

**Speech by the Commonwealth Secretary-General
Rt Hon Don McKinnon**

**Opening Ceremony
7th Commonwealth Women Affairs Ministers Meeting
Nadi, Fiji, 31 May 2004**

Ni sa bula vinaka saka na Turaga

Prime Minister,

Honourable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is wonderful to be here – in a region of the world that I can call home and where all of us have been made to feel so much at home!

Thank you to Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, Minister Adi Asenaca Caucau and the Fiji Government for the excellent arrangements made for this meeting.

And thank you to the people of Fiji for their warm welcome – in the best tradition of Pacific hospitality.

This meeting is very important, for a number of reasons:

First, it is the first time that a Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting is being held in the Pacific.

Second, this is a unique opportunity to take stock of advances made in gender equality – one of the areas in which the Commonwealth has taken a leading role.

And third, this meeting is of central importance, because you will be discussing the Commonwealth 10 year Plan of Action for gender equality.

This Plan of Action, which builds on earlier initiatives, will shape our strategy in the years to come and allow us to press on with our work to eliminate discrimination and inequality based on gender.

Let us not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead.

Whether we are talking about the “impact of globalisation”, the “ravages of war”, the struggle of living with HIV/AIDS or the marginalisation of women, there is much to be done.

These issues are not only a matter of concern to women. They are a matter of concern to everyone, since the involvement of women is essential to the economic and social development of a country.

1. Gender equality and development

Women are the strongest link in the virtuous circle of growth and development: educating women, as you would know, leads to better health for the entire family, and better health means greater opportunities in the workforce and increased economic growth.

Women must be able to play a part in addressing some of the most pressing issues we face today: alleviating poverty, combating HIV/AIDS, preventing conflicts.

If you don't allow half the world to play their part in solving these problems, you're only going to get half the solutions.

The world must understand that increased gender equality does not only benefit women; it benefits everyone.

As Fiame Naomi Mataafa, Samoa's Minister of Education, said recently: "countries that have good representation by women are those with a healthy economy, an effective democratic government and an educated population."

The lesson of the past few years is that women's equality is central to the successful development of any country. Women are key engines of economic growth and social progress and their involvement is essential to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

That is why I will continue to support feminism. Because, to me, feminism is about promoting gender equality. And gender equality is about building more democratic societies, in which citizens enjoy better education, improved health and greater opportunities.

2. Some achievements

But let me highlight where we've come from.

Five years ago, Commonwealth Heads of Government set a target of 30% of female representation in parliament.

Since then, 12 Commonwealth countries have achieved women's representation of between 20% and 30%.

Guyana and St Vincent and the Grenadines have recorded increases in female representation of over 15%.

Women now make up 50% of the Commissioners of the African Union.

And following the recent elections in South Africa, President Mbeki formed a cabinet which includes 43% of women.

And I'm sure that in the future there will be more female Heads of Government in the Commonwealth than the three we have at present.

But too many women still live on the edge. Violence in all its forms is one of the gravest problems women face today. Worldwide, one in three women will suffer violence during her lifetime – raped, beaten, trafficked or harassed.

To help address this problem, the Gender Section of the Commonwealth Secretariat developed an Integrated Model to reduce and hopefully eliminate violence against women, which has been widely applied in the Southern African region. Since then, a number of countries have experienced a drop in the number of reported cases of domestic violence.

In other countries, such as Belize and Jamaica, civil domestic violence legislation has been implemented, offering additional protection to that contained in Criminal Codes.

But it takes more than a change in legislation. Education can create a plus from a minus. So Commonwealth countries have also addressed gender inequality in education. Although the challenges remain huge, change is occurring:

Over the last 30 years, here in Fiji, there has been a five fold increase in the number of girls in secondary education.

In Singapore, intake levels of females at universities have increased by nearly 10% over ten years and now stand at 50.2% of enrolment.

In countries emerging from years of conflict, women are playing an increasingly crucial role in the process of peace and reconstruction.

I will never forget the role that women played in the Bougainville peace process, witnessing at first hand progress on this last week.

In Sierra Leone too, women have been essential to the restoration of peace and the strengthening of democracy.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has been particularly active in ensuring that the voices of women are heard in the process of peace and reconstruction.

In Sierra Leone, again, we established a National Consultation, in collaboration the Government and UN agencies to encourage more Sierra Leone women to become political leaders. Following this, at the May 2002 elections, the percentage of women in the Sierra Leone Parliament increased from 8% to 15%.

The Secretariat also works in partnership with civil society and other organisations to help bring gender equality to centre stage. It is therefore particularly relevant that the theme of this Meeting should be: “Partnerships for Gender Equality”.

In collaboration with UNAIDS, we recently organised a major event in London, “Global Coalition on Women and HIV/AIDS”, in order to raise awareness about the plight of women living with the virus and the unique problems they face.

I am pleased that civil society organisations have been closely involved in the planning of this meeting and in the development of the 10 year Plan of action.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the Commonwealth Foundation on the organisation of the Partners’ Forum – one of the largest civil society events ever held in the region – which will allow civil society groups to interact with Ministers and help shape common strategies for the years ahead.

3. Commonwealth Plan of Action

All this is good – but we’ve got to do better.

More horsepower is needed.

Objectives must be clear and this is where the Commonwealth Plan of Action can make a difference.

When I visited Papua New Guinea a few years ago, I met a bright schoolgirl who asked me: “Do you know Mr Kofi Annan?” I told her that I did, to which she replied: “Next time you see him, tell him that when I grow up, I want his job!”

The challenge, for all of us, over the next few days, is to listen to this little girl’s voice.

The challenge is to maintain her confidence and her hope.

This 10 year Plan is not just a document. It’s a template for action.

That’s why, when you discuss this Plan, Ministers, I would encourage you to think about the following:

Will it help open the doors of learning for more girls throughout the Commonwealth?

Will it help more women secure property rights to protect their families and bank loans to develop their businesses?

Will it provide assistance to women, families and communities to prevent violence at home?

Will it change the lives of women living with HIV/AIDS and how will it protect others from getting infected?

How, in other words, will it give more women more choices, more power, more control over their lives and the future of their families and communities?

Will it help to educate as well as being non-threatening to men?

Let not these challenges be dominated by process, by bureaucratic inertia or endless arguments on procedures.

The call must be clear. The energy must be released. Every word in this Plan must be a call to motivate, to deliver, to achieve.

That will be the measure of our success. And in 3 years' time, when we have our next Meeting, you will be able to stand proud and say: this is what we said. This is what we did. This is what we achieved.

We listened to the voices of women – and we helped them make their voices heard.

Only then can we hope that our Papua New Guinean girl – the future United Nations Secretary-General! – will grow up in a world where women have more choices, more opportunities, more influence over decisions that affect them and their families.

Hope that she and her fellow schoolgirls across the Commonwealth can grow up to become what they aspire to be, without fear of exclusion, discrimination or violence.

And hope that, as a woman, she will be able to play her full part in shaping her own life and the life of her community.

Our common goal is to make a real difference in women's lives. This meeting has the potential of achieving just that. I wish you well.