REPORT OF THE MEETING OF
THE COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS’
STEERING COMMITTEE

08TH SEPTEMBER 2012

Venue: HILTON

Prepared by
HANSARD DEPARTMENT
Parliament of Sri Lanka
16th Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee Meeting  
Hilton Colombo  
Sri Lanka  
8th September 2012

Present:
Secretary General, CPA – Dr. William F. Shija  
CWP President - The Hon.(Dr.) Sudarshani Fernandopulle (Chairperson)

Representative from Mediterranean Region  
Representative from Canada Region  
Representative from Caribbean, Atlantic and Americas Region  
Representative from India Region  
Representative from Pacific Region  
Representative from South East Asia Region  
Representative from Asia Region  
Representative from Australia Region  
Representatives of CPA Secretariat

Nomination of a Chairperson for Steering Committee Meeting:
The CWP President informed the CWP Chairperson’s inability to attend the ongoing Session and that she might be present in the afternoon and the Hon. Vice-Chairperson being expected on Monday.
She further stated that according to the CPA Constitution under Article 10 (3) (c), in the absence of the Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians or in the absence of the Vice-Chairperson, an alternate determined by the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians can Chair the meeting.
The CWP President sought the views of Members on the President of the CWP chairing the Steering Committee Meeting until Hon. Alix Boyd Knights arrives.
The Committee agreed.

Introduction of Members:
The Members present introduced themselves.

Welcome remarks by - Hon.(Mrs.) Sudarshani Fernandopulle, CWP President:
The CWP President extended a warm and cordial welcome to all Delegates present.

Address by Secretary-General of CPA, Dr. Willam F Shija:
The Secretary-General addressed the Delegates. He also commended the preparations for the Conference and the warm hospitality extended. He stated that the CPA is well positioned financially to facilitate the various programmes.
Apologies:
The CWP President extended apologies from the following:
   Hon. Alix Boyd Knights will be present in the afternoon.
   Ms. Lisa Baker, Australia
   Hon. Dr. Justyne Caruana – British Islands
   Hon. Elizabeth Burain – Pacific Region

Draft Agenda taken up for discussion:
(Document SC 3)
The representative from Canada raised the query with regard to finances and wished to
know at what point it will be discussed in the Agenda.
The President informed that the document with regard to the above had not originated
from the Steering Committee and therefore it had not been listed in the Agenda.
However, after deliberation the President expressed that there is provision for it to be
discussed under Item 8 - CWP Work Programme - of the Agenda.

As there were no further queries, the Agenda was adopted.

Document SC 4 discussed - Report of the 15th CWP Steering Committee Meeting
and 23rd CWP Meeting (United Kingdom):
The Representative from South East Asia who had been present at that meeting informed
that everything had gone well at the meeting.

She inquired about the proposed programme from 2012 to 2014 and whether it has been
prepared and expressed their willingness to participate and get involved in the
programmes.

President informed that it would be discussed under Item No. 8.

The President read out from document SC 4 – “Report on Activities since the last
meeting: the CWP work programme - regional funding of Pounds 7777 was identified
for the Pacific Region and carried over for the budget of 2012.”

The President asked for an overview of the activities conducted using these funds.

The Representative from the Pacific Region informed that the report with activities
highlighted were tabled yesterday and with a request for the funding to be extended for
2013 to do a more comprehensive programme.

The President informed that it will be discussed under Item No. 6 when reports from the
regions are presented.

The President informed that there are two matters raised by the CWP Chairperson
regarding the previous CWP session.
First, her concern about the lack of photographers for the CWP sessions as there had been only one photographer covering all activities. She has requested special arrangements for photographers for the CWP business session.

Secondly, her concern about interruptions that occurred when she had been presenting her report to the General Assembly.

The Representative from the Pacific region requested a clarification on the incident.

The President explained that the interruption was not aimed at her presentation and requested the Secretariat to explain further.

