



**Ninth Commonwealth Women's Affairs
Ministers Meeting**

***"Gender Issues in Economic Crisis, Recovery and Beyond:
Women as Agents of Transformation"***

Bridgetown, Barbados, 7-9 June 2010

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The 9th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (9WAMM) was held in Bridgetown, Barbados on 7-9 June 2010. Delegations from 32 countries attended the Meeting. The Meeting was opened by the Hon Freundel Stuart, Acting Prime Minister of Barbados and chaired by the Hon Stephen Lashley, Minister of Youth, Family and Sports, Barbados.

Background

2. The theme of the conference was "Gender Issues in Economic Crisis, Recovery and Beyond: Women as Agents of Transformation".

3. Ministers stressed that fifteen years on from the historic adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and five years following the adoption of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 (PoA), progress on gender equality has been slow and uneven.

4. Ministers called for greater recognition that women's involvement is key to sustained economic recovery and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Gender and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

5. Ministers recognised that all eight MDGs affect women, with MDGs 3, 5 and 6 being particularly important for gender equality. Commending the global efforts and investments towards the achievement of these goals, they observed, that far too many women, still do not have their basic rights met. They further noted that with only five years left until the 2015 deadline, accelerated progress, increased resources and innovative solutions were necessary for the attainment of the goals.

6. Ministers welcomed some positive trends in relation to Goal 3: promoting gender equality and empowering women. While noting that women's employment has increased, they were concerned that two-thirds of employed women have vulnerable employment in part-time, seasonal, low paid or unpaid work. In addition, they noted that the gender gap in primary schooling has narrowed by 4 per cent to 95 girls to 100 boys, whereas the gender gaps in primary and secondary education should have been eliminated by 2005. Ministers stressed that gender parity and access to gender sensitive education are key building blocks in the achievement of economic growth and an essential constituent of gender equality.

7. Ministers expressed concern that least progress has been made on Goal 5: improve maternal health. While some improvement has been recorded, they stressed it was unacceptable that half a million women are still allowed to die each year from complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Sixty-six of every hundred such deaths are in the Commonwealth. They reiterated the call of Commonwealth Health

Ministers for international support to meet the UN target of 90 per cent of births being attended by skilled health workers by 2015, while also agreeing to work towards increasing the number of births attended by skilled staff in their own countries. They further called for increased measures to reduce brain drain of health workers.

8. On MDG 6, and particularly its focus on HIV/AIDS, Ministers noted that nearly 60 per cent of the people living with the disease were women. They supported the call made by their Health Minister colleagues for concerted global efforts to ensure universal access to HIV prevention, care and treatment as a matter of urgency. They drew attention to MDG Goal 6 and the need to provide social protection to households made vulnerable by HIV and AIDs. They further emphasised the need to recognise and respond to the burden of unpaid care which often falls disproportionately on women and girls.

9. Ministers undertook to articulate, individually and collectively through the Secretary-General, the need for action on all MDGs, particularly those that impact on women directly, at the high level summit on the MDGs which is due to take place at the UN in September 2010. In this regard, they also noted the upcoming meeting between the Prime Minister of Canada and the Secretary-General to convey their concerns to the preparatory processes of the forthcoming G8 and G20 Summits, which will be hosted by Canada.

Women, the Economic Crisis and Recovery

10. Ministers noted the impact of the unprecedented global economic and financial crises on the economies of the Commonwealth. They especially noted that growth in the overwhelming majority of Commonwealth countries had fallen below its potential level with an attendant fall in living standards. They welcomed policy measures undertaken to maintain global demand and stabilise capital markets, especially by member countries of the G20, and stressed the need for continued concerted international action to achieve growth, improve livelihoods and financial stability.

11. Ministers noted that the impact of the economic crisis had been transmitted to poor and vulnerable countries through international trade, foreign direct investment, remittances and aid. In a number of countries, this has manifested itself in increasing fiscal deficits and indebtedness; deteriorating external balances; worsening poverty; and weakening social protection. In these countries, the crisis impacted disproportionately on women through rising unemployment and underemployment; increased care burdens; and greater pressure on survival and livelihoods, with negative long-term impacts for their families and themselves.

12. Ministers called for a more effective response from all actors in the global community to the disproportionately negative impact of the current national and international economic trends on women. They also emphasised that women are agents of change in attaining economic recovery, growth and sustainable development.

