Ever since I grew up, I have been dreaming of a society where women can be treated as equals with men. The right to equality is the right of all human beings to be equal in dignity, to be treated with respect and consideration and to participate on an equal basis with others in any area of economic, social, political, cultural or civil life. Most of the religions, including Islam, have been endorsing this concept.

In Pakistan, the constitution emphasizes the equality of men and women. However, we lack: implementation in laws; effective legal protection against discrimination, harassment and unequal opportunities, and the legal means to promote equality.

This year’s International Women’s Day under the theme, “Equal rights, equal opportunities: Progress for all”, underlines the need for governments, Parliaments, civil society, women's organizations, the private sector, the media and individual women and men to join forces in making important changes to policies, programmes, attitudes and behaviour to ensure that women fully participate in economic and social life.

The right to equality before the law and the promotion of equal opportunities are fundamental norms in international human rights law; however, the recognition and enjoyment of equal rights still remain beyond the reach of large sections of humanity. Even in countries where such provisions are in force, much remains to be done to ensure the realization of the right to equality.

**Unparliamentary inequalities**

We do not have to go far to find examples: unfortunately, in my view our own organization practices such inequalities. Despite making tall claims by asking countries to give women 30 per cent of representation in Parliaments, my own experience as the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) is that even in 2010 – my third year in this position – women do not occupy 30 per cent of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Executive Committee and all other decision-making fora. Furthermore, I believe women Parliamentarians should be given an adequate budget and resources for their activities according to their representation. In order to be treated equally, to be heard on this platform and to get even a quarter of rights for women (leave aside equal rights), I have to struggle and fight very hard to convince my colleagues from diverse backgrounds. I feel discriminated against and frustrated many a time.

In the CPA hierarchy, the CWP must be acknowledged by always being represented as a right on the stage at the annual conference. I have had to push through to make the CPA realize that women, who comprise 50 per cent of the world's population, should be given an equal opportunity to be honoured. I wondered what democracy was?

The CWP Chairperson is elected by all the women Parliamentarians at a conference and yet the CPA does not acknowledge her as an Officer of the Association, whereas others such as the President, the Vice-President and the Treasurer – who constitutionally do not come through the same electoral process – are so honoured. The CWP Chairperson is recognized constitutionally as a Member of the Association’s Executive Committee but not as an Officer even though she has such a significant mandate. To my disappointment, these practices are clearly discriminatory towards women and in conflict of the principles of the Commonwealth. It also shows how insecure our hierarchies are. I still wonder when we will practice what we preach and where this long journey and the struggle of women will end.

There are studies showing that the higher percentage of women in decision making positions, the more successful and efficient institutions are. In times of economic stress, there is no business argument that can counter the value-added of investing in women. Similarly, development studies over and over show that investing in women has a high return in improving livelihoods, improving access to education for children and health for all, and reducing poverty in general terms. This makes an impact on overall national economic and social development.

I feel that there is a need for sensitization, a change in attitudes and mindsets at all level. Too often, obstacles in the form of negative stereotypes about women’s leadership potential continue to limit their success, limit change and limit progress. Specific measures to encourage and support women’s participation and enable them to gain senior
leadership positions should be enhanced, including management and leadership training, formalized mentorship programmes and sustainable financial support.

**Transforming commitments into reality**

International Women’s Day is a reminder that most countries still have a long way to go before equality of rights and opportunities is translated into reality. There is no denying the fact that the status of women in most countries has improved considerably; but given the very low baseline from which women started, we cannot afford to be complacent. At a time when goals of gender equality have been set universally, it is a pity that most countries like Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and African countries are lagging behind in reaching the Millennium Development Goals that are to a great extent directed at closing the existing gender gap in societies.

The positive aspect is that women are now themselves struggling to rise. But without an enabling environment it is not possible for the marginalized amongst them to realise their full potential. It is time to eliminate injustice and inequalities and to promote full and effective equality.

On 8 March 2010, International Women’s Day, we called on Commonwealth members and all the CPA Branches to resolve to review and reinforce their commitments, policies and programmes to make gender equality a reality and initiate positive action, which includes a range of legislative, administrative and policy measures to overcome past disadvantage and to accelerate progress towards equality – to convert lip-service into reality.

I urge our Commonwealth family to be leaders in assuring progress for all by taking important steps to ensure dignity, respect and equality for women and give access to participation and leadership. Let us begin by asking all our Members to ensure that from this year onward their delegations to CPA conferences are truly gender-balanced and we see women attending our conferences as delegates, not observers.

In some Commonwealth countries, women waiting to vote in elections queue separately from men.