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**The role of regional and inter-governmental organizations  
in promoting gender equality**

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**CSW/ UNDAW Panel on**

**The Role of Regional and Intergovernmental Agencies  
in Promoting Gender Equality**

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**Panel presentation by Dr Rawwida Baksh  
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## **THE ROLE OF REGIONAL AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY**

Presentation by Dr Rawwida Baksh  
Head of Gender Section, Commonwealth Secretariat

I bring you warm salutations from the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Rt. Hon. Don McKinnon and the Secretariat. I am deeply honoured to participate in this high level panel on the role of regional and intergovernmental organisations in promoting gender equality during this 49<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> year review of the Beijing Platform for Action.

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

I am also indeed pleased to see many of you who attended our Commonwealth Beijing+10 Meeting of Ministers, Senior Officials, Civil Society Organisations and Partners , to launch our new Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015.

### **Brief History of the Commonwealth**

The Commonwealth Secretariat is a voluntary organisation of 53 independent sovereign states (nearly 1/3 of the UN member countries), 32 of which are small states. The Secretariat was established by the Heads of Government in 1965 whose primary goals are promoting international cooperation, peace, democracy and good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, gender equality, poverty eradication through economic and social development. The Commonwealth Heads of Government mandated the Secretariat to assist, support and promote initiatives by and within member countries to achieve sustainable development beneficial to all.

Guided by this mandate and our comparative advantage, the Secretariat in collaboration with member countries including national women's machineries and other partners, adopted a multi-sectoral, rights-based approach to issues relating to democracy and development. The Commonwealth recognises that gender differences do not exist in a vacuum, but intersect with a number of other factors of diversity, such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, age, religion, disability, and peace. Thus, the Commonwealth Secretary-General noted, "issues of peace, governance, democracy, and socio-economic development cannot be divorced from those of gender equality." The Commonwealth's vision of equality between women and men therefore, is based on the association's fundamental values, common values in diversity, which it seizes to share experiences, develop consultative and

collaborative processes geared towards the achievement of people-centred sustainable development.

### **Development of the Commonwealth Plan of Action (PoA)**

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/Gender Affairs launched the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action which was presented to the global conference in Beijing. This Plan of Action was later endorsed by the Commonwealth's Heads of Government at their meeting in Auckland 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 Platform for Action.

In his presentation at the Beijing conference, the then 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 true today. Thus, the Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's/Gender Affairs, building on past individual, country and collective initiatives; and strategies within the Commonwealth, and taking into consideration emerging global issues and developments which have differential impacts on women, men and young persons, have developed a new Plan of Action for the 2005-2015 decade, which was launched on 27 February 2005 here in New York on the eve of the Beijing+10 Global Review.

### **Linking the Commonwealth Plan of Action to the Beijing Platform for Action, and the 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(d) states, "intergovernmental organisations are requested to urge governments to implement measures aimed at eliminating differences between women, men, boys and girls with regard to opportunities in education and training, particularly in primary and literacy programmes."

In the area of combating violence against women, regional and intergovernmental organisations are called upon to step up co-operation and concerted action by all relevant law enforcement authorities and institutions with a view to dismantling national, regional and international networks in trafficking. In the area of women and conflict, they are urged to promote equal participation of women in peace activities at all levels, particularly at the decision-making levels.

The Commonwealth Plan of Action urges member countries to increase women's representation at all levels of decision-making. Realising the uneven progress recorded within member states in this area, the PoA further urges governments who have already achieved the agreed 30 per cent (30%) target, to strive for much higher aspirations (Para 3:13 (i)). This provision underscores the forward looking status of the new Commonwealth Plan of Action, and our resolve to sustain results.

In the area of education particularly in conflict and difficult circumstances, the Commonwealth urges governments to develop peace and citizenship education to promote respect for individual rights and freedoms, gender equality, diversity including religious and cultural diversity, and pluralism. The PoA also calls on member countries to monitor the implementation of the UNSCR 1325, as it realises that there can be no development without peace.

Other areas of similarity and comparison between the PoA, the Platform for Action and the Outcome Document will be highlighted in the country examples below.

