

**COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (CSW).
49TH SESSION**

and

Beijing+10 Review

United Nations, New York
28 February – 11 March 2000

**Commonwealth Presentation to the High Level Plenary Session on the
Review of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 2000 Outcome
Document of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly**

**The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015
and
The Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Statement to Beijing+10**

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7 March 2005

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Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, representing 53 member States from 5 regions, met on the eve of the Beijing+10 Review on 27 February 2005, and prepared a Message to the Beijing+10 Review, which it is my great honour to present to you.

They affirmed their commitment to implementing the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015, and they strongly reaffirmed their commitment to the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2000 Beijing+5 Outcome Document, and stressed the importance of their full implementation at national, regional and international levels.

The full text of their statement is attached for your consideration.

Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth. The new Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 (PoA) provides the framework within which the Commonwealth will contribute to advancing gender equality in the next decade. The PoA builds on past achievements, seeks to close persistent gaps, reflects the Commonwealth's response to global changes as they impact differently on women and men, and engages with new and emerging challenges.

The PoA forms part of the Commonwealth's contribution to the United Nations Beijing+10 Review. It also reinforces our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the promotion of a rights-based approach to gender equality. It is further guided by the priorities set out in the Aso Rock Declaration by the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) in Abuja – Nigeria (2003).

The PoA recognises that socio-economic development, democracy and peace are inextricably linked to gender equality. Thus, gender equality is viewed not only as a goal in itself, but also as a key factor in enhancing good governance, eradicating poverty and violence against women, ensuring education for all, improving maternal health, reducing child mortality and combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Thus, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Rt Hon Don McKinnon stated, "the principles of gender equality and inclusion are the fundamental values on which every attempt at democracy and peace-building must be based."

As part of their contribution to the Beijing Platform for Action and setting the global agenda for achieving gender equality, Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs developed the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The 1995 PoA was endorsed by Commonwealth's Heads of Government at their meeting in Auckland later that year. Heads of Government reaffirmed women's rights as human rights and urged member governments to develop and implement legislation and strategies to promote the advancement of women in accordance with the strategic objectives, actions and priorities adopted by the Beijing Platform for Action.

Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, building on past individual and collective initiatives and strategies, and taking into consideration emerging global issues, developed and agreed a new Commonwealth Plan of Action for the next decade 2005-2015 at their 7th Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting in the Fiji Islands on 30 May-2 June 2004, which they launched on 27 February 2005 here in New York on the eve of the Beijing+10 Review.

LINKING THE COMMONWEALTH 2005-2015 POA WITH THE 1995 BPfA AND THE 2000 BEIJING+5 OUTCOME DOCUMENT

The Beijing Platform for Action addresses the role of regional and intergovernmental organisations in promoting gender equality in all critical areas of concern. For example, paragraph 81 (b) (BPfA Strategic Objective B) states, "provide universal access to, and seek to ensure gender equality in the completion of, primary education for girls by the year 2000." Further, paragraph (d) states, "narrow the disparities between developed and developing countries."

As the largest intergovernmental organisation within the UN system, with 53 member countries, representing nearly one third of UN member countries and spanning five (5) regions, the Commonwealth is well positioned to contribute to the achievement of gender equality around the world.

The Secretariat's strategy is based on working closely with national women's machineries (BPfA – Strategic Objective H, Institutional Mechanisms), relevant ministries, key constituencies, CSOs and multilateral and bilateral agencies in the promotion of gender equality.

The PoA addresses four critical areas for Commonwealth action to advance gender equality:

- I Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict;
- II Gender, Human Rights and Law;
- III Gender, Poverty Eradication and Economic Empowerment;
- IV Gender and HIV/AIDS.

Within these critical areas, the Commonwealth aims to deepen its gender mainstreaming approach, particularly in addressing persistent and emerging challenges such as violence against women, women's political representation, women's participation in peace processes, trafficking and HIV/AIDs.

COUNTRY EXPERIENCES

While we have recorded numerous positive achievements, I would like to highlight a few.

In South Africa, women represent 47% of the Cabinet. Similarly, 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. Similarly, in Uganda, a constitutional reform provided for one woman Member of Parliament per district and one third of local council positions for women.

In the area of conflict resolution and peace-building, the Commonwealth endorsed the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to restore the democratically elected government in Sierra Leone. In addition, it organised a national consultation on "Women, and Men in Partnership for Post-Conflict Reconstruction" to facilitate the rebuilding of peace, democracy and development in Sierra Leone.

In addition, the Commonwealth Secretariat is currently engaged in northern Uganda to assist and support efforts with other partners to promote post-conflict reconstruction initiatives, which include activities geared towards breaking the cycle of violence and poverty, and rehabilitating livelihoods. In Cameroon, efforts are underway to mainstream gender in three areas judiciary, human rights, and elections.

In the area of gender-based violence, specifically violence against women, the Commonwealth has adopted a rights-based approach, which recognises the norms, standards and principles of international treaties and declarations. Some notable examples of Commonwealth country initiatives include the Government of Canada's commitment to reduce family violence through the introduction of the 'Family Violence Initiative', establishment of domestic violence courts in Singapore and Seychelles, and the introduction of domestic violence legislation in Belize and Jamaica. In addition, Ghana has successfully passed the 'Children's Act', amended the Criminal Code in areas dealing with rape and defilement, and adopted a policy on Affirmative Action.

