



Address by Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar as Commonwealth Chair-in-Office

Parliamentary Conference on “Educating Women, Transforming Society”

Date: Monday 14th March

**Location: Grand Committee Room, House of Commons, London
SW1, U.K.**

Honourable Members of Parliament

Secretary-General Sharma

Ladies and Gentlemen

Colleagues and friends

Thank you to the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Kamallesh Sharma, for his very generous introduction.

It was once said that most people can look back over the years and identify a time and place at which their lives changed significantly. Whether by accident or design, these are the moments when, because of a readiness within us and a collaboration with events occurring around us, we are forced to seriously reappraise ourselves and the conditions under which we live and to make certain choices that will affect the rest of our lives.

I find this statement to be very appropriate today as we engage in the various celebrations of Commonwealth Day 2011 under the theme - "Women as Agents of Change".

It is the first time in its long history that the Commonwealth has focussed specifically on women and I must say that this is a very welcome historic first, and I certainly hope it is not the last time for this special focus.

It is also more special and significant that this theme coincides with the centenary of International Women's Day celebrated on 7 March with the theme – "Equal access to education, training and science and technology: pathways to decent work for women".

This brings together some key issues for women - and that is reflected in the programme for your Conference this morning, and the support it has won from a wide range of organisations and individuals.

First, may I thank those who have made this event possible, the Council for Education in the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Secretariat, in collaboration with Soroptimist International and London South Bank University and other NGOs.

Thank you also to Jack Dromey MP who made it possible for us to have this historic venue.

Jack's track record in supporting women's battle for equality is well known, from his early support for Asian women striking for trade union rights at the Grunwick plant in north London. And of course his unstinting support for Harriet Harman MP in her leadership in this struggle.

I am delighted that she will be attending at the end of this Conference to issue the "Call to Action".

There has been much progress in women's equality during the lifetime of the Commonwealth, and there is much to celebrate this year.

I am privileged to be the first woman Chair of the Commonwealth, and at the end of my term, I am scheduled to hand the baton over to another woman - Australia's Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

It will be the first time that the Commonwealth has had successive women Chairs, and I hope it will set a pattern for years to come.

More significantly, I hope Commonwealth members will strive to emulate the democratic leadership model of Australia, Bangladesh and of course Trinidad and Tobago.

Embracing gender sensitive leadership styles is a clear demonstration of full and equitable participation in governance.

I hope the academia, civil society organisations and policy advocates among us will help to track progress in this direction in the years ahead.

But as we all also know, it is a case of much done, much still do to, and unfortunately that is particularly the case in the Commonwealth.

So in opening this Conference I want to address the work still to be done to overcome the pressing inequalities still confronting women in the Commonwealth.

Our theme “Women as Agents of Change” is integral to the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality which runs up to 2015 - the target year also for the international community’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The Plan of Action is based on the premise that empowering women is essential to achieving economic, social and political development, and sets out four critical areas for Commonwealth Action for achieving gender equality:

- Democracy and peace
- Secondly, human rights and law
- Thirdly, eradicating poverty and delivering economic empowerment
- And finally ending the scourge of HIV

Progress toward these Commonwealth targets has been slow but undoubtedly, education is the key building block for ensuring that women are agents of change in all of these four areas.

Indeed it was the great Nelson Mandela who once said that education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world and his words will ring true for all of eternity.

Education, you see, either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

It is also the main tool for enabling society at large to adopt new and more inclusive paradigms for addressing development challenges.

Education in its broadest sense is pathway to exercising civil and political rights.

The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education and the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth.

Now this idea cannot be applied to all the members of a society except where there is adequate provision for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests to women and girls. And this means a democratic society in every sense.

It means allowing our women and girls the ability to get onto the bottom rung of the economic ladder, climbing and remaining on the ladder, to overcome the powerlessness which has made women so disproportionately infected and affected by HIV.

And where women have achieved educational equality with men - indeed have outperformed them at both school and university as we do here in the United Kingdom and also in my own region in the Caribbean – there is the need to ensure that their achievements and abilities are given equal recognition in the workplace and in politics especially at leadership levels.

And it is also well known that the most transformative intervention that can be made in any society is to educate women, an investment that yields far greater returns beyond building bridges, roads and skyscrapers. I know this to be true politically – as a former education minister – and also personally – as a former teacher and University lecturer.