### **Commonwealth's Comparative Advantage in Promoting the Critical Areas**

The Plan of Action reflects the fundamental values and a shared tradition of member countries. Further, it highlights the Commonwealth's areas of comparative advantage, which responds to the principles and ethics of democracy and good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, gender equality and sustainable development. It also includes issues related to least developed countries (LDCs) and Small States, the Millennium Development Goals, poverty eradication and the HIV/AIDs pandemic. Common values and similarities among member countries in political, administrative, legal, educational and other systems also represent strengths, facilitating consensus-building and the sharing of experiences, expertise and resources.

The PoA focuses on four main areas to advance gender equality. These are:

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

A fifth and important area of the Plan of Action is that of implementation which includes partnerships; knowledge, information and capacity building (through a Commonwealth Knowledge-Based Network); the identification of resources; and monitoring, reporting and evaluation.

Within the above critical areas, the Commonwealth aims to build on and deepen the gender mainstreaming approach, particularly when addressing persistent challenges such as poverty eradication and economic empowerment, gender-based violence,

and the achievement of women's participation and representation in leadership and decision-making positions.

The PoA also seeks to promote strong and dynamic partnerships in order to accelerate the achievement of gender equality through advocacy, brokering, and sharing information on lessons learned and good practice. Our partners include Commonwealth governments, a network of Commonwealth institutions, the United Nations and its agencies, multilateral & bilateral agencies, regional bodies and civil society organisations.

### **Mapping Commonwealth Progress & Achievements – Country Experiences**

The Secretariat through the Gender Section and in collaboration with member governments continues to strengthen institutional mechanisms and processes that are crucial to advancing gender equality. It supports and provides training and technical assistance to member countries in priority areas especially those in which it has comparative advantage for example, in monitoring elections, education in conflict and difficult circumstances. However, the need to improve the slow rate of implementation and results is critical for progress and sustainability of results. The uneven progress recorded by member states is an indication that urgent action is needed to ensure collective benefits and sustainable development.

#### **Some Country Experiences**

In the area of political participation and decision-making, the Commonwealth through its assistance in elections, continues to push for increased women's participation and representation. In South Africa, women represent 42% of those in government. In Uganda, a constitutional reform provided for one woman Member of Parliament per district and one third of local council positions for women. Similarly, India's 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> 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 in the country.

In the area of conflict resolution and peace-building, our integrated approach involves men, women, and young persons in order to promote a culture of peace, resolve conflicts, undertake gender-aware post-conflict reconstruction in all sectors and increase women's representation in political processes. 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 and democracy 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.

Similarly, a gender technical expert has been appointed to work with the Government of Sri Lanka to mainstream gender equality into all policies and programmes. The expert is expected to commence work in March 2005. In Cameroon, efforts are underway to mainstream gender in three areas: the judiciary, human rights, and elections with the assistance of a gender expert.

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' (FYI), establishment of domestic violence courts in Singapore, Seychelles, and 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, 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. This has not only been recognised in the first overarching Millennium Development Goal (MDG), which pledges countries to the reduction of poverty by half by 2015, but was also equally recognised in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing+5 outcome document which identified women's increasing and persistent burdens of poverty and unequal access to resources and various economic processes as two of its critical areas of concern, namely: Women and Poverty, and Women and the Economy.

For the Commonwealth, too, 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 for the implementation of gender-responsive budgets. It has promoted and disseminated these concepts and

tools internationally through a wide variety of publications – including case studies and a practitioner’s guide. Some of the more recent publications are:

- *Gender Budgets Make Cents* (2001);
- *Gender Budgets Make More Cents* (2002); and
- *Engendering Budgets: A Practitioner’s Guide* (2003)

The focus of the work until recently was on the expenditure side of the budget, but recently, the Commonwealth 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.

In addition, the Commonwealth Secretariat has been responsible for international advocacy in support of this programme area through providing technical assistance to several countries for pilot work on GRBs: Barbados, Belize, South Africa and Sri Lanka. 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.