The Secretariat explained that there was the election for the Chairperson of the EXCO going on and while members were voting the rest of the General Assembly Agenda was being taken and there were points of Order being raised relating to the Election throughout the General Assembly Agenda, all that created the disturbances.

The representative from India informed that it was a general disturbance and not particularly at her presentation.

**Report from the Chairperson:**

The representative from South East Asia suggested that the Chairperson presents a short report.

President inquired whether it should be a summarized version with, maybe the entire report tabled. It was taken as a good suggestion.

The Secretariat informed that they provide the full report and the Chairperson picks up the highlights and presents within the ten minutes allocated for that.

The Representative from the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region was of the view that every Member participating in the General Assembly to do so within a reasonable time so that they are able to convey their message.

The CWP noted the membership of the Steering Committee, the terms of office for Members in each region and the responsibilities of the Steering Committee Members.

The Member for the Pacific Region moved that the item will be received and accepted and the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake seconded it.

Then, moving on to Item 6, the Chairperson informed that with regard to written Reports from the Steering Committee Members on developments in their Branches and Regions as reaffirmed by them at the last Meeting in London in 2011, by following an agreed format and time frame, requests and reminders were sent to them. She further said that at the time the paper was printed for this Meeting, only four Reports had been received, namely from the Regions of Canada, Australia, the Caribbean, the Americas, the Atlantic and Africa and that the other Reports from Asia, India and South-East Asia have been received and would be tabled at this Meeting.
Then, the Chairperson invited Members to report on the developments in their Branches and Regions.

The Member for South-East Asia presented their Regional Report, explaining the following developments that have taken place in the Region:

- The South-East Asia, after having meetings and discussions, has come up with their own structure of CWP and how to organize meetings and programmes as well. In their Report, South-East Asia proposes its structure of CWP, with the chairmanship to be held in rotation between the Singapore Branch and the Malaysian Branch, representing the CWP Steering Committee. The Regional CWP Steering Committee is to be held by the member Branches, which will be divided by zones and divisions. The zoning system is suggested to be based on geographical factors. Consultation sessions on the proposed structure have been held by representatives from the States and it will be presented at the Regional Meeting on September 11th for endorsement.

- In order to increase gender equality in politics, economic activities, administration and governance, a lot of activities have been carried out. In order to increase women’s participation in politics, efforts have been made by both the Government and the opposition parties. Some of the political parties have amended their party constitutions in order to include a 30 per cent quota for women.

- Discussions are taking place in order to encourage male MPs to speak more on women’s issues. In Malaysia and in Singapore, most of the women’s issues are brought up by women MPs when compared to the overall intervention of the MPs.

- Various measures have also been taken with regard to gender equality in economy. Measures have been undertaken to promote and increase women’s access to economic activities as well as protecting their rights in the labour market. Particularly in Malaysia, a scheme has been introduced to finance women. They are given free training and more than five thousand women have been trained. Since finance is the main problem, women are also given funds in order to alleviate themselves from poverty.

- The Employment Act has been amended early this year to include a chapter on addressing sexual harassment at workplace, whereby it has imposed obligations to the employer and the Labour Office to conduct an inquiry, should there be a complaint of sexual harassment.

- Due to major pressure from women Parliamentarians - in South-East Asia, 60 per cent of women use public transportation – the Malaysian Government has arranged a special coach, a special train and a special taxi service dedicated for women to curb sexual harassment in public transport and to provide a better and gender sensitized service since last year.
• The Domestic Violence Act of 1994 had been amended and passed by Parliament in December last year with the intention of enhancing protection for victims of domestic violence. Various training sessions for the police, health authorities and social welfare officers have been organized continuously.

• The Government has also introduced flexible working hours for women with the aim of encouraging their greater participation in the entire workforce. The housewives, at the same time, are given a chance to earn some extra income to help build their families.

• Another improvement is the increase in maternity leave from 60 days to 90 days with paid salary, which was well-received by women in the workforce.

