I want to take this opportunity to thank the CPA family and the CWP for the overwhelming support that culminated in my election as the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians on 4 September 2013. This was not only humbling, but a monumental honor for me to be entrusted with the mantle of coordinating efforts tackling the global plight of women.

The theme for this year’s International Women’s Day is ‘Inspiring Change’ and we as the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians are in total agreement with the relevance of this theme. Inspiring change is one of the main tenets of the CWP. We discuss this through open dialogue on ways of increasing female representation in Parliament, Cabinet and senior positions, and working towards the mainstreaming of gender considerations in all CPA activities and programmes. We have made considerable progress in making women be appreciated as equally able or even better, given the opportunity to play a leadership role in any sphere.

Some countries have acknowledged the potential contribution of women in national Parliaments and thereby enabled more space through appropriate constitutional, legislative and structural arrangements. The Table 1 displays the countries that have won acclaim for their commitment to increasing the number of women in national Parliaments.

I strongly believe that increased female representation is one of the key channels of pushing for and realizing positive change for the women’s movement. Taking stock of the trend of women in leadership is vital as we look to inspire change among aspiring and potential women leaders all over the world.

I want to share with you the progress of the East African Community as a region in relation to female representation. In Kenya, there are 65 women in the Lower House representing 18.6 per cent of the total seats. In the Upper House or the Senate, there are 18 Women out of a total number of 68 Members representing 26.5 per cent.

In Tanzania, out of 350 seats, there are 126 women in Parliament representing 36 per cent. The Speaker of the National Assembly is also female. In the Parliament of Rwanda, there are 10 female senators compared to 16 males, and the vice president of the Senate is also female. In the lower chamber, there are currently more female deputies than men as they occupy 64 per cent of the seats compared to 43 per cent males. Its Speaker of the House is also female. From the perspective of the 9th Parliament of Uganda, with the new constituencies created in 2010, its 9th Parliament comprises of 375 members with 129 (34.4 per cent) female MPs.

I wish to share with you a few highlights of what we as women Parliamentarians in Uganda have done to inspire change for the women in our country.

The cross-party women’s caucus in Parliament (CWP Uganda) has established itself as one of the most influential caucuses in Parliament, and a major player in advancing women’s issues and interests.

All female MPs automatically qualify for membership in the caucus, and it is highly active. The caucus has gradually developed its structures, become more organized, and taken active part in shaping debates and promoting legislation addressing women’s concerns. There is a caucus secretariat and office with a full-time co-ordinator, which has been invaluable in co-ordinating initiatives and advocacy, both inside and outside the Parliament.

The cross-party nature of the caucus and its extensive membership is critical in explaining its success. Despite the introduction of multi-party politics prior to the 2006 elections, party politics has so far not created great divides in terms of women’s issues. Female opposition members and ruling party members alike affirm their ability to collaborate across party lines and unite behind women’s issues under the auspices of the caucus. In particular, the caucus’ ability to establish a strategic plan for its work has yielded results. Roundtables, each led by a chair, are tasked with the responsibility of moving forward in one specific legislative area, with policy advocacy and networking high on the agenda. This organisational initiative began with the 8th Parliament and has allowed closer monitoring and assessment of its work and improved working relations with male legislators, some of whom are subscribing members of the caucus. In some instances our male colleagues have been key in the sponsoring of crucial Legislation e.g. the Law on Female Genital Mutilation and the Law on monitoring the trafficking of women and girls. Actors in civil society as well as the aid community have also been important in enabling pro-women legislative victories.

The plight and participation of rural women is equally intriguing since many are not able to personally articulate their own issues. One of the hindrances to the
participation of rural women in political activities is the work-burden. We need to create the conditions that will liberate rural women from manual labour, such as reducing the distance in order to get water. We need to get them equipped with energy saving stoves that will facilitate faster cooking and therefore free her time to attend to political issues for which her input is required.

It is my hope that 2014 showers us with blessings for women across the world. I hope my message together with the other articles centered on the same theme in this Issue of The Parliamentarian can ‘inspire Change’ among women globally.

Aluta Continua!

Delegates attending the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa

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