In 2004, the Secretariat’s Gender Section commissioned regional reports on the progress of Gender-Responsive Budgeting within the Commonwealth. A draft *Report on Gender-Responsive Budgeting in the Commonwealth: Progress and Challenges*, was presented at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers’ Meeting in September 2004. This was a preliminary report to form the basis for assessing progress. At the 2005 Finance Ministers’ Meeting a final report will be presented based on updates received from member countries.

While globalisation and trade liberalisation offer new opportunities for economic growth and poverty eradication, they also pose critical challenges related to loss of livelihoods. The limited capacity of many countries, particularly the small states, to formulate appropriate trade policies and to negotiate effectively during trade negotiations, has led various multilateral and bilateral agencies to work towards improvement and enhancement of this capacity. However, there has been much less focus on the gender issues.

The Gender Section of the Commonwealth 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 Commonwealth Secretariat has also focused on the need for employment as an essential strategy for poverty reduction. As clearly stated in the book titled *Mainstreaming Informal Employment and Gender in Poverty Reduction*, the vast majority of the poor work and most of them, especially women are engaged in the

informal economy. The book examines the challenges presented by trade and economic liberalization, technological change and industrial restructuring resulting in global value chains. It also highlights some examples of good practice from around the world to deal with informal enterprises and protect informal workers.

The Commonwealth Secretariat established the Commonwealth Women's Business Network. This was based on the premise that it was important in this era of globalisation and trade liberalisation to enable and empower women's businesses to benefit from the opportunities that present themselves. At the same time the Gender Section has worked on a regional basis to create an enabling environment for enterprise development. It organised a workshop on Strategies for West Africa on Poverty Reduction, Gender and Enterprise Development in Ghana in August 2004.

Through its capacity building measure, the Commonwealth Secretariat provided a gender consultant for one year to assist in engendering the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in Sierra Leone. In addition, a gender consultant was provided for the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) in the development of the regional gender policy and programme, which sought to enhance development impact for men, women and young persons in the region. The ECOWAS team uses the Gender Management System (GMS) training kit that was developed by the Commonwealth Secretariat in their training and workshops. Similarly, the Secretariat supports a gender issues adviser at the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC) to mainstream and monitor gender equality in the region.

The latest figures indicate on increasing impact of 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 women and girls.

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 the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health at 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 by allowing women to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive rights, 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.

## **Mainstreaming Gender Equality in the Commonwealth Secretariat**

Shortly after the 1995 Beijing conference, the governance structures and programmes of the Secretariat were reviewed with the objective to transform the Secretariat into an example of gender mainstreaming good practice. Some notable initiatives include:

- A Gender Steering Committee (GSC) was set up comprised of Directors and chaired by the Secretary-General. It meets bi-annually to review Secretariat's divisional progress in mainstreaming gender equality in their sector-specific programmes;
- Two Gender Focal Points (GFPs) were appointed by each division to co-ordinate gender mainstreaming into 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 the 33 per cent (%) target to ensure gender parity. In addition, the Secretariat's employment terms have been upgraded to reflect gender balance. This has resulted in considerable increase in the number 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;
- During the period 1997-2000, workshops and training to raise awareness of gender issues were organised for Secretariat staff. Approximately, 288 staff members participated in this workshops;
- The Secretariat has developed the Gender Management System as a framework for mainstreaming gender equality in individual government ministries (e.g. agriculture and rural development, education, information and communications, trade and industry); cross-cutting ministries (e.g. finance, development planning); in cross-cutting development issues (e.g. poverty eradication and the MDGs, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, multilateral trade, human rights). The GMS series of manuals has been widely disseminated, and most recently a GMS Toolkit has been published which includes an Action Guide (for individual learners), Trainer's Guide, Change Management Briefing, and a CD-Rom;
- A separate Gender Equality Programme has been strengthened within the Secretariat's organisational structure and current Four-Year Strategic Plan (2004-2008);
- 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) sent out to monitor elections. Efforts are underway to develop 'Election Gender Briefs' for election monitors and observers.

