REPOSITIONING WOMEN IN THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

With closer scrutiny of the current eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) one realizes that each one of them directly touches on the plight of women globally. More specifically, MDG three seeks to promote gender equality and empower women. It is imperative for us to critically look at our current position so that we can identify the gaps and re-align our strategy to move forward. Looking at the current world order, one recognizes the undeniable progress made by women in the different spheres of society. For instance it is true that we have witnessed an increase in enrolment of girls in schools at all levels of education; we have also witnessed increased female representation in national Parliaments, and we have also witnessed a visible positive shift in respect to rights of women globally. In the same vein, however, we have to concede that there are still gaps where a conscious effort is needed to reposition women in post-2015 development agenda.

Drawing on the global development agenda released in the 2013 report of the United Nations high level panel, the plight of vulnerable women and youth have high global priority. The report lays out five transformative shifts for the new global agenda. Among these, “Leave No One Behind” promises attention to the most marginalized and vulnerable people – which must include young people, women and girls, and women with disabilities everywhere in the world. Furthermore, it defines a specific target to ensure universal access to reproductive health care and rights under Goal Four – Ensure Healthy Lives that focuses on several interrelated health issues including maternal health and HIV/AIDS. It also draws specific attention to the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people — calling on nations to break down barriers.

Ensuring universal reproductive health rights and access to care is no mere theoretical goal, but a promise that young women do not have to drop out of school because they are pregnant, or be isolated from the labour market because of gender norms and values. Women’s access to reproductive rights and choices will solidify in the long run the rights of women to control their own bodies, to their own health, and to participate in their own lives. It also navigates them to make informed decisions around fertility. Repeated childbirth keeps them from income-generating activities and reduces productivity. And early and forced marriage keeps young women from education and employment. That is why it is of critical importance that these rights are fully catered for in the post-2015 development agenda.

Threats to women’s rights continue on many levels, among them those posed by culture, religion, and tradition, as well as processes of globalization and economic change. A right gained is not a right maintained unless there is constant monitoring. There is a need to strengthen women’s access to both formal and informal justice systems, and ensure these are responsive to advancing all women’s equal rights, opportunities, and participation. Improving women’s political voice is also crucial here.

As Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, the call for action on the outcome of women’s rights discussion in Yaoundé is imperative. We had a productive session under the theme “Joining hands for women’s rights: The role of Parliamentarians in gender empowerment”. Members attested the need to go ‘beyond numbers’ when reflecting on the representation of women in Parliaments across the Commonwealth. Members discussed the importance of creating women’s caucuses across party lines in Parliaments, which can develop and strengthen women’s presence in Parliament. Members considered improving international links between women Parliamentarians for mutual support and sharing best practices.

Reaching out to gender empowerment organizations can help to understand how women are excluded in society. Members agreed that it is essential to understand the challenges specific to women in order to influence the development agenda on gender. Tracking legislation is important to ensure gender equity is achieved. Parliamentarians agreed that mentoring schemes for women Parliamentarians are key to furthering women in the political sphere and that getting communities to encourage more women to enter public office is vital to increase numbers of women in legislatures.

I am convinced that the recommendations emerging from this session clearly provide a springboard for women in the post-2015 MDGs era. In line with the outcome of this session, there is need to re-engage our Parliaments and our countries to put special emphasis on the following:

- Intensive lobbying for more Bills that encourage more women in politics and allocate funds to create rehabilitation homes for abused and abandoned aged women.
• Access to justice, equal treatment, right to own property, right to access credit, fairness in the distribution of family inheritance and obligations to children in case of divorce or separation.

• Education is the key that opens doors of opportunities for women and also empowers them to take routine risk that someone else would shrink from.

As the CWP, we call upon all regional organizations, national governments, national Parliaments, regional Parliaments, civil society organizations and all stakeholders to support the outcome of this session and ultimately the cause of women in the post-2015 development agenda.

As the CWP, we believe that it is important to have a stand-alone goal in the post-2015 development agenda to achieve gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment. A goal that is grounded in human rights and tackles unequal power relations. Furthermore, there must be integration of gender equality concerns throughout the other priority areas and goals of the post-2015 development agenda with clear targets and indicators.

We continue to acknowledge that, whereas there has been much progress towards women’s rights over the decades, many gaps remain. For women’s rights to become a universal reality, it is critical to address the fundamental causes of gender inequality, such as violence against women, unpaid care work, inadequate control over assets and property and unequal participation in private and public decision-making. The stand-alone goal must therefore create minimum standards and drive change forward in the three critical areas that are holding women back.

The stand-alone goal should address violence against women. One in three women is likely to experience physical and sexual violence at some point in her lifetime. The most prevalent human rights abuse in the world today, violence against women and girls is an indicator of gender-based discrimination and a universal phenomenon which has tremendous costs for societies.

The goal should include the need to expand women’s choices and capabilities. Women and men need equal opportunities, resources and responsibilities. Equal access to land, credit, natural resources, education, health services, decent work and equal pay needs to be addressed urgently. Policies, on child-care and parental leave, as well as improved access to infrastructure (such as water and energy), are essential to lessen women’s unpaid work, so that everyone can enjoy parity at work and at home.

Finally, this stand-alone goal should address the necessity of guaranteeing that women have a voice within households, and in public and private decision-making domains. For meaningful and all-embracing democracy, women’s voices should be heard in decision making and in all domains, such as public and private institutions, national and local Parliaments, media, civil society, in firms, families and communities.

I’m happy to note that some of these elements are already encompassed in existing international commitments. The elaboration and substantiation of a new-generation development goal on achieving gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment should be based on existing norms and standards for gender equality such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as on outcomes of major conferences and resolutions of bodies such as the United Nations General Assembly and the Commission on the Status of Women.

The post-2015 development agenda offers a real opening to push for lasting change on women’s rights and equality, and to bring transformative changes in women’s and men’s lives. As the CWP, as the CPA and advocates for women’s rights, we can not let this opportunity slip through our hands. Women must be part of the core of the post-2015 development agenda.