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# Women Parliamentarians in the Post-2015 Development Era Agenda

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*The Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) – Canada Region reports on the activities of a CWP Pan-Commonwealth Conference in London, England. The conference, which addressed “Women in the Post Millennium Development Goal Era,” explored how women parliamentarians could use their positions to help the fight against global poverty in its many forms, including how it manifests in gender inequality.*



**M**illennium Development Goals (MDGs) emanated from United Nations’ Summits and Conferences in the 1990s. The MDGs represent the world’s commitment to deal with global poverty in its many dimensions. This commitment is supported by a global partnership, which calls for country-led strategies and support from developed countries in the

areas of trade, official development assistance, debt sustainability and access to medicine and technologies.

The eight MDGs – which range from halving extreme poverty rates to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS to providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and the world’s leading development institutions. The goals have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest. The UN is also working with governments, civil society and other partners to build on the momentum generated by the MDGs and carry on with an ambitious post-2015 development agenda.

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## Millennium Development Goals

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- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

\*\*Members are at different levels at achieving MDGs\*\*

## Global Efforts to Achieve MDGs:

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The MDGs have been the most successful global anti-poverty push in history. Significant and substantial progress has been made in meeting many of the targets including: halving the number of people living in extreme poverty and the proportion of people without sustainable access to improved sources of drinking water; a significant decline in the proportion of urban slum dwellers; remarkable gains in the fight against malaria and tuberculosis; and visible improvements in all health areas, as well as primary education.

However, there are still areas where action is needed most. For example: one in eight people worldwide remain hungry; too many women die in childbirth when there are means available to save them; and more than 2.5 billion people lack improved sanitation facilities.

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UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon says:

“In more than a decade of experience working towards the MDGs, we have learned that focused global development efforts can make a difference. Through accelerated action, the world can achieve the MDGs and generate momentum for an ambitious and inspiring post-2015 development framework. Now is the time to step up our efforts to build a more just, secure and sustainable future for all.”

### **The CWP Pan-Commonwealth Conference**

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This conference provided CWP members with the opportunity to develop our own considerations for the role of women, girls and gender equality in the post-MDG period. The conference provided the participants with the opportunity to gain an understanding of the current thinking behind the negotiations for the post-2015 agenda, to hear about the work of Commonwealth governments in this area, to learn about the importance of gender issues in social policy when legislating, and obtain guidance on how to work to strike a better deal for gender equality going forward.

Keen to provide a forum to share good practice in women’s issues, the CWP also deliberated issues of women’s leadership beyond public office and the importance of the gender sensitization of parliament through presiding over a legislative house.

#### **Session 1: Introductions from CPA Secretary General and CWP Chair**

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After welcoming CWP members, William F. Shija, CPA Secretary General, talked about the varying levels of female representation in Commonwealth Parliaments, the direct correlation between women in high office and improved levels of poverty, the activities and achievements of CWP to date, and the place for gender parity and women’s rights in the post-MDG era.

CWP Chair Rebecca Kadaga talked about MDG achievements to date, including the reduction of poverty, the improved gender gap in employment rates and of the efforts in the health and education sectors. She talked about the importance of reaching a consensus and the importance of a universal development agenda. Gender equality, after all, is a universal issue.

She talked about the importance of addressing gender inequality through targets, from the grassroots of local government and upwards, and also about the relevance of developing a road map to enable the CWP to achieve its objectives. Kadaga cited global examples where women are continually victims of gender-based

violence, discrimination and under-representation.

#### **Session 2: Presiding over the House - Establishing a Gender Balance**

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Dawn Primarolo, U.K. MP and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, talked about the challenges of being a woman Member of Parliament. Making particular reference to the way women parliamentarians are portrayed by the media, she contended that female MPs get at least twice as much negative publicity as men. CWP delegates emphasized the importance of political parties improving their list systems when selecting female candidates.

*It was expressed that there should be:*

- Zero tolerance for unacceptable behaviour towards women
- Select committees established, or similar scrutiny to inquire into the way media is biased against women
- Pressure on political parties to change their list systems to encourage greater female participation

#### **Session 3: Remarks from CPA Chair**

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Alan Haselhurst, U.K. MP and Chair of the CPA Executive Committee, covered three main areas in this session: the obstacles to women entering political office, the greatest challenges to the CWP, and CWP’s greatest achievements and future.

*Members raised the following points:*

- The CWP needs to increase its visibility
- The CWP’s network needs to be completed
- CWP needs to stay within the ambit of the CPA
- The importance of intergenerational work needs to be emphasized
- The use of social media to raise awareness of CWP should be enhanced

#### **Session 4: Gender and Social Policy - Making Your Mark**

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Diane Perrons, Professor of Economic Geography and Gender Studies at the London School of Economics, talked about the enduring nature of gender inequality and the fact that it often doesn’t capture the public’s imagination in the same way as other elements of the development agenda do. The group talked of the universal character of gender inequality, the role of education, and the importance of the quality of the education provided.

