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High Level Panel on

**The Role of Regional and Intergovernmental
Agencies**

in Promoting Gender Equality

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Thank you, Madame Moderator, for your kind words of introduction.

I bring you warm greetings from the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Hon. Don McKinnon and the Commonwealth Secretariat. I am deeply honoured to participate in this panel on the role of regional and intergovernmental organisations in promoting gender equality, to mark the 10-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action.

I'd like to thank Ms. Rachel Mayanja, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women; Ms. Carolyn Hannan, Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women; Ms. Kyung-wha-Kang, Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women and Bureau Members - for organising this high-level panel and for their invitation.

The Commonwealth Secretariat is a voluntary organisation of 53 independent states (nearly one third of UN member countries), 32 of which are small states. Commonwealth Heads of Government established the Secretariat in 1965. Its guiding principles are the promotion of international cooperation, peace, democracy and good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, gender equality, and poverty eradication through economic and social development. Common values and similar political, constitutional, legal, administrative, educational and other systems

facilitate consensus building and the sharing of expertise, experiences and resources.

The Commonwealth's Plan of Action on Gender and Development, which was presented to the Beijing Conference, made the shift from women in development to a gender mainstreaming approach. In the post-Beijing decade, the Secretariat developed the Gender Management System (or GMS) as a system-wide, multi-sectoral framework for gender mainstreaming. The Secretariat also recognises that gender differences intersect with other factors of diversity, such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, age, religion and disability. The Secretary-General has stated that, "issues of peace, governance, democracy, and socio-economic development cannot be separated from those of gender equality."

How does the Secretariat work on gender equality issues?

- We play an ABC role as advocate, broker and catalyst.
- We act as an advocate to Heads of Government to build political will and governmental commitment, and to ensure resource allocation for gender equality;
- We provide policy advice, technical assistance, capacity building, and gender-aware tools and methodologies to mainstream government Ministries, to facilitate policy making, planning and programme delivery. These Ministries include Finance, Development Planning, Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Trade and Industry, Health, Education and Youth.
- We play a catalytic role in developing innovative approaches to gender mainstreaming, for example, our work on gender-responsive budgets; an integrated approach to violence against women; a multi-sectoral approach to HIV/AIDS; gender, poverty eradication and the Millennium Development Goals; women and men in partnership for post-conflict reconstruction.
- We broker partnerships for promoting gender equality with Commonwealth associations; multilateral, regional and bilateral agencies; civil society organisations; the private sector; youth organisations and networks; academic institutions; the media; etc.

- We convene and service annual meetings of national women's machineries and triennial meetings of Women's/Gender Affairs Ministers, who shape the gender equality mandate of the Secretariat.

So in fact, Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, building on past initiatives and strategies, and taking into account emerging global issues and developments, developed a new Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality for the 2005-2015 decade, which was launched by Ministers on the eve of the Beijing+10 Review here in New York, and presented to the CSW High Level Plenary earlier this week.

The Commonwealth PoA focuses on four main areas to advance gender equality:

- i) Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict;
- ii) Gender, Human Rights and Law;
- iii) Gender, Poverty Eradication and Economic Empowerment; and
- iv) Gender and HIV/AIDS.

Recognising the uneven progress by member countries to increase women's representation in political decision-making, the Plan urges member countries to strive to achieve the 30 per cent target by 2015. It further encourages countries who have already achieved the target to strive towards parity.

Country examples of good practice include South Africa, in which women represent 47 per cent of the Cabinet. Also, India's 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments reserved one-third of all local government seats for women, which has resulted in over 500,000 women being elected to the Panchayat Raj throughout the country.

In the area of peace and conflict, our integrated approach involves men, women and young persons in promoting a culture of peace, resolving conflicts, undertaking gender-aware post-conflict reconstruction and increasing women's representation in the political process. The PoA also calls on member countries to

monitor the implementation of the UNSCR 1325, recognising that there can be no development without peace.

On gender-based violence, some notable examples of Commonwealth country initiatives include Canada's introduction of the 'Family Violence Initiative'; the establishment of domestic violence courts in Singapore and Seychelles; and the introduction of domestic violence legislation in some 11 Caribbean countries. Ghana has successfully passed the 'Children's Act', and amended the Criminal Code in areas dealing with rape and defilement.

In the Commonwealth and internationally, eradicating poverty has been at the heart of the development agenda. One third of the estimated 1.2 billion people who live on less than \$1 a day are Commonwealth citizens, as are 64 per cent of the 2.8 billion people who live on under US\$2 a day. I want to emphasise that over two-thirds of these are women.

The Secretariat was the first intergovernmental organisation to promote Gender-Responsive Budgets. It launched the Gender Budget Initiative in 1995 and has played a pioneering role in developing tools and training materials, which are being used by some 50 countries globally.

The Secretariat recognises that while globalisation and trade liberalisation offer new opportunities for economic growth, they also result in the loss of livelihoods. Many countries, particularly small states, have a limited capacity to formulate trade policies and to be effective in trade negotiations. The Secretariat has responded by leading work on *Gender and the Multilateral Trading System*. We also published *Chains of Fortune: Linking Women Producers and Workers with Global Markets*, case studies showing how women can benefit from the opportunities offered by globalisation.

You may well ask, what have we done to mainstream gender

within the Secretariat itself?

Shortly after the Beijing conference, we reviewed the Secretariat's governance structures, policy-making, strategic planning, budget allocation, human resource management and programme delivery.

We followed this up by:

- Setting up a Gender Steering Committee comprised of Directors and chaired by the Secretary-General which meets bi-annually to review Secretariat progress.
- Appointing two Gender Focal Points in each division to coordinate gender mainstreaming in all programmes and projects.
- Putting in place an Equal Employment Opportunities Policy.
- Adopting the 30 per cent target in recruitment at the diplomatic and professional levels, which has been achieved.
- The Secretary-General's appointment of Female Special Envoys for his Good Offices and Peace interventions. In addition, the Political Affairs Division is working towards gender parity in the Commonwealth Observer Groups sent out to monitor elections.
- Strengthening the Gender Section to lead the Secretariat's Gender Equality Programme. While also mainstreaming gender into the other 15 programmes in the Secretariat's Four-Year Strategic Plan.

Despite the successes achieved, a number of gaps, challenges and constraints remain which need to be addressed in the next decade:

- Countries need to domesticate the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) into national legislation;
- We need to commit to the strengthening of national machineries, including increased resources and mechanisms for implementation.

- There is an urgent need for sex-disaggregated statistics and indicators.
- We need to strengthen our partnerships to maximise our efforts and resources.
- We need to review gender mainstreaming as an approach to advancing gender equality.

Our new Plan of Action for Gender Equality provides the framework within which the Commonwealth will continue to advance its work and commitment to gender equality in 2005-2015. As we move into the second post-Beijing decade, along with other targets set within the MDGs, let us resolve to achieve gender equality for all by the year 2015. As Commonwealth Secretary-General, Hon. Don McKinnon has stated, “the principles of gender equality and inclusion are the fundamental values on which every attempt at democracy and development must be based.”

I thank you.