STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME BARRIERS PREVENTING WOMEN’s EQUAL PARTICIPATION IN LEADERSHIP & DECISION-MAKING

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Speaker of the Lok Sabha and President of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, Hon. Somnath Chatterjee, Secretary General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Dr. William F. Shija, Minister for Women and Child Development and President Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, Hon. Renuka Chowdhury, the Chairperson of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, Hon. Lindiwe Maseko, Ministers here present, Members of Parliaments, Distinguished Experts and Resource Persons, all protocols observed. I am delighted to address the 53rd CWP meeting in New Delhi, and have the privilege and honor to bring you warm salutations from the Commonwealth Secretary General, the Rt. Hon. Don McKinnon.

In addressing the topic, strategies to overcome barriers confronting women in their efforts to assume leadership roles, I would like to divide my presentation into four sections, first, I would like to provide a contextual perspective to the issue and within the issue, highlight why it is important to have women in decision-making positions. In doing so, I shall attempt to outline some common challenges, which confront women; and finally, share some useful and practical strategies available to women.

Contextual Perspective

In order to provide some global context on the issue of women in decision-making and leadership positions, please allow me to begin with the positive. Exactly sixty four (64) days ago, India, our host today, witnessed a rewrite of history, when Mrs. Pratibha Patil was duly elected (I dare say with overwhelming votes) as the first woman President of India. Other such ‘firsts’ include, Africa’s first female President, Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia); Prime Minister Bachelet of Chile, and Hon. Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, who was narrowly defeated following elections two weeks ago, and of course, your own dear Hon. Dame Jennifer Smith, who was Bermuda’s first elected female Premier, who is here with us today. There are many other ‘firsts’ such as first female Speakers, Clerks of the House. In many other countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Mozambique, South Africa, the Gambia, Germany, etc, women are assuming leadership roles including in arenas, hitherto thought to be exclusive preserve for men, such as the Finance Ministry.

The last report of the UNDAW study on ‘women in government and decision-making’ that was conducted in 1998 clearly captured the low representation of women in decision-making levels. Similarly, the latest report of the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) provides both the good and not so good news about the status of women in parliaments. The good news is that over the last ten (10) years, the number of women in parliament has increased globally. However, this increase has not been translated in other areas of decision-making levels in many regions, with the exception of the Scandinavian region, where institutional mechanisms have been put in place to ensure 50/50 balance representation in public and private sectors. Similarly, within Parliaments, women’s representation remains at 16% (84% for men). This means that one in
five (5) parliamentarians in the world are women. At this rate of progress it will take another 70 years to reach gender parity.

Following the Beijing Conference for Women, 53 Commonwealth countries adopted a minimum target of at least thirty per cent (30%) women’s representation and participation in government and decision-making positions. This minimum target was set on the assumption that with 30%, women would achieve ‘critical mass’ or in other words, sufficient numbers to make a difference. Hence, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, 39th session (March 1995) Report of the Secretary-General, stated: A “critical mass”, estimated at a level of at least 30-35% in decision-making bodies, has a visible impact on the style and content of political decisions.

The current Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender Equality (2005-2015) (the only PoA adopted post Beijing+5), a forward looking Plan, reaffirms the critical importance of achieving at least 30% target, recognises uneven and slow progress towards this set objective. Thus, calls for concerted effort by all stakeholders to promote the agreed commitment and encourages countries that have achieved the agreed 30% to strive for higher aspiration, the ultimate goal of gender equality being 50/50 balance. The Plan makes further emphasise on promoting women’s equal and full representation in private and public sectors.

As of today in the Commonwealth, only five (5) countries have achieved at least 30% women’s representation in national Parliaments. These are Tanzania, Mozambique, Uganda, South Africa, and New Zealand. Similarly at the local level, we have 5 CW countries with at least 30% women’s representation and India is one of the countries.

The picture in the public and private sectors is not encouraging and requires firm exercise of the necessary political will, commitment of resources and action by all actors. However, as the Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women Affairs stated at the recently concluded meeting (8WAMM), held from 11-14 June in Kampala, Uganda, *the MDGs are seriously off-track, in particular, goal No. 3 on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment; implementation of the Plan of Action on Gender Equality requires adequate resources and operationalisation of the monitoring and evaluation framework, thus, increased investments in gender equality must be a priority to ensure sustained economic, sustainable democracy, peace and development (Kampala Communiqué).*

**WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS.**

It is often asked why include women in decision-making and leadership positions. I would like to ask why not? For women to be able to influence decisions that affect their lives and those of their families, their political, socio-economic and cultural empowerment must form part of the ideals and activities to contribute to sustainable development. Unless women are part of such efforts, their issues are not likely to be covered by their male counterparts. For instance, in most countries that have passed bills on ‘Maternity Leave’, and Domestic Violence, it is a fact, that such bills were sponsored by women parliamentarians, and/or through action from women groups.