*Members raised the following points:*

- There is a distinct undervaluing of the unpaid work often undertaken by women such as the provision of care
- Women are frequently more vulnerable than men when cuts to national expenditures are made

- The importance of tracking public expenditures as a way to measure gender equality
- Structural and cultural issues are often vast and therefore continue to hinder the development of women

### Session 5: Negotiating a Better Position for Women and Girls After 2015

Charles Chauvel, Advisor for Parliamentary Development at UNDP, presented a progress report on the eight MDGs: extreme poverty rates have been halved since 1990; enrolment in primary education in developing regions has reached 90 per cent; the world has achieved equality in primary education between girls and boys – but women still face discrimination in accessing education at other levels, work, and participating in decision making; 14,000 fewer children are dying each day; maternal mortality has fallen by 47 per cent since 1990; greater numbers of people are receiving treatment for HIV/AIDS and malaria; 2.1 billion people have gained access to clean water since 1990; debt service has declined in developing countries; and the trade climate has improved.

*Members emphasized the following challenges in negotiating for women in the post-MDG era:*

- The provision, or lack of provision, of briefings from governments on negotiations concerning the next set of development goals, especially on girls' and women's rights
- The organization of consultations with the electorate on the post-MDG priorities
- Effective oversight over governments' commitments to gender equality is critical

Members expressed frustration over the UN system where parliament is often the periphery

### Session 6: A Vision for the Future of Gender Equality and Post-2015 Development Goals

David Hallam, UK Department for International Development Envoy, set out the thinking behind the successors to the MDGs, how they are designed and what they seek to achieve: a more equal world in 2030 which is more prosperous, more just and more peaceful. It was emphasized that there was a need to commit to changing the way we think and act.

*Five transformational shifts were set out:*

- Leave no one behind
- Put sustainable development at the core
- Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth



Photo provided

Attendees of the CWP Pan-Commonwealth Conference in London, England, with William F. Shija, Secretary General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.



Members of the CWP's International Steering Committee meet at CPA headquarters in London.

- Build peaceful and effective open and accountable institutions for all
- Forge a new global partnership
- The gender agenda will consider the following:
  - Prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls
  - End child marriage
  - Ensure equal rights of women to own and inherit property, sign a contract, register a business and open a bank account
  - Eliminate discrimination against women in political, economic, and public life

*CWP encourages:*

- A greater role for parliamentarians in the negotiations for the post-2015 era
- Parliaments need to be more bold in demanding an account of what our governments are negotiating for post-2015
- Greater coordination with other agencies such as UN Women

### **Session 7: The Role of Women in the Post-MDG Era**

Kemi Ogunsanya, Advisor for Gender and Political Development at the Commonwealth Secretariat, provided an overview of the road map to making gender specific targets for the post-MDG era. This proposal included:

- Freedom from violence: prevention; adequate response; behavioural changes; security; support services and justice
- Capabilities and resources: eradicate women's poverty; promote decent work, education and skills; build women's access to, and control of, resources; reduce women's burden; improve women's and girls' health; reduce maternal mortality; promote sustainable energy; and provide access to water and sanitation
- Voice leadership and participation: promote equal decision-making in households, encourage participation in public institutions, foster women's leadership in private sector and corporate boards and strengthen women's collective action

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*The CWP agreed that:*

- There is a lack of recognition of the importance of Parliament as a development actor – aid agencies prefer working with a country's executive branch of government
- Parliaments need to strengthen capacity, knowledge generation, and advocacy of MDGs
- Parliaments should play a critical role in developing breakthrough strategies for MDGs in consultation with national stakeholders, and constituencies including civil society and private sectors

### **Session 8: The Gender Premium: Women in Leadership Across the Commonwealth**

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Shaheena Jivrav, of the Commonwealth Business Council, gave a presentation which acknowledged that equal gender representation on the business boards have a direct correlation with superior performance. Delegates discussed global consumer spending by women which is totaling approximately \$28 trillion, yet almost 40 per cent of companies still don't have female directors on their boards. Strategies debated about how to shift this imbalance included education partnerships, sponsorship initiatives and the development of databases of businesswomen. The Commonwealth Business Council set out its aims to achieve this shift: to develop an advocacy strategy; to work with governments and the private sector; and to strengthen policies to increase the number of women on sector and public boards.

*The CWP advocated to:*

- Encourage that research be undertaken to evaluate whether there is any correlation between girls achieving greater results, and going on to further education, and attending mixed, or same-sex schools
- Promote the Commonwealth Business Council's women's activities

### **Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Moving Forward**

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The Conference was followed by a meeting of CWP-International, on which the Chair of CWP-Canada Region sits as one of 10 members. During the meeting, a *Draft Strategic Plan* for 2014-2018 was approved for circulation and discussion by all CWP jurisdictions. This CWP *Strategic Plan* will aim to serve as both a strategic communications and planning tool to enable CWP to act as a powerful agent for women parliamentarians in the CPA.

The *Strategic Plan* will provide a framework for CWP to identify its achievements, strategically assess the challenges it encounters, build alliances, and undertake actions across the CPA and beyond, in order to ensure that both men and women are involved in decision making in legislatures of the Commonwealth, and that women parliamentarians are supported in their work.