Leading work by a dedicated Gender Section has been vital to build and strengthen the commitment to gender equality, equity and ensure that gender is mainstreamed into all policies and programmes of member countries and in the Secretariat. For instance, through the work of the Gender Section, the Commonwealth Secretariat addressed the UN Security Council in October 2004, for the first time since its inception forty years ago. (For more detail information and figures, see attached figures/charts and graph).

### **Challenges, Gaps and Constraints in Promoting Gender Equality**

Despite the progress and successes recorded in several countries, experiences indicate a number of gaps, constraints, and challenges in promoting gender equality within member states, the Secretariat, and globally. Some of these challenges include:

- Inadequate and/or ad-hoc resources to implement gender equality programmes and projects;
- Insufficient data, statistics and indicators to inform interventions at all levels;
- Lack of political will to implement resolutions and other legal frameworks such as CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, UDHR, and others;
- Lack of institutional co-ordination, limited mandates, which gives rise to duplication and waste of resources;
- Socio-cultural and traditional barriers, for example in issues relating to female genital mutilation;
- Mind-sets of policy-makers, and inadequate policies to address gender inequalities.

### **Way Forward**

Far too many women still lack access to education, employment, ownership of land, and other economic resources, health care and reproductive rights. Women and girls in particular suffer in ways that have no direct parallel to their male counterparts from diseases such as HIV/AIDs, rape and other violations. Women's rights are often ignored and they are usually excluded from peace-building and conflict resolution processes. Given the gaps, challenges, constraints and lessons learned, we would like to propose the following:

- Promotion of the rights-based approach to advance gender equality and application of international standards to national laws and enforcement programme. For example, member countries should domesticate the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) at the national level;
- Urgent need for political will and exercise of such will in matters relating to promoting gender equality in particular resource allocation, strengthening national machineries (NWMs), so that programmes of gender equality are not done on ad-hoc basis;

- Adoption of integrated approach to all issues especially human rights violations including violence against women, HIV/AIDs, and trafficking of persons. This is imperative as experience has shown that men are critical partners in the fight to eradicate these problems;
- Improved gender analysis and promotion of indicators and necessary data to ensure positive intervention;
- Better coordination, strengthening partnerships, documenting and sharing of lessons learned to maximise efforts and resources;
- Review of existing legal frameworks and resolutions to ensure comprehensive interventions. For instance, in the area of peace and security, the United Nations Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace, and Security, should be reviewed to include early warning mechanisms, benchmarks and indicators, gender justice, security and rights of women in conflict and post-conflicts especially those living in unrecognised states in particular, refugees, IDPs. Other issues to be addressed include, education in conflict and difficult circumstances;
- Institutionalisation of mechanisms to promote gender equality and implementation;
- A review of 'gender mainstreaming' as a strategy

Finally, member countries and the Commonwealth Secretariat may need to re-align both existing and future programmes towards policy frameworks that pay attention to socio-political, cultural and economic results, which is beneficial to men, women and young persons. This is the integrated approach adopted by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

## **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that some progress and achievements have been made by the Secretariat, Commonwealth member countries and globally to promote gender equality. This was reiterated by the former Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, Ms. Angela E.V. King, when she noted, "the Commonwealth has made many contributions to bringing about improvements in the current international political, economic, and social climate, including its strong stand on gender issues and support of the United Nations gender equality goals. Despite these successes, much work remains to be done.

The new PoA for Gender Equality 2005-015, provides the framework within which the Commonwealth will continue to advance its work and commitment to gender equality and equity. The PoA is an integration of our responses to global issues which have differential impacts on women, men and young children. It continues to build on experiences, lessons learned, seeks to close persistent gaps and address new and emerging issues. In addition, it reflects the Commonwealth's fundamental values of which gender equality is chief. As the Rt. Hon. Don McKinnon noted, "the principles of gender equality and inclusion are the fundamental values in which every attempt at democracy and peace-building must be based."

As we move into the second post-Beijing decade, let us strengthen our partnerships and commitments to achieve gender equality. Along with other targets set within the MDGs, let us resolve to achieve gender equality for all by the year 2015. It may sound daunting, but it is indeed achievable if we collectively resolve to exercise the necessary political will.

Thank you.