JOINING HANDS FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS; THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS IN GENDER EMPOWERMENT

In my View for Issue Two, I would like to address what we as Parliamentarians can do to cause gender empowerment. Contrary to what a female CEO from Wall Street might tell you about women empowerment, a woman living in the rural terrain in Sokoto State in Nigeria will have a completely different perspective. This is the stark reality of the contrasting trends of women empowerment across the globe, taking into account the trend of economic development, education and the gross domestic product.

Having been a woman Parliamentarian for the last 25 years, I have been among the lucky few to reap the benefits of gender empowerment. I therefore feel it is our obligation as Parliamentarians to unite in bridging the remaining gap. As Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP), I recently proposed a three-year strategic plan for furthering women empowerment in the Commonwealth. This strategic plan is intended to galvanize efforts to, among others, trigger a drastic increase in the numbers of women in political leadership in all nine regions of the Commonwealth.

There has been an increasing awareness over the last three decades of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and political equity, as well as the need to broaden access to fundamental human rights, better nutrition, basic health and education. Along with awareness of the secondary status of women has come the concept of gender as an overarching socio-cultural variable, seen in relation to other factors, such as race, class, age and ethnicity.

However, even in light of heightened international awareness of gender issues, many countries have not yet managed to eliminate the gender gap. Inequality still exists in education, economy, employment, access to health, and decision-making at local, national and regional levels.

When women are empowered as political leaders, countries experience higher standards of living and positive equitable developments, particularly in the areas of education and health. Women’s participation positively affects communities, Legislatures, political parties and the people, and ultimately helps democracy deliver improvements to society. Several studies have shown that women’s political participation results in tangible gains for democratic governance, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, accountability, increased cooperation across parties, especially in all women caucuses and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace.

I suggest a two-pronged approach as a way forward for gender empowerment and promoting women’s rights. One is by fighting poverty through access to resources and credit facilities. Ways in which Parliamentarians can assist women through this approach is by:

- Monitoring the performance of institutions dealing with micro-finance to ensure funds reach the intended recipients, but that the conditions for borrowing are gender sensitive;
- Verifying the credibility of micro-finance institutions to ensure transparency and accountability in the disbursement and management of micro-finance;
- Ensuring the existence of mechanisms for dissemination of information on sources of micro-finance and training opportunities; and
- Monitoring the government’s implementation of the various international conventions on gender equality and lobbying for a quota system for appointments to senior positions in the public and private sector, including micro-finance institutions.

The second approach to gender empowerment is through the oversight role of Parliament. It is evident most Sub-Saharan countries will not achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) within the expected timeframe, unless there is a concerted effort by both developing and developed countries.

Thus, it is the responsibility of Parliamentarians to ensure that government policies achieve the intended objectives. Parliamentarians can ensure coherence between policy pronouncements and action by:

- Mainstreaming gender in the development process, which will require a change of attitudes towards women. Attitudes will only begin to evolve when all change agents are involved in making policies and resources are devoted to bringing about change. Parliaments have a role to play in ensuring all stakeholders and change agents, specifically women, are consulted and participate in the development process;
- In order to attain the MDGs, most countries implement Poverty Reduction

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Strategy Process Papers (PRSPs). Parliament has an important role to play in the PRSP oversight, through a PRSP or Budget Standing Committee. Through these committees Parliaments can also ensure the poverty reduction objectives of the PRSP are prioritized as well as coordination and monitoring of poverty outcomes.

- The MDG on education focuses on primary education, but extension beyond primary school level is hampered by obstacles such as expensive secondary school fees and the cost of required uniforms. There is also a need to address the provision of sanitary infrastructure including scholastic and sanitary materials that will enable both genders to remain in school until completion. It is also necessary to address the provision of schools with reasonable and manageable distances for the students;

  • Parliamentarians can seek to ensure there are sufficient budget allocations for scholarships targeted at girls living in very poor families to remove such impediments;
  • Despite the ratification of the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) by governments, women continue to suffer from discrimination. Parliamentarians should ensure those tasked with implementing CEDAW and any affiliated policies have received gender sensitivity training and have adequate resources to enforce implementation. Indeed it will be necessary for all women and male MPs to be included in the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action;
  • Since women constitute the majority of HIV/AIDS cases across the globe, Parliament should ensure legislation and policies are in place that provide women with the information they need about preventing HIV, along with information about treatment and drugs;
  • A large percentage of women are employed in agriculture, but often do not own the land. Parliamentarians can urge the introduction of legislation and recommend policies that promote equal ownership of land, such as the requirement that land registration certificates bear the names of both spouses; and
  • In the case of African Parliaments, they could seek to implement the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) process, which is designed to assess a country’s performance in attaining the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) goals. This could ultimately help to ensure greater gender equity.

It is my profound hope that the message contained in this article together with future articles will re-invigorate all stakeholders in the campaign for gender empowerment in the Commonwealth and beyond.