

Commonwealth Women's Forum – A Significant Landmark on the Path to Women's Equality

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At the 2015 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) hosted by Malta the first Commonwealth Women's Forum was held along with other forums related to young people, business, NGOs and civil society. Many of the over 500 women attending wondered why it had taken so long for women to have their own forum at which to discuss issues relevant to them and countries from which they had come. Malta is to be congratulated on hosting the Forum. As the President of Malta Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca said her welcome:

“The time is ripe to move from rhetoric to action. May the Women's Forum move beyond discussions to entice the Heads of Government present to act to ensure the wellbeing of women and mark an end to the atrocities women and girls are experiencing today. The Commonwealth can effectively be an inspiration to the world in bringing about change in the lives of women and girls.”

The Forum followed the 20th Commonwealth Women Affairs Ministerial Meeting (10WAMM) that took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013 and among other matters observed the under-representation of women leaders and decision-makers in politics, public sector, and corporate boards and in communities with the result of a negative impact on democracy and development. Following 10WAMM, the members of the Commonwealth Gender Plan of Action Monitoring Group agreed that in order to affirm high-level support and direct top-level politics equality and human rights, there was an urgent need for women to be given the opportunity to interact with the heads of government and for the Commonwealth's gender equality commitments to be higher on the agenda for Heads of Government. As a participant to various national and international conferences and workshops over the past 40 years, one could only agree that the time was overdue to move the equality agenda for women to directly engage with those decision-makers who have the authority and capacity to include women and their interests in their decision-making. The Forum provided that opportunity and with the support of the Maltese Government the Women's Forum was formally included within the CHOGM agenda and in the future will become a permanent feature of the CHOGM programmes.

The theme of the Forum **Women Ahead: Be All That We Can Be** captured the reality that the empowerment of women benefits not only women themselves but the social and economic development of their communities. The theme of the empowerment of women reflected and supported United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 that includes the target to *ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life*. The link with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals was reinforced in the main address of the Forum delivered by Dr Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Executive Director of UN Women who set out the Global context for the advancement of women. The participation of UN Women, the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association-UK, and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum enhanced the breadth and quality of the presentations as well as the smooth running of the various

sessions. The relationship between the global and the local was a consistent theme of the Forum with the various presentations in the panel and workshop sessions providing an invaluable insight into development within international and national and local institutions. In many ways the Forum provided a 'master' class in recent global and local developments in the movement for the equality of women.

The Forum focused on three main areas: women in leadership and entrepreneurship; women, media and technological development (including media and ICT); and women in social development covering education and health. These themes were addressed through presentations from lead speakers and moderated panels of speakers who were experienced within their areas of expertise. While time is always constrained in such sessions in the workshop sessions on the following day there was an opportunity for all participants to share their experiences. I moderated the workshop on Women's Political Empowerment and was impressed with the range of experience and expertise expressed by the participants who included Members of Parliaments, local government representatives, international agencies, NGOs, and academics. The discussion was distinguished by the generous sharing of experience and offers of assistance. It was apparent from the three hours' discussion that similar issues arose in different contexts. The need for responses to common barriers and constraints to women to be culturally appropriate was apparent from the various contributions. What works in one country may not be successful in another. In all societies however women experience discrimination and there continues to be a reluctance to redress the inequality of women in a way to results in real change.

Although my focus at the Forum was on political empowerment, I attended on the first day all the sessions on the other two themes of women the media and technological development and women in social development. These sessions reinforced the reality that for women to have political decision-making it was essential to ensure the media understand and contributed to the goal. The influence of technology on the media was an emphasis that reflected the changing nature of how ideas are formed and communicated. It is essential to participate in the digital revolution that is slowly but surely changing the nature of how we communicate within our communities. Although education and health have always been recognised as the pre-conditions for women's equality, the changing nature of the economy to the delivery of social services through the not-for-profit or private sector provides new challenges for women. The inclusion of a session on social enterprise highlighted this change and also linked into the theme of opportunity for women entrepreneurs.

