

Gender into the mainstream



The Commonwealth Secretariat's gender programme supports the empowerment of women in the Commonwealth by helping to eliminate discrimination, promoting equal opportunities for women and men, and recognising that gender equality is essential to poverty eradication and sustainable development.

The Secretariat continued to support the work of gender and women's affairs ministries across the Commonwealth. It worked with national women's machineries in advancing women's economic interests; promoting an integrated approach to the elimination of gender-based violence; increasing women's participation in decision-making in both the public and private sectors; and including them in peace processes, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.

Poverty eradication

Poverty often affects women disproportionately. For example, women workers from low income households are concentrated mainly in the informal sector. While this forms a large part of the global economy, they are faced with poor working conditions, job insecurity and minimum financial reward. The Secretariat is

collaborating with international partners to identify how women working in the informal sector can move from producing for saturated domestic markets to more profitable regional and global markets, especially high value and growing export markets, which may require diversification into new products or services.

Gender mainstreaming

The Secretariat is a global leader in the field of 'gender mainstreaming', meaning the adoption of systems within which all policy-making and development initiatives routinely include consideration of gender. The Secretariat has published an internationally recognised series of gender mainstreaming manuals dealing with a wide range of sectors and development issues.

A growing number of Commonwealth governments recognise gender mainstreaming as integral to real democracy

Above:

Training workshops are a key component of gender mainstreaming

Right:

The Commonwealth Secretariat works with the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure that gender equality is an integral part of peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction

Opposite:

A prospective candidate for the 2002 Sierra Leone parliamentary elections



because it puts into practice the principles that all citizens are equal, male or female, and that the state exists to serve them equally. The 'gender sensitive' government or organisation constantly asks: Are males and females benefiting equitably from our services? Have we adjusted the input of resources to ensure equality of benefits? Are we enabling both sexes to contribute positively to society? Are both properly represented in positions of power and decision-making?

Gender mainstreaming at the highest levels has potentially the greatest impact, for example in drawing up the national budget. But it can be successfully introduced at many levels. Its value is very clear in post-conflict reconstruction, where long-term stability depends on careful attention being paid to the interests of all groups. For example, the Secretariat is providing technical assistance to the Government of Sierra Leone to ensure its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is sensitive to gender.

The Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network, supported by the Secretariat, has acted as a strategic arm of the Commonwealth Business Council since September 2002. The Network recognises the significant contribution of women's businesses, and promotes their involvement in accessing markets and other opportunities. Through a series of pan-Commonwealth and national activities, it provides a vital policy forum and networking opportunities for the private sector, NGOs and governments across the Commonwealth, and advises on trade policy including issues related to the World Trade Organisation.

Gender, budgets and trade

Globalisation and trade liberalisation do not eliminate existing inequalities in access to resources and power between men and women, and may increase them. Trade policy negotiations and decision-making within and outside the WTO have to be gender sensitive if actions to promote the social and economic advancement of women are to be effective.

In 2003, the Secretariat facilitated training workshops in the Pacific region and in Geneva to help governments to mainstream gender into trade policies as an integral part of initiatives to strengthen developing countries' capacities to engage in trade policy negotiations and decision-making. It has continued to support Commonwealth governments in mainstreaming gender into national budgets by providing strategic policy advice and expertise.

Politics and peace

The Secretariat supports countries emerging from violent conflict and promotes women's involvement in decision-making in peace processes, post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building. The February 2002 'West Africa/Sierra Leone Women in Parliament Workshop', one of two organised in Sierra Leone, brought together women parliamentarians from Ghana, Nigeria and around the Commonwealth to build leadership capacity among and support for prospective Sierra Leonean women candidates for the May 2002 national elections. The percentage of women in parliament in Sierra Leone increased from 8 per cent to 15 per cent following these elections, higher than the Commonwealth average.

The signing of a ceasefire agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in February 2002 brought hope of ending a devastating 20-year conflict in which some 64,000 people lost their lives and 800,000 have been displaced. The Commonwealth Secretariat is collaborating with the Peace Secretariat within the Office of the Prime Minister and the newly formed Sub-Committee on Gender Issues to ensure that gender equality is an integral part of peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction and resettlement programmes in Sri Lanka, and that women are equitably represented in political decision-making and government at all levels.

Strengthening partnerships for eliminating violence against women

Freedom from violence or the threat of it within and outside the home is every person's right, and gives them scope to engage in productive and income-generating activities and to participate in decision-making in public life.

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action agreed on a comprehensive set of recommendations to address the issue of gender-based violence. To enable government and non-governmental organisations to recognise and respond effectively to violence against women in its many forms, the Commonwealth Secretariat held a Pacific Regional Workshop on 'Strengthening Partnerships for Eliminating Violence against Women' in February 2003 in Fiji Islands. This was organised jointly with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Secretariat for the Pacific Community.



Knowledge-based network

Knowledge and information are central to the advancement of gender equality and to the implementation of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development and its Update (2000–2005). A Knowledge-Based Network is an integral part of the gender programme: the gender page of the Commonwealth Secretariat website, with over 2 million visits per year, disseminates relevant gender policy briefs, key policy resources, and publications including a database of good practices and country progress reports from member countries and regions across the Commonwealth. The Secretariat's gender 'help desk' provides advice and support to governments, and strategic regional partners such as the Economic Community of West African States in the development of their gender mainstreaming policy frameworks and capacity.