Hon’ble Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am grateful to the chair for giving me this opportunity to express my views and share a few of our experiences in India at this workshop. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Secretariat have taken a laudable initiative in organising this Workshop in the backdrop of the Millennium Development Goal 3 of promoting gender equality and empowering women.

Friends, political caucus, as we know, is an essential feature of the political system in many democratic countries. However, caucuses are not encouraged within the parliamentary parties in India, where all important decisions are taken on party lines. Political parties play a very significant role in our Parliament and influence its functioning considerably. The legislative wings of the parties, the parliamentary parties, carry heavy responsibilities. Besides ensuring discipline, they provide their members all the necessary training and orientation in legislative work; brief them on issues coming up before Parliament and on national and international developments; feed them with data, materials and information on anticipated problems of concern through party position papers and discussions. They monitor and evaluate the parliamentary performance of party members and secure feedback to the party. In this scheme, Party Whips, who are chosen from
Members of Parliament by political parties in power and in opposition, play an important role. They are responsible for the attendance of members at the time of important discussions and votings. During sessions, the Whips of different parties send to their supporters periodic notices, also sometimes called ‘whips’, warning them when important divisions are expected, telling them the hour when a vote will probably take place, and requesting them to be in attendance at that time. Being constantly in touch with the members in the lobbies, etc., of the House, the Whips, acting as intermediaries between the leaders and the rank and file of their parties, keep the former in touch with the currents of opinion. And it is through the Whips that members of a party come to know about the views and priorities of the party leadership.

In so far as the subject of promoting gender equality and empowering women is concerned, in India, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in our Constitution, in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. This not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to take measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, the laws, development policies, plans and programmes aim at women’s advancement in different spheres. We have in place the National Commission for Women, set up in 1992 under an Act of our Parliament. Broadly speaking, the Commission is mandated to review the Constitutional and Legal safeguards for women; recommend remedial legislative
measures; facilitate redressal of grievances and advise the Government on all policy matters affecting women. In keeping with its mandate, the Commission has taken various steps to improve the status of women and worked for their economic empowerment. We also have the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, adopted in 2001, to ensure women’s equality in power sharing and active participation in the decision making processes at all levels. In India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development is the nodal Ministry looking after the welfare, development and empowerment of women. Recently, our Government launched the National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) in March 2010 with a view to empower women socially, economically and educationally. This mission aims to secure convergence of schemes/programmes of different Ministries and Departments of Central as well as State Governments. The National Mission has a National Mission Authority (NMA) at apex level under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister.

Over the years, the planning strategies for women have evolved from ‘welfare’ to ‘development’ to ‘empowerment’. To this end, concerted efforts are on to incorporate gender concerns in all the major sectors like finance, agriculture, energy, industries, non-farm sectors, employment generation, poverty alleviation programmes, etc through gender-budgeting and gender mainstreaming.
Our Parliament has passed a number of important legislations for the empowerment of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to our Constitution are landmark initiatives which have laid a solid foundation for women’s empowerment. These amendments ensure not less than one-third of the total seats of members and of the Chairpersons for women in all elected offices in local bodies whether in rural areas or urban areas. Today, we have 1.5 million elected women representatives, who are involved in the planning, implementation and supervision of the delivery of essential public services at the lower levels of our representative system. In some of the States, the percentage of women at the helm of affairs in these bodies has gone beyond the stipulated 33 per cent. We are striving towards ways to further increase the representation of women in these local bodies. Likewise, we have also strived to increase the representation of women in the Parliament and the State Legislatures and a Bill to this effect, seeking one-third reservation of seats for women, has been passed in March 2010 by the Upper House and is pending in the Lower House. Once this Bill gets passed, it will bring about revolutionary changes like those we experienced in our Panchayats/Local bodies. We also have in place a number of women specific legislations relating to dowry prohibition, maternity benefits, domestic violence, immoral traffic prevention, indecent representation of women, prevention of sexual harassment at work place, etc. for the protection of women and gender equality.
Besides these, I would like to make particular mention of the Standing Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Empowerment of Women in our Parliament which was constituted for the first time in 1997. The Committee consists of 30 Members: 20 from the Lok Sabha and 10 from the Rajya Sabha. The term of the Committee is one year and it is re-constituted year after year. The Members of the Committee are expected to work together for the empowerment of women cutting across party affiliations. The Committee, among others, considers the reports submitted by the National Commission for Women and reports on the measures that should be taken by the Government for improving the status or conditions of women. It examines measures taken by the Union Government to secure for women equality, status and dignity in all matters. It is also entrusted with the task of examining such other matters as referred to it by either House of the Parliament or by the Speaker, Lok Sabha or the Chairman, Rajya Sabha. Some of the subjects chosen by the Committee (2012-2013) for examination include: honour killings, victims of sexual abuse and trafficking and their rehabilitation, working conditions of women in organized and unorganized sectors, assessment of educational status of women with special reference to the girl child, assessment of socio-economic and health status of tribal women, etc. During the current Lok Sabha, the Committee has submitted 19 Reports till date.
Friends, though there have been many positive changes, perceptibly in increasing political participation of women across the world, it is pertinent to remind ourselves that the challenges to women’s empowerment and equality continue to affront us. In this arduous task, there is a need for parliamentarians to come together and work concertedly. And since the problems and issues surrounding women’s empowerment and equality are multi-dimensional, it is imperative to adopt a multi-pronged approach. Beyond political participation of women, there is also a need to address the civil, economic, social and cultural rights of women. In other words, besides breaking the old values and societal attitudes which inhibit women’s participation in politics, there should be efforts for economic empowerment of women. I am hopeful that our deliberations during this Workshop will provide us new perspectives and insights on these issues and help us in effectively addressing the issue.

Thank you.