

Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs: Sixth Meeting, New Delhi, India, 17-19 April 2000.

Introduction

The Update to the 1995 Plan of Action on Gender and Development
Gender Mainstreaming: Overcoming Constraints, Achieving Results, Lessons
Learned

New Directions in Gender Mainstreaming

Gender, Macroeconomic Policies and Globalisation

Women's Human Rights, Conflict and Peace

Gender and Politics

Message to the Commonwealth High Level Review Group Next meeting

Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs (WAMM) met in New Delhi, India from April 17 to 19, 2000. WAMM represents the largest grouping of Ministers responsible for women's affairs within the international arena who form a constituency that meets regularly, builds consensus on critical issues and approaches, shares experiences and best practices, and provides leadership and expertise to advance gender equality throughout the Commonwealth. Forty-six member countries attended the meeting - the first Commonwealth Ministerial Meeting to be held in the new millennium.

His Excellency, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India officially opened the meeting. At the inaugural ceremony, the Honourable Murli Manohar Joshi, Minister for Human Resource Development, Government of India and chair of the Meeting quoted Mahatma Gandhi, "But I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion, she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by men. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality."

Ministers extended a warm welcome to the Rt Hon Donald C McKinnon, recently appointed Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. The Secretary-General reminded Ministers that gender equality was enshrined as one of the fundamental values of the Association. He also reminded them that when Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Durban in November 1999 they saw this as "a particular challenge" and "urged member governments to take action for the promotion and advancement of women by strengthening their national machineries to implement gender mainstreaming for the acceleration of women's empowerment in political, economic and social activities in the 21st century."

Ministers expressed their appreciation for the excellent arrangements for their meeting and the warm hospitality extended by the Government and people of India.

The theme of the meeting was 'Advancing the Commonwealth Agenda into the New Millennium'. Ministers discussed a range of issues focussing on gender mainstreaming, macro-economic policies and globalisation, women's human rights, conflict and peace, political participation and HIV/AIDS.

Observers representing international and regional agencies and organisations as well as non-governmental organisations attended the meeting and made brief presentations on the work of their organisations. Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the Plan of Action on Gender and Development

Ministers expressed appreciation to the Commonwealth Secretary-General for his Report on the Implementation of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action: Learning by Sharing, and noted that while significant progress has been recorded in the 15 critical areas for action, much still remains to be done. Ministers shared ideas and experiences on gender issues including: poverty and women's economic empowerment, employment, human rights and violence against women, and women in leadership and decision-making positions, particularly in politics.

The Update to the 1995 Plan of Action on Gender and Development

The Commonwealth Secretariat presented an overview of the Update to the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development; Advancing the Commonwealth Agenda for Gender Equality into the New Millennium (2000-2005). The Update had been approved by Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs and subsequently endorsed by Heads of Government at their meeting in Durban, South Africa in November 1999.

The Update is a strategy to focus Commonwealth government and Secretariat action with a view to achieving greater impact in key areas of Commonwealth comparative advantage. It recognises new and emerging social, economic and political changes that are occurring worldwide and have major gender implications, for example, the macroeconomic impacts of globalisation, competitive international markets, changing employment patterns, and technological advances. The Update places emphasis on the strengthening of the capacity of National Women's Machineryes (NWMs), and on the linkages between the Commonwealth Secretariat and NWMs.

Gender Mainstreaming: Overcoming Constraints, Achieving Results, Lessons Learned

Gender mainstreaming is the current international approach to promoting equality between women and men. It is based on the recognition that gender

inequality exists at all levels and in all sectors of society. It seeks to close the gaps between women and men's access to and control over opportunities and resources, and to ensure that they are equally empowered to affect society's governance and decisions. In order for gender mainstreaming processes and activities to be effective, a comprehensive, cross-cutting and gender aware approach is vital. Ministers shared their country experiences and exchanged views on what works and what does not work in the implementation of gender mainstreaming. They emphasised the need for political will, policies, processes and partnerships. Ministers recognised that treating women and men identically will not ensure equality of outcomes and agreed on the importance of taking into account the diversity of women and the multiple barriers they face. They also agreed that in addition to gender mainstreaming there is a requirement for the implementation by sector of women-specific activities and projects, taking into account national priorities and situations. The availability of adequate human and financial resources would assist in the implementation of gender mainstreaming.

