We cannot be complacent about the fact that half of the world’s women today still live in states of poverty, fear, exploitation and utter weariness. It would be tempting to take a whole set of statistics from the IMF, the World Bank, UNDP and other multilateral organisations which show that much progress has been made but that much still remains to be done. However, I would like to highlight some of the obstacles and routes towards women’s political leadership and empowerment. Women’s political leadership cannot be seen as an issue on its own. It is something that grows out of the broader context of women’s liberation and equality.

Let me start with some basic propositions about individual human rights, which most of us are all too familiar with – but there is no harm in repetition of what are, after all, the cornerstones of a life of dignity.

The foundation of post-Second World War human rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which movingly has in its preamble: ‘We the peoples of the United Nations [not “we the governments of the United Nations”] determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war … and to reaffirm faith in fundamental rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small … have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims’, which the declaration goes on to list.

This declaration and the many instruments (and there are many both international and regional) that followed in the next 60 years or so all enumerate the basic freedoms we have a right to – the right to life, liberty and the security of the person, to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and religion, and to political participation. Above all, the international instruments re-iterate the universal truth that human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights.

The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and ratified it in subsequent years by the overwhelming majority of nations. This convention declares that discrimination against women in the political, economic, cultural, civil or any other field is unlawful. CEDAW also makes it a requirement of ratification that states enact appropriate laws to provide protection for women and to repeal all existing laws that constitute discrimination.

This position has recently been reaffirmed in the Commonwealth Charter, which proclaims ‘gender equality and women’s empowerment are essential components of human development and basic human rights’.

So, we have the international legal framework to end gender imbalance, to outlaw discrimination against women and to enable women’s political leadership to flourish. But that is not the end of the story. The political empowerment of women is a laudable aim and a non-negotiable right. But how should it be achieved?

No claims to gender equality can be made without political empowerment, representation and leadership. In an ideal world, girls go to school, learn employment skills (resulting as often as not in later marriages, spacing of families and fewer children), co-operate at the community level in income generation and, ultimately, become sufficiently motivated to act politically at the local, regional and even national level. They become enfranchised and, in turn, democratic representatives themselves. It is at this stage that women’s empowerment becomes transformative in bringing about permanent shifts in the distribution of social power. This, I might add, is the normal progression for men in most societies.

However, I have said that a vast proportion of the world’s women live in poverty, fear and exploitation. Though political empowerment is undoubtedly their right, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect such women to aspire to political leadership when their primary concerns remain survival and subsistence. While women’s political empowerment should be one of our goals, essential for living a life of dignity, the conditions for such political equality must first be created.

Two obvious aspects of the path out of survival and subsistence towards creating the conditions for women’s political empowerment are:

- Women’s education, as it says in the Commonwealth Charter
- Women’s economic development

* From a speech given at the Commonwealth Secretariat for International Women’s Day, 8 March 2013.
However, the trajectory for women from educational and economic equality to political leadership is by no means automatic. Inherent conflicts of interest can and do arise. For example, shifts in access to income can alter authority and/or social patterns, provoke hostility or have other negative unintended consequences; children may be disadvantaged if their mothers break away from oppressive family contexts, minorities may suffer additional discrimination and societies as a whole can be destabilised.

Research indicates that successful development in these areas – and, indeed, in any development – depends on two principles:
1. Successful development focuses on what people want – not what we, that is to say donor organisations, governments, politicians, etc. – would wish to give them
2. Initiatives that strengthen what already exists in the community are more likely to work

The rationale is that an innovation that is conceived and grows organically within the community will allow: leaders to emerge; locally acceptable mechanisms for monitoring and accountability to develop; and people to have a voice and a sense of ownership. This, in turn, will mean that any given project will be more likely to be nurtured and defended if necessary. Existing structures within the community will be more likely to adapt if not pressured to do so from the outside.

People in the less developed areas of Commonwealth countries know very well what to do – so our job is to trust them by providing resources. They know, for example, as well as we do that educating girls is development’s magic bullet. But a school on its own is not going to be transformative unless all the underlying fears and traditional beliefs can also be dealt with. The community needs to discuss, explain and agree in order to have a sense of ownership. Once development is entwined with existing structures, cultural, social and other obstacles can begin to be chipped away, worked around or watered down in a way that can never be the case when these principles are ignored.

