



62nd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference

CARIBBEAN, AMERICAS AND ATLANTIC

HOT TOPICS FORUM

"SEEKING TO INCREASE WOMEN'S

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION"

15 DECEMBER, 2016, 14:00

Opening Remarks

Mr Akbar Khan

Secretary-General

Programme:

Opening Remarks by Mr Akbar Khan, Secretary General,
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Opening Remarks by the Hon. Shirley M. Osborne, MLA,
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Montserrat

REMARKS

- **The Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee** Honourable Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury)
- **Honourable Shirley Osborne**, MP, CPA Vice-Chairperson
- **Hon Kamla Persad-Bissessar**, MP Leader of the Opposition Trinidad and Tobago
- **Hon. Rayburn Blackmoore**, Minister of Immigration and National Security, Dominica
- **Dr Josephine Ojiambo**, Deputy Secretary-General, Commonwealth Secretariat
- **Professor Verene Shepher**, Director of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies and Professor of Social History, University of the West Indies
- [**Rt Honourable Rebecca Kadaga**, MP Hon. Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians]
- **Honourable Presiding Officers, Hon. Members of Parliament**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**

REMARKS

I am honoured to be here with you at the opening of the second in the series of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Regional Hot Topics Forum.

The objective of the new Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 'Regional Hot Topics' Forum, is to provide a platform for key policy makers and experts to discuss a 'hot' or 'burning' issue of critical importance to their Commonwealth region with a view to raising awareness of the issue and identifying strategies to address it.

Today, I am delighted to welcome the inaugural Caribbean, Atlantic and Americas Regional 'hot topics' forum bringing together a diverse panel of parliamentarians and international and regional experts to share their experience, expertise and regional perspective on the pressing and important issue of **'Seeking to increase Women's Political Participation'**.

Despite constituting half of the world's population, women continue to be disproportionately represented in governance and at all levels of decision making.

So what is the picture in the Caribbean region? Are the attitudes talked about by Dame Jennifer Smith, the former Premier of Bermuda and first woman former Speaker of House of Assembly still prevalent today in the region when she stated ***'Women in politics has to do with the social standing of women generally; Politics is about power and power is viewed as a man's preserve'***.

Distinguished guests

The inspiration behind this topic and the realisation of today's forum is entirely due to the energy, determination and commitment of the Hon. Shirley Osborne, Speaker of the Montserrat Legislative Assembly and Vice Chairperson of the CPA. It was her vision and unrelenting dedication that has made this forum a reality.

As a woman, holding one of the most senior positions in her jurisdiction and also within the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Speaker Osborne is an example of the positive role modelling and contribution women make to championing gender equality and political leadership both on a domestic level, but also internationally across the Commonwealth family.

Distinguished guests

This forum is the first in a two-part series for the Region, the second we envisage will be delivered in early 2017, where we will continue this interactive dialogue; and strengthen the resolve, conviction; courage and determination of women to stand for public office and to make their voices heard.

As a child of a Guyanese mother who was a lawyer, I know first-hand the wealth of female talent in the Caribbean. I am proud by Guyana's record of not only having produced a women Head of State, in President Janet Jagan (served as President of the Republic 1997 -1999) but also being one of the few countries in the Caribbean and more widely to have met the Commonwealth Heads of Government recommended target of no less than 30% of women in parliament.

I am pleased to also record that joining Guyana is also Grenada and Trinidad and Tobago which have exceeded the 30% target for women's representation in Parliaments.

However, even though there have been and continue to be some 'bright lights' in Women's political leadership in the Commonwealth Caribbean with examples of leading role models such as former Prime Ministers Maria Eugenia Charles of Dominica (1980-1995), Portia Simpson Miller of Jamaica and Kamla Persad Bissessar of Trinidad, the overall picture is one of slow and uneven progress.

For example, contrary to conventional wisdom about the positive relationship between economic development and women's empowerment, the evidence shows the higher the country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the Caribbean, the lower the proportion of female cabinet ministers.

What's more, the evidence shows that women once in the Executive are disproportionately clustered in the hybrid 'soft' portfolios. In a trend that has changed little over time, women tend to control portfolios such as sports, youth and gender affairs, social services, education, tourism culture and housing¹.

The stark reality today in the Caribbean, Atlantic and Americas Region, is there are no serving female Heads of State.

The picture across the world's national Parliaments is equally mixed. As at June 2016, only 22.8 per cent of all national parliamentarians were women, a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995.

Globally, there are 38 countries in which women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses. Four chambers with no women at all.

As of September 2016, 10 women are serving as Head of State and nine are serving as Head of Government.