Ministers noted the importance of structures and mechanisms to facilitate gender mainstreaming; institutionalising gender training in the public service; collecting and utilising sex-disaggregated data; developing indicators; and incorporating gender analysis and gender planning into all sectors. They underscored that gender mainstreaming is central and involves all sectors at all levels of government, civil society and the private sector. Ministers recommended that the Commonwealth Secretariat continue to support government's efforts to achieve gender mainstreaming by providing strategic policy advice and expertise in the implementation of gender mainstreaming, where sought, as described in the Update to the 1995 Plan of Action; ministers noted the need to support the Commonwealth Secretariat to enable it to continue its work in assisting National Women's Machineries in gender mainstreaming.

Ministers commended the Secretariat for the series of Gender Management System (GMS) publications and encouraged it to continue the development of user-friendly training materials adaptable to the different needs of member countries.

New Directions in Gender Mainstreaming

Ministers noted that the scale of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been increasing from year to year and has now grown to the proportions of a worldwide pandemic. They recognised that HIV/AIDS is a gender issue because the risks and consequences are different for women and men. For example, women are more susceptible to HIV infection because of their biological nature; women are often less able to negotiate safe sex due to their lower status, economic dependence, fear of violence, fear of the consequences of insisting on safe sex practices; and women and girls known to have

HIV/AIDS are more likely to be rejected, expelled from the family home and denied treatment, care and basic human rights. The importance of health promotion including the disclosure of HIV status to spouses was also stressed.

Ministers agreed that the application of gender mainstreaming to multisectoral policy approaches would result in the development of gender-aware measures to combat HIV/AIDS. Recognising that HIV/AIDS poses a grave threat to many countries and particularly imposes a serious social and economic burden on most developing countries, Ministers called on the Commonwealth Secretariat and governments to advocate for improved health education and public awareness, to strengthen partnerships at various levels and to collaborate closely with international agencies. Ministers noted that unsustainable debt levels in developing countries makes it difficult to address the challenge posed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and poverty. Debt relief, including cancellation as appropriate, would assist in this regard.

Ministers agreed to urgently intensify initiatives around HIV/AIDS, including an analysis of their differential impact of HIV/AIDS on developing countries, as well as to encourage ongoing dialogue and research on HIV/AIDS.

Ministers discussed the contemporary changes in society that could have an impact on male/female roles and relations. As regards gender issues, with respect to males, it was felt that there was insufficient data to reach any firm view and that more research was needed. Ministers recognised that there is no empirical evidence to support the theory of 'male marginalisation'. Ministers agreed that the perception of this phenomenon or the issue of male marginalisation in education can affect gender mainstreaming programmes.

It was agreed that it was important to address gender gaps for both males and females, to identify underlying causes, and to address them in order to achieve gender equality and to fulfil the rights of women and girls. It was also agreed that women should not bear the burden of change alone, and that male participation for the achievement of gender equality should be encouraged. Ministers underscored the need to take an approach to gender mainstreaming which addresses gender issues in childhood and at each stage of the lifecycle.

In response to the request from the CHOGM Committee on Co-operation through Sport, Ministers endorsed the 'Windhoek Call for Action', adopted by the Second World Conference on Women and Sport held in Namibia, in 1998, that calls for action throughout the world to further the development of equal opportunities for girls and women to participate fully in sport, and encouraged governments to assist in its implementation.

Gender, Macroeconomic Policies and Globalisation

Globalisation, trade liberalisation and increasing competition have transformed the social, economic and political landscape of the Commonwealth. Globalisation presents new opportunities and challenges to policy makers who should take steps to minimise any disproportionate adverse effects of globalisation on women or men. Ministers noted the inter-relationship between structural adjustment, trade liberalisation and globalisation, and noted as well the impact of privatisation on health care, education and employment in some countries. Whilst recognising the positive aspects of globalisation for many countries and particular sections of society, they expressed serious concern over some of the negative effects, particularly on weak and vulnerable economies and especially on women and children. These included rising unemployment, poverty and the difficulty of providing social safety nets. They expressed concern about the adverse impacts experienced by those states already overburdened with debt, and the informal sector in which a high concentration of women is found.

