I would like to associate myself with the focus of the first 2015 issue of *The Parliamentarian*, which is the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals. I am glad that the publication identified this very important subject as the central issue. With most targets of the Millennium Development Goals concluding at the end of 2015, it was vital to have goals that set the stage for an ambitious future development agenda albeit in a sustainable framework.

I am confident that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will offer the perfect platform for a comprehensive post-2015 development agenda. The Rio+20 outcome document *The Future We Want* resolved to set up an all-encompassing and transparent intergovernmental process on SDGs that is open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the United Nations General Assembly. I was thrilled that the outcome document mandated the formation of an inter-governmental Open Working Group that will submit a report to the 68th session of the General Assembly containing a proposal for sustainable development goals for deliberation and suitable action. The outcome document specifies that the process leading to the SDGs needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes considering the post 2015 development agenda and that initial input to the work of the Open Working Group will be provided by the UNSG in consultation with national governments.

As aptly illustrated in the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Action Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDSN 2013a), the SDGs will be complementary to the tools of international law, such as legally binding global treaties and conventions, by providing a common normative framework that fosters collaboration across countries, mobilizes all stakeholders, and inspires action. I envisage the following advantages to be realized with the advent of these well-crafted development goals:

- Help guide the public understanding of complex sustainable development challenges, including neglected ones;
- Support long-term approaches towards sustainable development;
- Unite the global community and inspire coherent public and private action at local, national, regional, and global levels;
- Promote integrated thinking and put to rest the futile debates that pit one dimension of sustainable development against another;
- Define responsibilities and foster accountability;
- Inspire active problem solving by all sectors of society;

As Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP), I am most specifically concerned with the component of addressing women’s plight globally. Suffice to say that I was deeply pleased to find my well captured under SDG No. 5: achieve gender equality of all women and girls. The CWP continues to strive to propagate ways of increasing female representation in Parliament and work towards mainstreaming of gender considerations in all CPA activities and programmes. As such, SDG No. 5 is very much a component of our work. Throughout my leadership journey, from the first time I assumed elective office to date, I have always passionately fought to end the marginalization of all women and girls.

I would therefore like to comment more specifically on the dynamics of the efforts of ensuring gender equality of all women and girls.

Creating a world where the equal dignity and worth of every individual is respected and valued is simple to articulate, but difficult to deliver. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was a powerful statement of intent, and in the intervening years attempts were made in every jurisdiction to create legislative, administrative, and judicial mechanisms to ensure these values were upheld. In the process a genuinely universal standard has emerged that countries across the world subscribe to, and communities across the world aspire to.

However, human rights mechanisms thus far have tended to focus primarily on civil and political rights, instead of the full spectrum of human rights, including socio-economic and cultural rights. I would like to emphasize that it is important that the post-2015 agenda focuses on guaranteeing fundamental equalities, and goes beyond non-discrimination. In the short term, there is a need to create full, decent productive employment opportunities for women and access to finance, as well as to continue to provide social protection, and...
more importantly promote and value women as capable of flourishing
in financial investments. The promotion of women’s economic rights
is critical for economic growth and this entails promoting a range
of women’s rights: their sexual and reproductive rights and rights to
education, to mobility, to voice, to ownership, and to live free from
violence.

Equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment is a very
critical standalone goal. Coupled with this goal are three similarly
important target areas.

Freedom from violence against women and girls
The scourge of violence against women and girls threatens the basic
security of the world. Violence against women and girls not only
affects women, their families and communities, but it also undermines
the stability and prosperity of whole societies. The World Health
Organization reported in 2013 that 35% of women worldwide have
experienced some type of violence in their lifetime. This violence
can have serious and long-lasting effects on women’s mental,
reproductive, and sexual health. This issue is addressed in the UN
Millennium Development Goals, and for all intents and purposes, it
must be captured in the post-2015 development agenda.

Gender equality in the distribution of capabilities
This area involves women’s access to education, healthcare, and
opportunities such as land or work with equal pay. I am proud to
note that all indicators show that progress is being made in all of
these areas, but this progress varies by region and demographic
dispersion. For example, there is evidence in some areas to show
that women tend to hold less secure jobs than men in developing
regions. I get disheartened when reports on education reveal that in
Northern Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and western Asia, the gender
disparity in education still remains high and yet we are all aware
of the invaluable role of education in achieving gender equality.

Education is very important for every child whether boy or girl. It is
sad that some communities still discriminate against the education
of girls.

Gender equality in decision-making power structures
This issue is about women holding positions of influence both in
public spheres and government, but also within their own homes
and families. The number of women that hold parliamentary seats
has increased in almost every world region since 2000, mostly
due to the creation of legislative or voluntary quotas that require a
certain number of female members. However, women’s decision-
making power at home remains significantly lower than men’s in
many regions of the world. These types of decisions range from
money-related choices, to women’s ability to visit friends and family,
to decisions about women’s own health. Family dynamics are greatly
influenced by societal and institutional norms, and the hope of many
organizations is that by increasing women’s access to education and
work opportunities, these norms will begin to change in a direction
that is less discriminatory.

The importance of achieving gender equality cannot be over
stated. Research studies show that economic stability and growth
for developing countries is greatly boosted by improved gender
equality. As such, if women and girls can gain access to improved
education, they will eventually get better jobs and be able to better
contribute to the economy. Including women in political decision
making leads to more effective governance, since women’s presence
in government brings greater diversity and different experience to the
process. This makes the problem all the more pressing and important.
Gender equality is not only a significant concern from a human rights
standpoint, but it will allow for the economic and political growth that
developing nations need to make them competitive in world markets.

Dear readers of The Parliamentarian, let us continue to share
experiences in the next issue of our Journal.