Based on our work and experiences from around the world and within the Commonwealth, I would now share the challenges, and some practical strategies that have been effective in addressing the barriers that hinder women’s participation in decision-making positions. Given
time constraints, I would limit my presentation to some common challenges as reported by
women around the Commonwealth.

As the Secretary General’s report noted (1995), a critical mass of women in leadership and
decision-making has a visible impact on the style and content of political decisions in any
country (emphasis).

**CHALLENGES**

Lack of women’s representation and participation has been attributed to several factors
and constraints. Some of the constraints include political structures that inhibit women’s
participation, negative attitudes towards women’s participation and the existing expectations of
traditional and cultural roles for women. Furthermore, women’s capacity to participate at
leadership levels is restricted due to over burden of family responsibilities, cultural expectations
and stereotyping that ‘a woman’s place is in the home’. Recently, a Minister from one of the
Commonwealth countries fell in love with an advocacy ‘tee shirt’ produced by one of the
women’s group in Trinidad and Tobago, and it reads, ‘A woman’s place is in the House of
Parliament’. I think we need more of such smart economics tee shirts for advocacy campaigns.
Such tee shirt could be down played by many of us as ordinary, however, in considering the
power of the ‘human psyche’ (in societies where women have been socialised to believe that a
woman’s place is in the kitchen), such advocacy tool may change a few minds.

Given time constraints, I will like to mention in brief some common challenges confronting
women in decision-making and leadership efforts. These include, cultural expectations on
women, which create internal and external barriers; political systems, which may reinforce the
old patriarchal male dominance; inherent/existing discriminatory laws and policies; traditional
and or customary practices; level of literacy /illiteracy, family burden including over work,
financial considerations and lack of political will by governments and political parties.

Let me now turn to some practical strategies that have worked in some countries around the
world.

**STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME BARRIERS WOMEN’s PARTICIPATION AND
REPRESENTATION IN DECISION-MAKING**

What needs to be done? What can we do, as parliamentarians, as institutions committed to
seeing increased women’s representation in decision-making and parliaments?

Given our experience, the first and most critical strategy that is yet to be utilised is for women
around the world to go beyond asking for “mere numbers”, and demonstrate the impact of
women’s contribution to leadership and decision-making. Because the issues are related to
power struggles and require a change in mind-sets (especially with the populace), it is
important that women mobilise, perhaps through research and analysis and document the
impact women leaders have made in societies where women have been in leadership
positions. More than anything, this will serve, as a powerful tool to those who elect and vote
leaders into office to show case women’s efforts and accountability.

Having mentioned one of the new ways of articulating and uniting women’s energy to push for
greater representation in decision-making, I would now elaborate on six other strategies used
by women in several countries.
The first is embarking on Constitutional, Legislative and Electoral reforms in order to repeal any
existing provision or law that is discriminating against women participating at the level of
decision-making. Such reform has resulted in considerable progress in some Commonwealth
countries. For instance, the eleven countries in the Commonwealth that have achieved the 30
per cent benchmark of female representation in national parliaments and at the local level,
have successfully lobbied for a quota system or managed to have it mandated by law. Such
quotas and/or affirmative action have adopted through constitutional or legislative reforms.
Countries where such reforms have taken place include South Africa, India, Guyana, and
Uganda to mention a few.

2001 was a landmark year in Guyana because women approached the all-male
political parliamentary reform commission with a recommendation for a general principle to
courage women’s participation in decision-making to be enshrined in the constitution. The
73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments in India also reserved one third of seats for women at
the local level – the Panchayat. Other measures taken also include, reform of electoral laws,
where they are found discriminatory. There have been criticisms of reserving seats as it is
claimed to reduce merit and competency thus, the issue of elected or nominated seats
dominate current discourse.

Quota systems however are not enough. Additional measures are needed to address
the structural and cultural barriers that stop women from participating in decision making,
otherwise, when quota systems are abandoned, such as in the former Soviet Union and
Bangladesh, women’s representation may fall. Additionally, progress within the public and
private sectors has been possible only through legislative provisions, statistics and data from
Scandinavian countries is a testament to the progress made.

Secondly, around the world and in some Commonwealth countries, women’s groups have
mobilised to create a Women’s Manifesto and or an all ‘Women’s political party or lobby group’
to push for women’s representation in decision-making areas. These women mobilise across
and beyond party, ethnic, religious and other affiliations. The need for such cross mobilisation
is underscored by the wide and persistent discrimination and marginalisation against women.
A major result of such cross boundary mobilisation is the emergence of “women caucuses, and
adoption of ‘women’s manifests’ in countries such as Northern Ireland, Cameroon, Uganda,
and a host of others. Within such manifestoes, women articulate common challenges and
issues affecting their representation and participation in society. The Northern Ireland
manifesto is titled “Democra’she”. Within these manifestoes, women often articulate their
issues and draw up an action plan, strategies and ways to achieve their goals.