• To get women professionals who have left the market to come back to work, a double tax deduction incentive will be provided from the beginning of next year when the companies decide to re-employ them.

• The policy to have at least 30 per cent women’s participation in decision-making in the public sector has contributed to an increase from 18.8 to 31.7 per cent in 2011. Also, initiatives have been taken last year to have a 30 per cent participation of women in decision-making of the private sector too.

However, the Member for South-East Asia said that although their aim is to have a 30 per cent quota for women candidates, they have only a 10 per cent representation at present.

In answer to the question raised by the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake as to whether the table provided by the Member for South-East Asia, giving women’s participation in legislative bodies includes representatives from the states of Malaysia, she said that the Upper House has two women Representatives from each of the 13 States. In South-East Asia, Malaysia is a federal State with smaller states and Singapore is taken as a single Branch. Malaysia has a 10 per cent women’s representation.

The Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake then asked her to elaborate a little bit on the decision-making realms as far as Parliament and the private sector in Singapore is concerned. The Member for South East-Asia said that they did not have a proper structure for a regional CWP earlier and that they are going to discuss it on the 11th of this month and then have a meeting. She further said that in Singapore, the situation was the same, but it is better now with young, new women MPs being elected at the last election. Malaysia is hoping to have a 30 per cent women’s representation in the private sector. It being a conservative Muslim country is now opening up with people trusting women more.

(The Committee was suspended for tea and the official photograph and resumed at 11.00 a.m.)
PACIFIC REGION

The representative from the Pacific Region said that women representation within the Pacific Region is encouraging. According to her, it is 4.7 per cent and admitted that they are lagging behind the figure of 20 per cent. She said that they have made a number of recommendations on the need to increase women parliamentary participation at the CWP Pacific Region’s seminar on “Gender and Democracy” and hoped that the CWP could assist them in the implementation of the same. The Pacific representative said that the PIF is one of the region’s most important and influential organizations which aims to build capacity, support emerging women leaders and development in the region. She acknowledged the sum of Australian Dollars 320 million allocated for gender work in the Pacific and said that it would be a real boost to empower women representation in the Pacific Region. In response to a question posed as to what they would do with Pounds 7,777 allocated for the Pacific Region, she said that the Steering Committee has to decide on the best way to utilize the funds. When inquired by the President whether the Pacific Region needed the funds for this year or they would prefer to carry it forward to 2013, the Pacific representative said that she would appreciate if the funding could be extended to 2013. Since the Secretariat was rolling from 2011 to 2012, it is an impossible task but because of the earnest request, they would re-inquire from the Secretary-General. Since Australia has contributed a large sum towards the development of the Pacific Region, the representative of the Australian Region asked whether the Steering Committee could be of further assistance to the Pacific Region. In response, the Pacific Region representative said that they would prefer if the CWP meetings are held in the Pacific Region which would give maximum exposure to the Region and through which better ideas, understanding and knowledge could be acquired.

INDIA

The representative of India emphasized that most of the key positions in India are held by women. She elaborated on a number of legislations passed by the Indian Parliament and said that every State has a Women’s Commission where complaints can be lodged. Further, she said that they have declared a year called, “Women Empowerment Year” where women who have done service to the society would be rewarded. As regards the allocation, she said that at the lower level it is 33 per cent and in some states it is 50 per cent and hope to extend that to the Centre. Further, she said that they still have not been able to pass the Women Reservation Bill and that it is pending in Parliament. She said that the allocations made through the Gender Budgeting System would enhance women empowerment. Then, she elaborated on the schemes adopted by India towards empowerment of women. Since the drop out rate of girls in some States in India is very high, they have designed a scheme which would address that problem. She said that when a girl is born, they would deposit a sum in the bank through which she will get education, books etcetera. As regards the protection of children against exploitation, the representative said that there is a National Commission on Children. Since almost half of the population in India is women, she said that they pay special attention towards them. On the question posed by the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake whether at Panchayath level the representation is 50 per cent, she said that applies to some states and it is 33 per cent in all States. She further said that there is a Bill pending before Parliament and
elaborated on the hindrances on the passage of the Bill, such as continuous dissolution of the Lower House. Since India is a multi-party country, the representative said that issues regarding women should be made on unanimous decisions. The most noticeable statement made by the Indian representative is that irrespective of her caste and creed, the suffering of the women is the same. She further said that they do not accept the “quota within quota system”. In answer to a question on the representation of the Upper House, she said that it is around 11 per cent.