13. Ministers welcomed the signs of recovery seen in some countries but stressed that it remained fragile. While growth is expected to recover in 2010, it is still

estimated to be significantly below the 2006-08 average. They also noted that poor and vulnerable countries continue to face an unsustainable financing gap, even after the adjustment effected since the onset of the crisis. They voiced concern that the setbacks experienced by women were still not being reversed and noted that cash transfers and other measures for social protection will help buffer the negative impacts.

14. Ministers were apprehensive that further adjustment would result in high social costs. They stressed that women would be disproportionately affected by this, thereby undermining their potential role in recovery and transformation.

15. Ministers called for an inclusive approach to economic recovery that takes into account the interests of all countries and social groupings. They recognised that all governments should continue to play an active role in promoting global recovery and growth with equity, characterised by sustained expansion in GDP and measured by opportunity, capability enhancement, access and security for all.

16. Ministers further called for special attention to the needs of vulnerable, poor and less developed states in relation to efforts at promoting economic recovery and growth.

17. Ministers pointed out that women would require, inter alia, access to productive resources; information and finance; participation in diversification strategies and technology transfer; increased and more efficient spending on education/training, health, nutrition; water and sanitation; strengthened institutional infrastructure to support innovation and enterprise, and effective participation in decision-making in a sustained recovery.

Towards an Inclusive Macro-Economic Framework

18. Ministers recognised that any new macro-economic framework should build on the concept of inclusive sustained growth. They also recognised that such a framework would need to be based on fiscal discipline; fair taxation and redistribution systems; and a competitive exchange rate. It should also take into cognisance social justice, dignity and the centrality of women's roles in national wealth creation in both paid labour market activity and unpaid labour in the household and community.

19. Ministers called for greater focus on the delivery of an inclusive agenda that addressed identified gaps, such as unpaid work by women; the development of economic and gender indicators which included sustainable livelihoods for the poor, especially women; and effective participation of women in economic and governance systems in the last five years of the implementation of the PoA.

20. Ministers stressed the need for prudent fiscal management and the inclusion of women in the decision-making process as an important factor in ensuring strategic planning, prioritisation and implementation of policies for positive budgetary outcomes for women. Ministers called for urgent action to build capacities in all Ministries for more inclusive budgetary processes that embed gender equality. They also encouraged the good practice of gender auditing for all Ministries to deepen the work on Gender Responsive Budgeting.

Gender Responsive Investment

21. Noting that international investments have begun to improve, Ministers urged the investment community to learn from the mistakes of the recent past and put values of sustainability, transparency, responsibility and ethical finance at the forefront of new efforts to regain the growth momentum around the world. They stressed that short term, unsustainable and unethical risk-taking must now be replaced with sustainable investment and corporate responsibility in the pursuit of rebuilding economies and creating long-term growth and profitability.

22. Ministers also pointed to the need to engender investment at all levels including women's participation in decision-making, gender perspectives in governance and regulatory practices and instituting the necessary social and environmental safeguards required for gender responsive investment. They cautioned that gender responsive investment should not be seen as a reaction to this latest economic crisis, but as a recognition of the investment community's obligation to societies, the environment and future generations.

23. Ministers called for more transparency, and effective governance and management of financial investment, in order to promote a market in responsible financial products and services, committing investors and investment stakeholders to values and practices which promote gender responsive investment as a framework for best practice.

24. Ministers recognised the emerging role of innovative development financing, particularly philanthropic capital, where public and private investors leverage their funds to achieve economic, social and environmentally positive returns. They encouraged governments to ensure that principles and modalities governing such blended investment vehicles in order to ensure that women benefit from this promising financial innovation.

25. Ministers also acknowledged the continuing role of micro-finance and credit unions, particularly for many poor women-headed households. They stressed the importance of greater access for women to the full range of financial products.

26. Ministers recognised the potential of blended investment models to create market-based solutions, which are scalable and high-impact and promote public/private partnerships. They also affirmed the role of philanthro-capitalists in charting and financing new gender responsive business models and called for coalitions of social impact investors to build partnerships for creative solutions to education, health, climate change and poverty reduction. They requested the Secretariat to explore how best this can be promoted as models of alternative funding and public, private partnerships.

27. Ministers requested the Secretariat to explore all avenues for supporting women entrepreneurship and accessing external markets and report back at the next Commonwealth National Women's Machinery Meeting, in the wings of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 2011, with a roadmap on the way forward.