The Outcome Statement from the Forum incorporated specific recommendations that provide the path for future change required if women are to achieve equality through the opportunity to 'to be all that you can'. While the Forum recognised the need for women to take and develop the opportunities available, those opportunities often require changes in policy, laws and resource allocation that require commitment from political leaders and in particular Heads of Government. The Minister Helena Dalli from Malta presented the Outcome Statement to the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers' meeting. She noted that the Forum had stressed the importance of women's economic, social and political empowerment and the need to leave no women behind, including women with disabilities and women with different choices. I noted the contribution of women with disabilities and LBT women was apparent in the various sessions that emphasized the inclusive nature of the Forum. Minister Dalli also added that the Forum reinforced the need to strengthen women's access, participation and leadership in education, health, employment, technology, political and economic decision-making and

the judiciary. Finally, her presentation called for the establishment of an independent Technical Working Group on gender equality and women's empowerment in line with the targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to report the progress at subsequent CHOGM, together with the Commonwealth Women's Forum to be a permanent forum preceding future CHOGM. As noted this recommendation has been accepted by CHOGM so there will be a continuing opportunity for women of the Commonwealth to meet to access what progress is made and what still needs to be addressed.

The establishment of an independent Tactical Working will be essential to sustain both the work of the 10WAMM and the Gender Plan of Action Monitoring Group. The Outcome document will also inform the current End of Term Review of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015. What was impressive about the Forum for me as a participant was the sustained work from the Commonwealth Gender Section and CPA-UK to develop and promote a long term strategy for change through the Commonwealth Secretariat and its constituent members. I have learnt over a long period of political participation within my own country that it is essential that women are organised and persistent in pursuit their goals. It is also essential that women engage those who have the power to make the decisions, hence the need for commitment from the Commonwealth Heads of Government. That commitment has to be expressed not only aspirationally but practically through the allocation of adequate resources to promote the interests of women and the inclusion of women in all levels of decision-making.

The Outcome statement from the Forum succinctly reflected the general and specific issues that arose in all the sessions. Overall the Outcome Statement reflected the urgent need for women to become part of main stream decision-making. This was reflected in the statement that the Women's Forum be acknowledged as a platform "(i) to transform the mainstream processes with an effective monitoring process to be observed by member states and (ii) to ensure commitments to gender equality and women and girls empowerment takes centre stage and remains essential dimensions of sustainment development, and high on the agenda of Heads of Government." The Outcome Statement also recognised the changing nature of economic policies on the agenda of equality for women. The emphasis on women having financial literacy and independence was recognition of the essential pre-conditions of women's empowerment. While education and health remain essential pre-conditions to equality so does financial independence. The path to this independence will vary but include employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The fact that many poor households are headed by women reflects the urgency to address the economic opportunities for women. The development of appropriate policies and allocation of resources to ensure women have financial independence depends on accurate current data and the participation and advocacy of civil society women's organisation.

The emphasis on women's entrepreneurship was reflected throughout the statement. The lack of progress in traditional corporate leadership positions was observed with concern by the participants. There was a call to strengthen systems to increase representation with a minimum of 30% and target timelines to meet a target of 50% of women in decision-making at all levels through voluntary or regulatory measures that were appropriate for the situation. This slow progress in the corporate sector has however highlighted the need for women to be supported to provide their own economic and financial opportunities. This approach is reflected in the outcomes from the media, technology and social development sessions. Overall the Outcome Statement reflects the frustration of women

to get on and develop their own skills and opportunities but need the support of political and corporate decision makers to remove the unnecessary constraints on women 'to be all that you can'.

The Outcome Statement however also reflected the sobering reality for many women who are subjected to gender-based violence. It is worth recording in full the statement relating to gender-based violence because it identifies the need to address this issue to enable any progress for to be made by women to take control of their own lives for their own benefit and for the sustainable development of their communities. The discussion on gender-based violence "underscored the need to address the wide spectrum and the root causes of power and control of sexual and gender-based violence (such as sexual and cyber harassment, stalking, rape, prostitution, trafficking, pornography, Female Genital Mutilation, domestic violence, forced and early marriage), as it continues to undermine the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. Noted the increasing rife social taboos and endemic cultural practices, which allows child marriages, female genital mutilation/cutting, sexual violence and transmission of diseases on women and girls in the Commonwealth."

Overall the Forum provided an invaluable opportunity not only for women of the Commonwealth but for all the countries of the Commonwealth, in particular, the Heads of Governments and Ministers who have the authority and opportunity to make changes. The Commonwealth is an unique organisation that through its commitment to the values of the rule of law has a real opportunity to provide a global example of best practice to enable women to fully develop their potential, not only for their own wellbeing and that of their families, but their communities. The fact that the Heads of Government have agreed to the Forum to be held before each CHOGM, is a significant step on the path to full equality for the women and girls of the Commonwealth. While still much is to be done on a country level, the leadership of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will provide the support for member states to progress the matters raised in the Outcome statement.