 15 years on from its adoption, the Beijing Platform for Action has been implemented slowly and unevenly.

We must step up efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. With five years left until the 2015 deadline, lifted and accelerated progress and innovative solutions will be essential.

Of course, all of the Goals affect women, but let us look at three in particular.

Take Goal 3, of promoting gender equality and empowering women.

There is encouraging news in that the gender gap in primary school enrolment has narrowed to over 95 girls for every 100 boys in developing countries. And women’s share of national parliamentary seats increased to almost one fifth in 2009.

On the other hand, when it comes to gender gaps in primary and secondary education together, only 18 countries are likely to achieve the target by 2015. And close to two-thirds of employed women are still found in ‘vulnerable’ jobs such as in part-time, seasonal, or low-paid work.

Also, while there has been laudably good progress overall, an imbalance of another kind is emerging, with growing underachievement by boys and participation in tertiary education, which has potentially significant social implications.

Take Goal 5, of improving maternal health.

There have been successes – with Eastern Asia, Northern Africa and South-Eastern Asia showing declines of around one third or more in maternal deaths; the proportion of births attended by skilled health workers has risen; and the proportion of pregnant women having at least one ante-natal care visit has risen even higher.

But this fifth MDG is the one that is furthest from its target. What values, policies and priorities allow half a million women each year – one every minute – to die from complications in pregnancy and childbirth? For every 100 such deaths, 66 are in the Commonwealth.

Or take Goal 6, and particularly its focus on HIV/AIDS.

The global peak of 3.5 million new infections had been cut by nearly a third by 2005. But AIDS is now the face not of a middle-aged man, but of a young woman. Around two thirds of the 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Commonwealth countries are women.

So with women, there are both advances and continued tribulations to report. Any way we look at it, the figures are not good enough: the gender equations simply do not add up – with five years to go until the MDG deadline, we need urgent appraisals and action as to the way forward.

And the environment for getting things right gets no easier. Since 8WAMM in Kampala three years ago, an already shaky edifice has received further shocks. The effects of global economic and financial, food and fuel crises, and the impact of climate change, loom large.

These crises have been – and are – real enough for us in the Commonwealth. Half of our member states had stagnant or negative growth last year. The poor, women and children are hardest hit by economic downturns, and they take longer to recover. They have fewer assets, fewer options and less flexibility.

Situations of conflict have added another layer of complexity, where women and children are not only in the front line as victims but should be the front line of delivering rehabilitation and reconstruction.

And how has the world reacted?

In shoring up their economies, policy responses have not necessarily helped its women, let alone adequately taking into account the vulnerabilities of small states and developing states in general.

The fact is that, if it fails its women, the world community also fails itself. By disregarding or dismissing the idea that women can be agents of change for economic recovery, good governance and sustainable development, we short-

change ourselves. That is why this meeting intends to talk through some possible responses to confront the situation.

The Commonwealth can take satisfaction at its Plan of Action for Gender Equality, which this community – Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers – adopted six years ago in Fiji. The Plan remains one of the most far-sighted, flexible and comprehensive frameworks of its type.

It points to three things about our Commonwealth capability.

First, we have been innovative on matters of policy. For instance, we have pioneered gender responsive budgets, as a way to measure the impact of spending and revenue collection on the social and economic opportunities of women and men.

Second, we have been active on matters of practical assistance. Only recently, some of my colleagues were in The Gambia and Nigeria, providing assistance at Ministerial level on gender responsive budgets. In May, other colleagues were working with Samburu women in the northern Rift Valley in Kenya, helping them know and activate their rights to property, and their rights to be free from violence.

Third, we should strongly back a programme to create 500,000 additional midwives, particularly for the most vulnerable regions.

WAMMs have the capacity to inspire: three years ago, we committed to special emphasis on helping member countries to adopt the principles and the practices of gender responsive budgeting. Now, more than 60 countries worldwide have gender responsive budgeting initiatives.

This Meeting can be a catalyst in reinforcing the reality that investing in women is a pivotal commitment, which can have a transformative effect on society: women are the real ‘agents of change’.

Here in Barbados in June 2010 – as the world’s leaders continue to explore new models and perspectives – we have an opportunity to think how women can be a greater part of the equation.

A new paradigm requires new thinking and strong partnerships – things that will be explored in this meeting.

We are honoured to welcome a broad range of actors, from different sectors, and with a variety of innovative solutions: philanthropists, Women’s Funds, Women’s Banks, investors, business people, and development actors – all bringing new ways of doing business and innovative solutions. All global society must be a partner – and show solidarity and create a web of partnerships in this endeavour.

One supreme goal is investing in women – how it can happen, who can do it, and what sort of enabling environment needs to be created. *Newsweek* magazine got to the point last September: it computed that there is \$5 trillion-worth of new female earned income out there, ready to be harnessed in the global post-recession economy.

Business has a heavy stake in equitable and prospering societies, with women at their heart and central to their economic life.

Distinguished delegates and guests. We must look for fresh ideas and solutions; we must invest in women; we must continue to offer new perspectives to other international decision-makers in order to benefit half of the world's population. We owe this to ourselves, to our collective future: our Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meetings are yoked to this endeavour.

I wish all participants success over the next two days.

Thank you.