The South African Development Community in association with the Commonwealth developed a 'Do it Yourself' trainers' manual on an integrated approach to combat gender-based violence. In the Pacific, the Chief Magistrate

of Vanuatu introduced new rules in Magistrate Courts which provide for the granting of domestic violence protection orders and provision of some security for survivors of domestic violence.

Internationally, the eradication of poverty has been at the heart of the development agenda. For the Commonwealth, this is a central concern. 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. Over two-thirds of these are women.

The Commonwealth Secretariat was the first intergovernmental organisation to promote Gender-Responsive Budgets (GRBs). It launched its Gender Budget Initiative in 1995 and has played a pioneering and instrumental role in the production of tools, methodologies and capacity building materials. In fact, to a large extent it is the Commonwealth experience – primarily that of Australia and South Africa – which have been adapted as the framework for capacity building in Gender-Responsive Budgeting in many countries of the world.

The focus of the work until recently was on the expenditure side of the budget, but recently, the Secretariat has pioneered new work on the revenue side. In 2003, it published *Gender Impacts of Government Revenue Collection: The Case of Taxation*, which presents a conceptual framework, and it is proposed to take this further through the development of tools and in-country pilots.

The Secretariat has done some pioneering work in establishing the framework for *Gender and the Multilateral Trading System* and has published a manual on the subject. More recently, it has published *Chains of Fortune: Linking Women Producers and Workers with Global Markets*, which includes six case studies from different regions of the Commonwealth showing how women can be enabled to take advantage of globalisation.

The Secretariat provided a gender consultant for one year to assist in engendering the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process in Sierra Leone. In addition, the gender consultant provided to the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) facilitated the development of the regional gender mainstreaming policy and programme. Similarly, the Secretariat supports a gender issues adviser at the Forum Secretariat to facilitate gender mainstreaming in the Pacific region.

The latest figures indicate the increasing impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on women and girls and the inadequacy of efforts by the international community. Commonwealth developing countries account for 60% of the 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS, and 9 of the most affected countries are all Commonwealth members, while half of all the people living with HIV/AIDS are females.

The Commonwealth HIV/AIDS programme adopts a multi-sectoral approach focusing on effecting specific changes in areas that have a direct impact on the lives of women and girls. Such collaboration was recently witnessed through the 'Global Coalition on Women and HIV/AIDS' hosted by the Commonwealth Secretariat in partnership with UNAIDS on February 2003 in London. The Secretariat is also collaborating with Dalhousie University and regional agencies to establish a virtual International Institute on Gender and HIV/AIDS.

The Commonwealth recognises that men can make a difference to women's health, thereby reducing the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS. The Youth Ambassadors for Positive Living is a flagship programme of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The programme mobilises young people who are HIV positive to fight the pandemic through peer education and other awareness programmes which addresses the stigma and discrimination related to HIV/AIDS.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT

Shortly after Beijing, the organisational and governance structure, strategic plan, human resource management and programme delivery of the Secretariat were reviewed with the objective of transforming the Secretariat into an example of good practice. Some notable initiatives include:

- A Gender Steering Committee, chaired by the Secretary-General, comprised of divisional Directors was set up.
- Two Gender Focal Points (GFPs) were appointed in each division to coordinate gender mainstreaming in all programmes and projects. 'Gender Resource Packs' were prepared for Directors and GFPs with regular consultation and reviews conducted.
- An Equal Employment Opportunities Policy (EOPP) became effective in June 1997, with a Steering Committee, which monitors the implementation of the policy. Similarly, Staff Counsellors were appointed to listen to cases of low staff morale and issues relating to sexual harassment and sex discrimination in the work place.
- The Human Resources Section adopted a 33 per cent (%) target to strive towards gender parity. In addition, employment terms in the Secretariat have been upgraded to reflect gender balance. This has resulted in considerable increase of women at professional levels. As of July 2003, 33 per cent (%) of senior positions were filled by women; middle cadre women 40%; while 82.7% of support staff were women;
- A separate Gender Equality Programme is one of the Secretariat's programmes, in addition to which gender is mainstreamed across the other 15 programmes of the current 4-year strategic plan;
- Female Special Envoys are appointed by the Secretary-General for his Good Offices and Peace interventions. In addition, the Political Affairs division continues to work towards a 50:50 gender balance on the Commonwealth Observer Groups (COGs) to monitor elections. Efforts are

underway to develop 'Election Gender Briefs' for election monitors and observers

CONCLUSION

In his presentation at Beijing, the then Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, stated, "it is through systematic integration of gender concerns into the mainstream activities of governments and their bureaucracies that we will have a more equitable distribution of resources and sharing of power between women and men. Only in this way, can we ensure that women and men have an equal chance to make decisions and take part in the activities and enjoy their benefits." Ten years after Chief Anyaoku made that statement in Beijing, it is still relevant today.

Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs resolved in their Beijing+10 meeting on 27 February 2005, to build on the Commonwealth's shared values, calling for strengthened partnerships at all levels: between Commonwealth governments, civil society and other partners. They concluded by stating, "Together, let us work to achieve gender equality, peace and development for all."