¹ Presence without Empowerment -Women in Politics in Latin America and the Caribbean

Distinguished guests

As noted, the Commonwealth Caribbean is not alone in experiencing a slow pace of change. This pattern is also reflected in some other regions of the world.

The 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women's political participation note **'Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalised from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to education, healthcare and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women'**

This situation should be concerning for all of us who care about inclusion and diversity as an essential component of democratic governance for at least two reasons:

- (i) firstly, from the local to the global level, women's leadership and political participation has been on the agenda for several decades; and,
- (ii) there is established and growing evidence that women's leadership in political decision making improves them by working across party lines through parliamentary women's caucuses – even in the most combative environments- and by championing issues of gender equality, such as the elimination of gender based violence, parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender equality law and electoral reform².

There is a direct correlation between more women in decision making positions, and improved human development and poverty reduction.

When inclusive, a parliament has the potential to become a much more effective political institution through enhanced legitimacy as the public feel better represented by parliament, as a consequence of better descriptive and symbolic representation, and a greater responsiveness to them.³

There is, moreover an incongruity in a Parliament which is unequal and exclusionary when, as a legislature, it makes laws on such issues. ⁴

² Inter-Parliamentary Union – Equality in Politics – A survey of men and women in Parliaments.

³ Childs and Lovenduski quoted in The Good Parliament 2016

⁴ The Good Parliament publication 2016

Distinguished guests

It has been recognized internationally through global norms such as the:

- **UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights,**
- **The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**
- **UN General Assembly Resolution on Women's political participation (A/RES/66/130)**
- **The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (article 7)**
- **The 2013 Commonwealth Charter on Gender Equality;** and most recently,
- **The UN Sustainable Development Goal Number 5** which states explicitly the need to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'.

...that progress in increasing the participation of women in politics has to be made:

I hope that the forum will examine how to further implement at the national level the provisions contained in these global norms treaties on a national level.

Before closing allow me to take a few moments to reflect on some of the national tools available to us to implement these norms in order to realise the aspirations set forth.

Quotas

Over 70 countries globally have adopted alternative forms of quotas to tackle gender imbalance, which have advanced the political participation of women in decision making. Three types of political quotas have been used; (i) Reserved seats; (ii) legal candidate quotas; and (iii) Political party quotas on voluntary basis. Some countries have used a combination of these forms effectively⁵.

Political parties

Political parties can take various measures to promote women's leadership. These include the voluntary adoption of quotas on party lists for election. Other measures

⁵ Commonwealth Secretariat – Information Brief on Women and Political

might include equal opportunity, non-discrimination and/or gender equality clauses in party manifestoes and constitutions.

Linked to the political parties is the question of political party funding. Several countries already make the allocation of direct public financing of political parties typically to cover campaign expenditures, training, part activities dependent on fulfilling certain gender equality requirements, such as allocating a portion of the subsidy to fund women's wings.

Other measures to promote a conducive environment:

Introducing legal reforms aimed at ensuring a solid framework for gender equality, non-discrimination and women's equal participation through constitutional provisions.

Several Commonwealth parliaments have developed capacity building initiatives for women's political participation such as peer to peer support between female parliamentarians and also twinning arrangements.

As well, youth initiatives help to promote the participation of young women and in developing the confidence of a whole generation.

At the grassroots level, intergenerational work is key to inspiring and sensitising **young women and men** to the importance of gender equality and female representation in decision making bodies.

To that end, the **CPA Roadshow**, an initiative to emphasise to young people across the Commonwealth the important political values of diversity, democracy, development and gender equality has played a key role in educating young people about the importance of gender parity in decision making, by bringing elected representatives to young people in schools and universities. The CPA Roadshow has visited Montserrat, Guyana and Bermuda where the engagement of young women on political issues has been remarkable.

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians in the Caribbean, Atlantic and Americas Region, under the leadership of the Hon Shirley Osborne will be delivering activities to

“Strategize for Women’s Political Leadership in the Caribbean Political Space” and will raise the profile of status of women in the region.

This makes me pleased and proud to say that the CWP is tackling barriers head-on that are impacting women’s active participation in public life.

Honourable Members, with these opening remarks, I would like to thank you for your attendance and to commend our excellent panellists for taking the time to be here. Thank you for sharing your views and expertise with us.

I would like to end with the words of our distinguished panellist, Hon. Kamla Bissessar:

‘With equal opportunities, both women and girls can improve their own lives, and in so doing, the lives of others, their communities and nations. From birth to their first day at school, having a successful career – and everything in between – women and girls must be given the chance to succeed and become the agents of change we need. By breaking down barriers that prevent them from achieving their full potential, we can accelerate development, for the benefit of all’.

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