So the educational disadvantage that so many Commonwealth women still experience is a real barrier to social and economic progress in all our countries.

The failure of the international community to meet the goals of the education for all campaign is well documented.

And the cost in terms of damaged lives and lost potential is huge.

The world was supposed to have achieved educational equality for women by 2005.

But two years later, in primary education alone, there was still a five per cent gender gap, which doubled to ten per cent in the worst areas of West Asia, Oceania and Sub-Saharan Africa. Girls are disproportionately out of school - especially in rural areas - and once they enrol, they are less likely to stay in school and complete their courses.

Across the Commonwealth there are about 27 million children out of primary school - of whom about 16 million are girls.

So many children who miss out on the most basic building block they need to enable them to achieve their full potential in life.

We are told that real equality will “nearly” have been achieved by 2015.

But being “nearly equal” was not good enough in 2005 - and it certainly is not good enough for 2015.

So what are some of the steps that we need to take to make sure Commonwealth women get equal access to education and act as agents of change?

Here are some suggestions on collective action to better harness women’s resource potentials:

- On the demand side: We need to overcome the discrimination that leads to boys getting priority access to education. This problem is more acute the higher up the educational ladder you go. When resources are scarce, in some communities boys still get preference while girls may be expected to marry young or become carers. We need to incentivise school attendance for girls.
- On the supply side: We need enough places for girls, with secure schools, proper water and sanitation. In some countries primary school teachers are overwhelmingly women, but in other places that is not the case, and we need enough women teachers, especially in rural areas, and flexible education for girls with caring responsibilities

- We need to reform the curriculum and ensure that women have access to all subjects, including - at an early age and before the gender stereotypes have become set - access to science and sport.
- And we need to have sound policies and programmes for early years and continuing education, recognising that women, who lose out in education first time around, often want to return either to support their children's learning or to train for work.
- More concrete effort is required to stem the tide of boys' under-achievement and early drop-out rates as these have long term implications for family cohesion, social stability and community peace.

These are just some suggestions. I am sure you will add more during the course of the morning.

Before closing, I want to spend a few minutes dealing with some of the wider inequalities because if education provides the foundation, there are other parts of the building that also need attention.

I said that 2015, which is when the Commonwealth's Gender Plan of Action concludes, is also the year when the world should achieve its MDGs. And as we all here in this chamber know, it is the MDGs that are most closely linked to women that are most seriously under-performing. Especially MDGs 3, 4 and 5 which relate to women's equality and infant and maternal mortality.

MDG 3 - women's equality - requires progress in the workplace and in national parliaments.

On the economic front, inequalities in the Commonwealth are still stark. In Kenya, women own nearly half of all micro-enterprises, but they receive less than 10 per cent of the available micro-financing.

Here in the UK I understand that although women account for 44 per cent of employees in the financial services sector, they account for only 9 per cent of board members of the major banks.

And in politics, inequalities remain equally stark. In the Commonwealth, we have only one country - Rwanda - which has achieved gender equality in Parliament. Rwanda has gone beyond the critical threshold of 30 per cent to achieve 56 per cent women MPs.

Of the top ten countries for women MPs, only three are in the Commonwealth. They are all in sub-Saharan Africa – Rwanda, South Africa with 44 per cent women MPs, and Mozambique 39 per cent. My own country is 27th, with 28.6 per cent, while the UK is joint 52nd with 22 per cent.

And out of 54 countries in the Commonwealth, only three have governments headed by women: Julia Gillard of Australia, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Bangladesh, and myself.

The lack of a critical mass of women parliamentarians and heads of government is important and has huge implications for ensuring that legislation and policies are in place to promote the interests of women and men.

These are tested avenues for ensuring equal access to education for all that is designed to meet their needs. There is a dire need to hear women's voices where policies are made and resources allocated.

So yes, while we celebrate the achievements of the Commonwealth, we must also recognise the challenges. Women in the Commonwealth can see through the glass ceiling and are impatient to achieve the equality which we know is ours by right and is willed by governments across our countries.

I am convinced that those of you in this debating chamber today are here because of your commitment to the cause of delivering equality for women in the Commonwealth through access to education that empowers and emancipates.

I wish you every success in your Conference, and in taking forward your call to action to ensure that Commonwealth Governments deliver on their commitments so that in all our countries, women can truly be agents of change.