

Promoting equitable governance in the Commonwealth

Esther Eghobamien

The Commonwealth context

The Commonwealth's shared histories and values are guided by the recognition that democracy and development are interdependent. The 1991 Harare Declaration also affirms that genuine democratic elections must contribute to women's empowerment and strengthen gender mainstreaming at all levels of decision-making. Against this backdrop, the 5th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting of 1996 recommended a target of no less than 30 per cent of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by 2005 for member countries.

This target was endorsed at the 1997 Edinburgh Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and incorporated into the Commonwealth Plan of Action (PoA) for Gender Equality 2005–2015 document as a key target in 2004. The PoA was approved by Heads of Governments in 2005 and reaffirmed in 2009. The 2011 CHOGM in Perth, Australia, similarly emphasised the need for improving gender equality and women's empowerment in the Commonwealth, and called on Heads to demonstrate commitment by entrenching measures at advancing women's political participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making.

The Commonwealth's commitment to gender equality as encapsulated in the PoA draws on international commitments for the realisation of women's rights enshrined in Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and related health and education targets. It provides the framework for members to advance gender equality, consolidate achievements, address challenges, and respond to global priorities and emerging concerns.

Notwithstanding these policy prescriptions, steep challenges still impede achievement of the 30 per cent global target. The Secretariat is committed to assisting members achieve equitable governance. The Social Transformation Programmes Division (STPD) Gender Section leads the Secretariat work on democracy, women's political development and leadership in decision-making positions.

The focus recognises the fundamental roles of good governance, transparency and accountability as key drivers of efficient and effective delivery of goods and services and overall economic growth.

Good practices from Commonwealth member states

Women as Heads of Government

Currently, there is a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in government around the world, and women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments. The share of women among ministers averages at 19 per cent, and presence at the highest positions is even more elusive – only 20 out of 193 Heads of State and/or Government globally are women. Seven of these are Commonwealth member countries. They include, prime ministers Julia Gillard of Australia, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Bangladesh, Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago and Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica; and presidents Pratibha Patil of India, Joyce Banda of Malawi and Monique Ohsan-Bellepeau of Mauritius. In addition, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is represented by women governor-generals in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas, Barbados, New Zealand and St Lucia.

Women in parliament

The target of 30 per cent of women in decision-making in parliament and local government has been achieved through affirmative action measures such as quotas and reserved seats in some Commonwealth countries. Out of the top 40 countries noted for mainstreaming women into parliament, 13 are Commonwealth members – Australia, Canada, Guyana, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, Rwanda, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda. Rwanda tops the list with 56 per cent women, closely followed by Seychelles with 43 per cent and South Africa with 42 per cent. In addition, the Caribbean region ranks high in the number of women in governance, followed by the Africa and Asia regions. Notwithstanding this increase, women's representation still remains below 20 per cent: and is

comparable with global statistics, indicating on average, only 19 per cent seats occupied by women.

Women in local governance

Despite women's critical roles in local governance, female elected councillors and mayors remain under-represented in all regions of the world. In the Commonwealth, constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India resulted in over one million women being elected to the Panchayat Raj throughout the country. Namibia and Lesotho have over 40 per cent representation of women in local governance, while Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Uganda have also reached the 30 per cent target at the local government level.

Persistent challenges

Despite these successful models, challenges remain, with women representing, on average, less than 4 per cent and less than 9 per cent of all elected representatives in the Pacific region and West Africa respectively. Furthermore, studies have shown that the under-representation of women is often symptomatic of persistent gender stereotypes, conflict between family and work demands, patriarchy, the lack of an enabling political environment, inadequate funding to support female candidates, the absence of special measures/quotas, low literacy levels, the lack of job security in politics, the scarcity of female role models and insufficient training on political participation.

Commonwealth strategies for increasing women's representation in decision-making

Key strategies being pursued to enhance women's representation include:

1. **Capacity-building** on women's voting needs in Botswana, The Gambia, Lesotho, Nigeria, and Trinidad and Tobago.
2. **Constitutional reforms** to ensure women's equal participation in political and electoral processes by Bangladesh, India, Lesotho, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.
3. **Electoral and political reforms** introducing quotas and other political party arrangements to promote proportional representation and to deal with barriers such as the first-past-the-post electoral model.
4. **More systematic engagement of political parties** through women's caucuses, interest groups and coalitions.
5. **Redrawing of voting districts** to open up seats in constituencies likely to vote for women.
6. **Strengthening partnerships** and cultivating 'Male Champions'.