Thirdly, in pushing for greater inclusion of women, we recognise the importance or working in
partnership with men. This is important in order to secure the necessary attitudinal and change
in mind- sets, which is required to procure support and access from men, who often hold the
reins of power. Making men advocates for change is very important; working with men is
especially vital when women are not represented in decision making at the highest level. Using
men as spokespersons for campaigns that specifically target the attitudes of men and or their
behaviour has proved to be a powerful and effective strategy. Several societies have
succeeded in building a group of ‘male champions’, those who have shown great commitment
to the achievement of gender equality and equity.
The fourth area that we have recognised as useful strategy is working with political parties and other institutions such as the Judiciary and the Courts, who have a major role to play in ensuring access and support for women’s representation and participation. In some countries such as South Africa, political parties have often employed strategies to ensure women’s representation. One such strategy in South Africa is known as the ‘Zebra Crossing’. Just two weeks ago, the President of South Africa, Mr. Thabo Mbeki called Political Parties to show they are committed to gender equality within their own ranks. In his words, ‘our constitution says we must produce a non-sexist society. I don’t know how many of our political parties have taken the decision to have gender equality… in the composition of all their structures, their representatives that they deploy in government, and all of that. Political parties need to take a decision and agree to gender parity within their immediate ranks and broader structures’ (30/8/08). Similarly, just yesterday, I read in HT Nation (Indian Newspaper), that the BJP (Indian political party) had agreed to reserve thirty-three per cent (33%) party seats for women in the party.

In the area of politics, both political parties and the media have important roles to play in ensuring the necessary support for women, who wish to be elected or to serve in leadership roles. The media must be encouraged to portray positive images of women; consult women as experts and resource persons on issues affecting societies; and give more airtime to stories celebrating women’s achievements especially during campaigns.

The fifth area that I would like to highlight today is the importance of training women and building their capacities to conduct election campaigns, address the media, awareness raising, advocacy, and general leadership skills. Given the dynamics and expectations at decision-making levels, it is critical to enhance the capacity of women to deliver when they are either elected or appointed to leadership and decision-making positions. Leadership skill programmes should be designed for women with a focus on the following areas, advocacy, awareness raising, political structures/history, public speaking, organisation and community development as well as budgeting among others. Such skills’ enhancement must be regular and sustainable to prevent a backlash. In the area of politics for instance, such skills are essential in order to assist women in embarking on campaign financing, which remains a major challenge for women candidates. In this regard, the initiatives of the United States democratic women’s group – ‘Emily’s list’, a grassroots political network is worth imitating. Please visit their website: www.emilyslist.org these women mobilise funds and support for women candidates in the US. The acronym Emily – means, early money is like yeast, which makes dough rise. A similar initiative exists in the State of Texas in the USA, known as ‘Annie’s List’ – www.annieslist.org

Finally, a critical and important strategy often ignored, is mentorship of younger women. It is essential that young women are supported and mentored to acquire and learn necessary skills to prepare them for leadership and decision-making roles. This is important not only to ensure that ‘progress achieved is sustained’, but also to prepare future leaders and provide smooth transition and continuity that will make societies sustainable. A good practice model is the Jamaican women’s political caucus established in 1992, which provides political education, mentoring and support to young women in preparation for leadership roles.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to take us back to where I started, which is reviewing our ‘collective positives’ i.e. the gains we are continuing to make in the area of women in decision-making. I feel it is important to do so, as I see ‘NOW’ as an opportune moment, which has been captured
by a famous man, who in his own right is a ‘male champion’ on issues relating to women’s empowerment – Nelson Madiba Mandela, when he cautioned and I quote, ‘when the water starts boiling, it’s foolish to turn off the heat’. This 21st century seems to have opened more windows of opportunity for women to secure their rightful position in decision-making, and in a sense, got the water boiling.

From Jamaica, to Chile, and then on to the Gambia, Mozambique, South Africa, to New Zealand, Bangladesh and now of course to India, the heat is on. Let us heed Mandela’s advice and not turn the heat off, for ensconced privileges do not give up easily. The journey and road may be arduous; however, it is only through this road less travelled, that we would achieve the double dividend of equality, i.e. for us, and the generation after. As the Commonwealth Secretary General Rt. Hon. Don McKinnon stated at the Women Affairs meeting in Kampala, ‘now more than ever, we need to keep gender equality and women’s rights on the front burner. There is compelling evidence that if we don’t, we risk doing a serious disservice to future generations. Our task is to see that women do not go ‘missing’ in development and democratic agenda’. The water is boiling and we must make sure the issue of women in leadership and decision-making position is placed on the burner. The risk of disservice to future generation will be too great a cost for us all.

In closing, please allow me to extend my gratitude to the Government of India, the Parliament, the Commonwealth Women’s Parliamentary group, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, led by Dr. William F. Shija – the Secretary General, Andrew, Meenakshi, Nick, Shem, Joe, Musonda, Tina and Luseanne, who have worked tirelessly to organise this 53rd conference for Commonwealth parliamentarians.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish you fruitful deliberations.