Gender, Economic Crisis and Social Protection

28. Ministers called for a gender analysis of policy frameworks for social protection measures in the formal and informal sectors in the context of the economic downturn and the ensuing global public debt crisis.

29. Ministers recognised the need to adopt measures that protect vulnerable sections of their populations from market volatility, poverty resulting from natural disasters and effects of climate change. They also pointed to the inadequacies of restricting social protection to the management of risk episodes. In this connection, they recommended protection measures designed to make livelihoods resilient, encourage decent working conditions and provide workers, particularly women in the informal sector, with space to organise for greater voice in collective arrangements that govern their lives.

30. Ministers also encouraged states to adopt, ratify and domesticate relevant conventions that provide for appropriate social protection for women in the informal or domestic sector, such as the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers, in order to ensure full protection of the human rights for women categorised as domestic workers in accordance with the ILO definition.

31. Ministers acknowledged that reducing vulnerabilities, increasing livelihood resilience and providing social protection are essential to ensure social justice and human dignity. They called for the provision of gender-responsive, life-cycle based social protection measures.

Peace, Security and Prosperity: Women's Leadership Roles

32. Ministers noted, with serious concern, women's minimal leadership role, in the executive and political spheres. They expressed concern that the presence of women in most national parliaments remains at less than 20 per cent in 2010, despite the PoA commitments of governments. They noted that lack of financial resources, disadvantageous electoral systems and exclusion from influential networks continue to be barriers to women's full participation in politics in many countries. They noted that political processes and practices continue to disadvantage women's interests, skills and competencies and called for inclusive democracy in the pursuit of good governance.

33. Ministers welcomed the growing recognition that women's political participation in leadership goes beyond mere numbers to include factors such as quality and effectiveness of representation. At the same time, Ministers recognised the challenges that women Parliamentarians face given that many of their representative bodies have not yet met the targets set out in the Plan of Action. They called on governments to take measures to increase the participation of women in political leadership and request the Commonwealth Secretariat to increase its support to mechanisms that work for the advancement of women in leadership at national and regional levels.

34. Ministers observed that the absence of transparent, participatory democratic processes was a fundamental and recurring cause of community strife, conflict and war. They highlighted the heavy cost of this violence to families and communities. In this connection, they noted the active role of women in curbing community violence and also called for greater involvement of men in combating this violence in the community.

35. Ministers noted that ten years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, only 19 out of 192 countries have developed national action plans for implementing the resolution. They further noted that, of 300 peace agreements reached since 1989, only 18 refer to sexual and gender-based violence. They called on the Secretariat to assist countries to develop inclusive, gender-sensitive governance models and urged that the Working Group on Gender Peace and Security, approved by Ministers, should be made fully operational.

UN Gender Entity

36. Ministers supported and look forward to the early establishment of the UN Gender Entity and its objectives towards advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality through strategic partnerships, policy advocacy and programming.

PoA Delivery: Partnership for Synergy and Accountability

37. Ministers welcomed the Draft Final Report of the Mid-Term Review of the Implementation of the Plan of Action (MTR). In accepting the Report, they commended the assistance provided by the Secretariat to countries in regard to the implementation of the MTR. They noted the recommendations of the MTR Report and called for a more strategic and systemic approach to implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including strengthened partnerships with Civil Society.

38. Ministers also noted the need for a more concerted approach to gender mainstreaming within the Secretariat and called for a better resourced Gender Section.

39. Ministers stressed that partnerships, involving governments, civil society and the private sector, had an important role to play in delivering gender equality. In this connection, they welcomed the valuable participation of and statement from the Commonwealth Partners Forum which was held on 4th and 5th June at the same venue. In particular they noted their recommendations related to gender-responsive economic reforms; violence against women and girls; HIV/AIDs; maternal mortality and reproductive health; education; political participation and leadership; and peace and security.

Senior Officials Meeting

40. Ministers received a report from Senior Officials. They endorsed the recommendations of Senior Officials on the future work of the Secretariat under the three strategic pillars of economic, social and political development. In addition, they affirmed their commitment to the concerted effort required to meet the specific objectives of the PoA and urged members for increased commitment.

41. Ministers thanked the Government of Barbados for the excellent arrangements made for the meeting.

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