

**Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting
7-9 June 2010, Bridgetown, Barbados**

**Address at Opening Plenary by
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(Transcribed from handwritten notes)

Hon Chair

His Excellency Kamallesh Sharma, Hon Commonwealth Secretary-General.

His Excellency Deputy Secretary General

Hon Ministers of Commonwealth Countries

Distinguished Delegates

Members of Commonwealth Secretariat

Ambassadors Dame Stephanie Shirley

Distinguished Guests, Media Representatives – a very Good Morning to you all.

It is indeed a great honour for me to be present here at the 9WAMM and taking part in the opening Plenary Session. I would like to thank the Government of Barbados for hosting this meeting in your beautiful country. I would also like to thank the Commonwealth Secretariat for organising this event. The surge of global economic crisis swayed across the boundaries of different continents having deepened and broadened its adverse impacts. The Commonwealth region along with others also experienced the effects of such financial crisis in myriad forms with differential impact on women in particular. While such economic recession having negative impact on employment and labour ends to affect all sectors of the society, the poor, the women, the children, constitute the most vulnerable segment suffer from worst consequences. Unemployment increases, earnings of workers fall and their rights are endangered. It has been found (Horton & Majumdar, 2001) that labour participation rate decreases more for vulnerable groups, such as young workers, women and older workers in time of crisis. Female workers are more likely to lose their jobs than male counterparts as they do not belong to labor unions generally.

It is in the backdrop of this changed scenario and emerging global perspective that the Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting very aptly focuses on "Gender Issues in Economic Crisis, Recovery Beyond: Women as Agents of Transformation.

The vast majority of the world's poor are women. The majority of the 1.5 billion people living on 1 dollar a day or less are women. Female headed households are poorer than male headed households. Poverty does have a gender dimension. Commonly known as feminization of poverty it denotes a change in the levels of poverty biased against women or female headed households. Poverty, commonly defined as a deprivation of resources, capabilities and freedom, feminization of poverty denotes a gender biased change in any of these dimensions of poverty. What causes impoverishment of women may also cause the impoverishment of men and therefore it is essential to identify the gender inequalities

behind poverty. Feminisation of poverty make women prone to suffer greater and longer forms of poverty, far more severe than men and the hardship is transferred to children, continuing the poverty

Women living in poverty been an unequal burden because of family composition, dissolution of marriage, gender division of labour and labour market inequalities ----- ---- to education, intra-household inequalities etc. Women are often denied access to resources like land, credit etc. Health care and nutritional need do not get priority, there is lack of access to education and participation in decision making level both within and outside the house are minimal.

Women play a major role in ensuring food security and poverty reduction in household managers. They are often the mainstay of food systems. Women produce 60% to 80% of the food in most developing countries. But their key role as food producers and contributions to household food security is slow to be recognized. Women are highly involved in care economy. Recognition of women's unpaid work and integration into national economy is crucial. Again, women as primary care givers of family, children and elderly are more vulnerable to effects of natural disaster and climate change. Specific gender attributes contribute to increased women vulnerability.

Considering women as agents of transformation in meeting the emerging challenges of global economic recession, climate changes food insecurity is therefore, the need of the our. Empowering women by providing access to resources, land, credit facility, access to training and education is crucial. Society overall benefits from empowerment of women. Women generally spend their earnings on her children, she pays for tuition, buys milk and look for children, families are healthier more children attend school. Women are important agents for transformation. – combating violence against women and ensuring economic .only a right based approach but also has an invaluable socio-economic dimension. As the World Bank President stated, it is not only an issue of women's right but ensuring economic empowerment is 'smart economics'.

Reducing maternal mortality has significant impact in the lives of children, family, community and society at large. The social and economic cost attached to it cannot be under estimated.

In order to deal with the global recession policy responses to financial crisis have focused on institutional strengthening of financial sectors, increased regulations, cutbacks in investment in social sectors and roll back of social safety net among a slew of measures. The added dimension of the fuel and food crisis, issues of climate change and situations of conflict have added a layer of complexity to policy responses.

Yet it is critical to examine how far these initiatives have factored in gender concern. It is crucial that the differential impact of global economic crisis on women is taken into account in stepping up of policy and programme measures to address the impact originating form crisis.

Given the many national priorities, it has been observed that the achievement of MDG targets is being placed at serious risk.

We know that the global system of production, trade and finance are sites where gender dimensions are fairly well entrenched. This entrenchment becomes more evidence when economic shock such as the current crisis occurs and the differential effects on women and men begin to surface.

While we can discern commonalities in the way gender roles have a bearing on capacities and location in the global economy, variations across the regions, countries and social groups throw up more complexities.

Although there is a considerable body of analyses on the gender dimensions of the financial and related development crises, the issues of women as agents of transformation and their roles and capacities to institutionalize change is less established in particular the links between global governance, finance recovery and socio-economic transformation on the one hand, and women's roles and capacities on the other hand are still being worked out.

Policy responses need to be cognizant of women's capacities for transformation. Placing women's needs and interest at the centre of policy formulation is the first step.

In focusing on the gender dimensions and women's roles and capacities in the economic recovery process, we need to situate the financial crisis within the framework of the MDGs and the international development agenda highlighting in particular, the need for innovative financing approaches to mobilize needed resources to stimulate economic revival and growth.

By placing women at the centre of policy formulation and responses, we can draw on women's capacities for contributing to socio-economic and political transformation through their equal participation in policy formulation, decision-making and governance.

In Bangladesh under the visionary leadership of Hon Prime Minister and her staunch commitment to mitigate the effects of climate change and facing emerging challenges faced economic crisis the government has strengthen social safety net protection measures and food security programmes with essential focus on women. Widow allowance, destitute women allowance, disabled women allowance, maternity allowance for the extreme poor women afford such measures ... protection.

In addition for food security under vulnerable groups development programme 30kg rice is distributed to each extremely poor woman every month and income generating activity training is given.

Under the public food distribution system (PFDS) govt. provides in kind support to poor people and those affected by natural calamities and disasters. The Government has further introduced rural employment and road maintenance programme for ultra poor and

destitute woman in crisis prone districts. There is also 100 days employment generation scheme support is being provided under new scheme to poor low income working mothers in the garment sector. 5.5 million primary students are receiving stipends. Small and medium enterprise is also being given through SME Refinancing scheme.

There are some of the unique measures as alternative mode.

Thus in order to have adequate policy response it is important to consider –

- Role of women must be integrated into macroeconomic policies in a pronounced manner.
- Macroeconomic policies need to be made more gender responsive to gender mainstreaming.
- Involvement of woman in decision-making process have to be made more meaningful through capacity building, allowing more freedom to work and assigning more responsibility.
- Create a synergy between all policies adopted by government based on gender perspective and create ---- with allocation of budget.
- Create a synergy in attaining the objectives of CEDAW, Beijing +15, MDG, National Plan of action of respective countries + POA of Commonwealth.
- Create gender disaggregated data base for full understanding and appreciation of gender responsive budgeting.
- Emphasise on gender responsive budgeting.
- Adopt legislation to combat violence against women and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.
- Create an enabling environment for attaining holistic empowerment of women and gender equality.

I sincerely hope the status of women in economic crisis will be extensively deliberated upon in the next session and a clear path way can be marked by the end of 9WAMM in engendering and infusing the concern in policy responses and as to how to translate the same into action and interventions. Thus our concerted efforts altogether with will be able to foster Commonwealth values and carry forward the high priority agenda of ensuring the role of women as agents of transformation.

Thank you all.