So, by following these principles, programmes to provide women’s education and economic development have a higher likelihood of meeting their own objectives and becoming less dependent on the donor. If backed by high level politics they will also have the capacity to become institutionalised.

The development community has a long history of funding education, setting up schools and improving access to finance. Unfortunately, there remain cultural and systemic obstacles to success in many developing countries. These include the mindset of not only men but the older generations of both men and women; the lack of a clear chain of command within government; the need to reassure parents that their daughters will be safe in school. So, while every eventuality has been thought through – finance is in place, training has taken place – large programmes can, and do, still fail due to lack of local government engagement or simply the nervousness or distrust of the community.

Women’s educational and economic development can only help women’s political empowerment to flourish if they are home grown and their roots are able to grow ever deeper into a country’s culture and system. Political empowerment is far less likely to be the result if initiatives remain dependent on donor involvement and foreign support.

The international community’s role in such projects therefore is to be an enabler, rather than just a provider. One way in which the international enabler community can work is through information sharing. It is, for example, widely acknowledged that women have a special need for information concerning all aspects of reproductive rights in order to take decisions about their lives, reproductive or otherwise. Furthermore, women need information to participate in public debate about issues that affect them and thereby to assist in shaping public opinion. Without such information, women’s power to use their education and economic freedom is limited.

**Box 1: Educating for governance**

In early 2002, on a post-Taliban visit to Afghanistan, a country with which I have been associated for over 30 years, I came across a young man recently returned from Pakistan whose dream was to set up a school for girls. He had begun in a tiny bombed-out building in the extreme west of Kabul. He had 30 pupils ranging in age from seven to 35, attending in three daily shifts. To cut a long story short – I began to support him and gradually the school developed into what it is today: Marefat High School. It teaches nearly 3,000 pupils (both boys and girls) a full curriculum of liberal arts, sciences and vocational training. Pupils go on to win scholarships to overseas universities and then return to teach at the school. They become part of the new educated generation and future leaders in Afghanistan.

The reason why this project has succeeded beyond our expectations is that it already existed and is rooted in the community. Even then much work had to take place to reassure parents who had lived through the Taliban regime that their daughters were safe to attend school. The parent-teachers association was a powerful force in developing the school and enabled parents and the local community to be involved at all times in decisions that affected them and their children. The sense of ownership by the community means that the school is and will be defended.
This is where organisations like the Commonwealth provide a crucial service. Many of the cultural and systemic problems faced in one country will be replicated in others. Solutions found in one country can therefore be adapted and implemented in others. I have seen this sharing in action in recent months through the CPA-UK. For example, I was recently involved in a conference in the UK parliament which brought together female parliamentarians from Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. These three countries have different levels of development, face different internal pressures and politics and, indeed, at a national level there are serious political frictions between them. However, despite this, women parliamentarians are able to come together to share problems that they have in common and the solutions that are being implemented. This information sharing is part of the process of helping communities to discover what they want and how they might achieve it for themselves.

What I have outlined so far might call bottom-up support: the international community working with local communities to create the conditions for political empowerment. What is also needed is encouragement from those who are already politically involved. For development work to gain enough momentum to result in political empowerment, it must be pushed from the grass roots and pulled by the existing political elite. And this is what is happening in Pakistan – the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus encouraging micro-financing to help women in the community, while at the same time providing them with role models and examples of what can be done.

I have so far addressed the issue of achieving women’s political empowerment in the developing world. But while this is central to the problems of development, it is not just a development issue. In the developed world we still struggle with achieving political equality. Women in developed countries have educational equality, economic emancipation and equality of political representation, and yet still do not have full political participation. This can be seen in the membership figures of both houses of the UK parliament. Despite 85 years of women having the vote, only 22 per cent of MPs and peers are women! So I think a modicum of modesty is called for when we preach the message of political emancipation in the developing world.

Finally, let me end with an apposite quote: ‘Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity: the female sex.’

And that was said by Mahatma Gandhi.