Ministers agreed that special attention needs to be given to women in the informal sector where appropriate through a range of measures which may include protective and promotional legislation, better working conditions, provision of support services for child care and health care, credit and market access and by enhancement of the technical, managerial and entrepreneurial capacity of women.

Ministers also noted the additional hardships faced by small island states due to their size and isolation. Capacity building in communication, trade and information technology would enhance their links regionally and internationally.

Ministers strongly endorsed and urged the speedy implementation of measures addressed to Commonwealth Governments and the Secretariat contained in the Update to the 1995 Plan of Action, and the Fancourt Declaration for the achievement of sustainable economic growth and equitable social development for both women and men. They emphasised the need for the Commonwealth to facilitate women's access to resources and markets, with specific assistance for women in the informal sector where appropriate. Ministers recommended that governments utilise gender analysis in the negotiation of liberalisation processes, and, where appropriate, establish and strengthen social safety nets and protect the basic needs of women such as food security, education, access to capital and markets.

Ministers noted the need to focus on the inter-relationships between macroeconomic and social development imperatives and recognised this as critical to women's economic empowerment and the attainment of gender mainstreaming objectives.

Ministers commended the Commonwealth Secretariat and the countries that participated in the pilot project for their work in implementing the gender budget process. They emphasised the need for the national budgetary process to incorporate gender analysis, where appropriate. Gender budgets make good economic sense as they allow for more effective targeting of resource allocation and redistributing wealth. Equally important is the positive impact on gender equality. They support gender mainstreaming strategies by linking gender to a critical area of macroeconomic policy formulation, and by directly engaging Ministries of Finance and National Planning, relevant line ministries and decentralised government structures in the implementation of the gender budget process.

Ministers encouraged governments to integrate, where appropriate, a gender analysis into the national budgetary process. In addition, they requested that Commonwealth Ministers of Finance at their next meeting endorse the integration of gender analysis into the national budget and also agree to consider integrating a gender perspective into macroeconomic policies like debt management and structural adjustment policies, and international trade policy.

The Ministers endorsed the need for a framework to effectively respond to the impacts of macroeconomic policies on women. Ministers agreed that the strategy should incorporate certain key elements, for example: the strengthening of capacities of NWMs to understand, respond to and monitor macroeconomic policy issues; the incorporation of analyses of women's unpaid labour in macroeconomic and related social policy formulation processes; research, collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data; the establishment of direct communication channels between government, parliamentarians, women's groups; and civil society; and the provision of appropriate technical assistance.

Ministers requested that Commonwealth Ministers of Finance consider these issues at their next meeting.

Women's Human Rights, Conflict and Peace

The promotion and protection of the human rights of women and the elimination of violence against women and children will remain a challenge to international, regional and national organisations, and local communities in the 21st century. Although women's rights are an integral and indivisible part of human rights, more is required to ensure that women fully enjoy their economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights on the same terms as men. Ministers noted that the economic cost of violence against women and its impact on economic development should be better appreciated. They recognised the essential role played by women's non-governmental organisations and civil society in the promotion and protection of women's human rights.

Ms Angela King, UN Assistant Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, addressed the meeting and highlighted issues related to women's human rights, and conflict and peace. She encouraged Commonwealth governments to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Her words added more weight to the words spoken by Dr Charlotte Abaka, Chairperson of the National Council on Women and Development of Ghana; and Ms Rosalyn Hazelle, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Community and Social Development and Gender Affairs of St Kitts and Nevis.

Ministers noted the progress achieved in the development of international human rights standards for women's human rights, particularly with regard to the right to equality, freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex, freedom from violence against women and reproductive rights. They also noted that positive advances have been made in the creation and strengthening of international human rights mechanisms dealing with women's human rights. These steps include the ratification of the CEDAW by most countries, and the universal ratification of the Convention for the Rights of the Child by all but two countries, the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on violence against women, and the increased representation of women on human rights bodies.

Ministers requested their governments to comply with their international human rights obligations and encouraged those countries that have not yet ratified CEDAW to do so, and to work towards the effective implementation of the CEDAW. They encouraged governments to take specific actions to promote women's economic and social rights.