7. **Promoting a gender sensitive parliament** through a 'Women's Agenda' in parliament and diversifying gender concerns beyond traditionally perceived women's needs.

Lessons from Secretariat programming

The Commonwealth Secretariat pioneered Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in the late 1990s through strategic engagements with Commonwealth finance ministers. It promoted GRB as a tool that incorporates a gender equality perspective into processes and policies that underpin national budget systems to promote equality between women and men. By 2005, biannual reporting to finance ministers on progress in implementing GRB among members was instituted.

One key finding from a 2009 study on the status of GRB was that in countries where GRB had been integrated into national budgets, the process was driven largely by women leaders. The study therefore concluded, among other issues, that promoting women's leadership is pivotal to achieving development goals and targets. This was corroborated by the 2011 Lord Davies report on women's representation in leadership in the corporate sector. Therefore, just as in the political arena, the under-representation of women in executive and directorate levels is very real. Their absence at decision-making levels in most sectors makes it extremely difficult for women to participate, especially in the global financial governance architecture. The realisation is that overcoming the complexity of barriers that create and sustain women's exclusion from leadership demands strategic, multi-pronged and systematic approaches.

Secretariat response and priority action

In light of the above, a number of programmes have been initiated by the Secretariat in collaboration with key partners to strengthen the capacity of women in political leadership. The 2011 Commonwealth Day theme, 'Women as Agents of Change', and the selected examples below, reflect the Secretariat's values on gender equality, democracy and good governance.

Pan-Commonwealth women leadership training

To adequately equip women for leadership challenges in their professional and private lives, the Secretariat is developing a Women Leadership Resource Manual in collaboration with its partners. The Manual will address a range of issues and seek to empower women at all decision-making levels, including parliamentarians, ministers and national women's machineries.

Research on the impact of women's leadership

The quantitative representation of women goes beyond numbers to include issues such as qualitative leadership and effective participation at decision-making levels. Thus, in

collaboration with UN Women, a study to document the development impact of women's increased presence in leadership is being undertaken in Rwanda. Findings will generate evidence to advance advocacy and reform.

Regional leadership concerns

Two pan-Commonwealth regional colloquia were convened in the Caribbean and Africa regions in June 2011 and March 2012 respectively. The high-level colloquia, chaired by the first female Commonwealth Chair-in-Office and Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago and the Government of Ghana, surfaced peculiar challenges and obstacles experienced by women in politics. Specific actions proposed in the Port of Spain and Accra Consensus Documents for achieving Women's Transformational Leadership and Gender Equality include:

- Minimum of 30 to 40 per cent representation of women in parliamentary and local government elected positions.
- Removal of all barriers that directly and indirectly discriminate against women's participation and leadership in political party structures.
- Strengthening of economic governance, to stimulate growth and to support women's productive capacities and social protection.

Promoting global policy advocacy

Building on the colloquium was the first ever high-level meeting of female world leaders – including US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton – led by Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat and UN Women. Held in the wings of the 66th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2011, the meeting deliberated on women's limited political participation. The resultant signed Joint Statement was negotiated as a Global Resolution at the 67th UNGA in September 2012. The aim was to retain the event as a regular feature of UNGA meetings as a platform for projecting the views and voices of women on priority global concerns. The side event focused on Gender and the Arms Trade Treaty.

The Perth 2011 CHOGM special side event, entitled 'Empowering Women to Lead', was a global advocacy and dialogue platform that addressed the limited participation of women in leadership roles. Commitments were made by member states to support effective mainstreaming of women into leadership positions and at all levels of decision-making.

Esther Eghobamien is Head of Gender at the Commonwealth Secretariat (Social Transformation Programmes Division). Prior to this post, she was Country Gender Advisor at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) – Nigeria Program, where she worked on governance, health and mainstreaming gender in country assistance programmes. She has also served as Director of Women Affairs (Nigeria) and as Director of Planning, Research and Statistics at the National Women Development Centre. A graduate of the University of Ibadan and University of Washington Graduate School of Public Policy, Ms Eghobamien is a Hubert Humphrey Fellow and an Eisenhower Fellow.