Box 2: The Women’s Parliamentary Caucus in Pakistan

While visiting Pakistan recently as part of a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA-UK) delegation we met with the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus for almost three days of intensive discussion. This significant group of women parliamentarians from both the National Assembly and the Senate have been successful not only in forcing through gender balanced legislation but also in striking out discriminatory statutes. At the same time there has been substantial investment in developing the Millennium Development Goals and, in particular, microfinance schemes.

At the risk of too great a simplification I would suggest that there are several ingredients in the Pakistan example that bear further scrutiny. First, there are approximately 100 female parliamentarians who are members of the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus; they are from all parties and have been successful in persuading male parliamentarians to support their efforts resulting in sympathetic legislation.

There is political will based on a strong lead from the female Speaker of the National Assembly.

One area they have concentrated on is promoting microfinance services to women. There are a number of indigenous organisations involved, ranging from the National Commission on the Status of Women, foundations and think tanks to grass-roots skills training programmes. A large amount of money is available for microfinance schemes, which appear to achieve a 98 per cent success rate in terms of successful payback. One example we came across was the Kashf Foundation. This is a home-grown organisation with the goal of alleviating poverty, especially amongst women. It has the explicit aim of enhancing their economic role and decision-making capacity. The foundation is supported by third parties but within eight years of its creation it became financially sustainable.

Baroness Frances D’Souza

Baroness Frances D’Souza studied anthropology at University College London and took her doctorate at the University of Oxford. She taught anthropology at the London School of Economics (1973–80) and Oxford Brookes University (1977–80). She entered the House of Lords in 2004 and became Lord Speaker in September 2011, the second to be elected to the post. Baroness D’Souza has previously directed independent research into famine and emergency aid, and has a special interest in human rights. She has worked with a range of organisations including the REDRESS Trust (as director 2003–04, consultant 2004–06) and Article 19 (executive director, 1989–98).
Society For Development and Community Empowerment (SDCE) is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation established in June 2002 and registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission, Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs and Federal Ministries of Women Affairs, Youth Development, Education and Health.

Our thematic areas of work include:
- Economic development/entrepreneurship
- HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Right to Education
- Good governance, child sponsorship, trafficking and child labour, and drug-demand reduction
- Economic empowerment of women
- Human Rights and accountability
- Promoting tools and technologies in the agriculture sector
- Reproductive health
- Environment Sustainability, sanitation and waste management.

Programmes supporting women’s advancement

SDCE priorities also centre on promoting tools and technologies in its programmes which will enhance women’s advancement in economic opportunities in areas such as bead making and fish/snail farming, soap production, allied agro-products, and manual cassava/corn. Over 200 women have benefited from these activities.

Other on-going SDCE Feminist Vision activities include:
- Promoting and providing income-generating activities and decision-making skills for indigenous women to enhance their livelihood and improve on the level of care and support for orphans under their care.
- Advocacy and community mobilisation on women’s rights and gender equality in Andoni and Obio/Akpor LGAs, Rivers State.
- Increased access to modern agricultural techniques and equipment.
- Literacy and entrepreneurship programmes for women.

Other programmes

Community Care Initiative
Youth, Sexuality, Drug and HIV Intervention in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Feminist Vision Care Initiative
A gender sensitive initiative that addresses issues of gender discrimination, rights, responsibilities of adolescents, leadership development, family life and reproductive health, and initiate life-skill education and training, most especially among girls and young women.

Energy, water and sanitation
Promoting the use of sustainable solar power to provide lighting, safe water; and to develop innovative programmes for hygiene promotion, behaviour change and skills acquisition.

Democracy and governance
SDCE is part of a coalition of CSOs, including NGOs and community groups that promote mass mobilisation to combat corruption in public offices in the states and local government councils of Nigeria, and to support community participation in budget development and monitoring.

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SDCE's headquarters are in Port Harcourt with branches in Bayelsa, Imo, Ondo, Abuja and Edo States.

We strongly believe in and are firmly committed to the philosophy of the humanity of all peoples irrespective of their racial, geographic, ethnic or social colorations.

A community free from drugs, crime and HIV/AIDS.

At SDCE we value our most precious resources, our children and we want them to value themselves. When people have a sense of self-worth they are not easily manipulated, or cajoled into harmful practices of drug abuse and crime.