Ministers expressed concern regarding the growing incidence of trafficking in persons, particularly women and children. They noted that trafficking in women and children has assumed international dimensions and therefore requires the concerted co-operation of Commonwealth member states and the international community to achieve its elimination. They called for studies in order to better understand the problem of the sexual exploitation of women and children including through media such as the Internet.

Ministers expressed strong support for the range of activities undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat, particularly the development of training and resource materials on women's human rights as well as a model framework for an integrated approach to eliminate and prevent violence against women. They called upon the Commonwealth Secretariat to build on the outcomes of the Judicial Colloquia to develop training programmes for judges and evaluate such programmes through consultation with regional institutions and collaboration with Ministries of Justice and Legal Affairs, and NWMs. They strongly endorsed the measures addressed to Commonwealth Governments and the Secretariat contained in the Update to the 1995 Plan of Action, and called for action on a priority basis.

Ministers expressed serious concern about the impact of armed and other forms of conflict on women, including loss of life, family members, homes and livelihoods; and human rights violations through sexual violence, rape and forced pregnancy. According to UNHCR statistics, women and children constitute 80 per cent of the world's refugees and displaced persons. They noted the need for monitoring the gender impacts of armed conflict and putting in place gender aware policies, for example, on human rights violations and refugees, where applicable.

Ministers commended the important role that women have been playing in brokering peace in situations of armed conflict. Ministers recommended that the Commonwealth take action in collaboration with other international organisations and civil society to include women at the highest levels in peace building, peace keeping, conflict mediation, resolution, and post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction activities.

Ministers recognised the need for gender-aware capacity building for women and men on conflict mediation, resolution, and peace keeping, and, the sharing of good practices among Commonwealth countries. They encouraged a 30 per cent target of women's participation in peace initiatives by the year 2005.

Ministers recognised that only in situations of peace could women and men achieve full equality. Ministers expressed deep concern about the effect on civilians of anti-personnel landmines and called for increased humanitarian assistance for the victims of landmines. They also expressed concern on the illicit trafficking, manufacturing and circulation of arms and weapons, and support for nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation in all its aspects. They recommended that tolerance for diversity, respect for human rights, international human rights, and training in conflict mediation and resolution should be included in national education curricula at secondary and tertiary levels.

Gender and Politics

Ministers expressed a level of satisfaction at the gains made by some Commonwealth countries in women's representation in politics since they set the 30 per cent target at their last meeting in 1996. They commended the countries that had achieved the targets at levels of Cabinet, national parliaments and local government. They reaffirmed the 30 per cent target (with encouragement to eventual parity) of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors to the year 2005. They agreed on the importance of adopting strategies to enable women to make an impact in Parliament and influence the legislative structures and the public policy agenda.

Despite the gains, Ministers recognised that challenges remain including: negative attitudes in society regarding women in leadership positions; political structures that inhibit women's participation, and the existing expectations of the social and cultural role of women.

To respond to these challenges, Ministers recommended that countries take steps as appropriate to accelerate the increase in women's political participation including actions by governments, political parties, electoral bodies and civil society. A range of suggestions was proposed including implementation of the 30 per cent target, training and capacity building for women candidates, establishing parliamentary gender caucuses, setting up key structures such as national steering committees to promote gender mainstreaming and ensuring that women are well represented in key national, sub-regional and international bodies. There was need to ensure that women have access to opportunities which would qualify them to fill decision-making positions. Ministers agreed that the creation of an enabling environment to promote self-esteem and confidence in women and girls could also enhance women's political participation.

Ministers recognised that once women have achieved entry into Parliament and other bodies, their capacity to make an impact on the legislature needs to be strengthened through measures such as capacity building, the availability of support systems, tools and materials, family-friendly working environments, and the recognition and rewarding of women's achievements.

Message to the Commonwealth High Level Review Group

Ministers agreed to submit the attached message to the members of the Commonwealth High Level Review Group established at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Durban in 1999. A similar message would be sent to the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

Next meeting

Ministers agreed to meet again to consider progress in the Fiji Islands, who registered interest to host the Seventh Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs in 2003.

New Delhi

19 April 2000.