The Representative of the Pacific Region stated that the total number of beneficiaries covered under the scheme during 2011-2012 is 29,650, and inquired as to what number it should really be, and the Chairman said that the Representative of India would clarify it later on.

**Presentation by the Caribbean Americas and Atlantic Region:**

The Representative of the Caribbean Americas and Atlantic Region elaborated on the seven main topics discussed at the Annual CPA Regional Conference held in Jamaica. Do Presiding Officers and Standing Orders need to draw the line more effectively.

She further stated that at the CWP regional conference six topics were discussed. These topics were aligned with the main themes highlighted by the main Plenary Session in the UK and they wanted to meet the overall agenda of the CWP as a body.

In terms of female representation within the Caribbean Region, collectively and singularly none of the 17-Member countries have met the 30 per cent requirement which was highlighted in the Conference held in Beijing in 1995. It remains considerably below that level.

In providing adequate information regarding the Parliaments within that region, most of the member countries have not reported their statistics on the websites and it is only five countries that have information posted. When sending out the invitation to the sister islands to forward their information, there was very little response.

She stated that in Bermuda, they have a population of about 67,000 in 21 square miles and 36 Parliamentarians of which 11 are females. She further stated that it was just below 30 per cent and they do whatever possible to increase women participation.

She further explained that the Government has launched many programmes uplift the living standards of the people. With regard to women representation in Parliament, she too was of the view that it should be increased. In response to a question the representative of the Caribbean Region replied that there is no specific allocation for females and it depends on academic achievements. In response to a question she stated that drug addiction is not a severe problem in Bermuda.

Replying to another question raised by the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake, the Caribbean region representative stated that the Bermuda is having an area of 21 square miles and 67,000 people. Also, there are 47 Parliamentarians of which 36 are in the Upper House and 11 are in the Lower House.
When the India Region Representative inquired about the housing and accommodation facilities given by the Government, she replied that facility is provided to certain people based on their income for each month. Fuel allowance and rental allowances are also provided based on their income.

An official from the Secretariat said that CPA does not have the resources to help financially but it does provide fantastic network of shared experiences to respond at a policy level. She said the CWC Conference is coming up in the next year and that they can share ideas or experiences.

Canadian representative said that it is an honour for her to be there and to be able to present her report. She said that Canada is a large country and have around 32 million people which is smaller than a number of other countries in the Commonwealth. They are one federal government broken up into 13 provinces and territories. Four provinces in Canada are actually governed by women. There have been four women premiers and three opposition party leaders. The Senate is made up of 37 per cent women. The 25 per cent Members of Parliament are women elected and is appointed to Senate.

She said that they are working very hard as an organization in Canada. The Canadian region is made up of representatives from each legislature and of the federal government as well. A few years ago, they had put together and developed the Terms of Reference because they found that a number of women were coming to CWP every year but they did not know what the CWP was and what their role was. So, they had set up the Terms of Reference for all 15 of them. It is a three-year term now. Now one of the things they have put in the Terms of Reference is that every member who comes would be for a three-year term and every branch has to have alternate names so that if a Steering Committee Member could not attend, then an alternate would attend in their place and that had made a huge difference in the CWP. She said that they are doing a good job within their own organization. She said that they represent every woman in Canada and every senator in Canada at the provincial and federal levels. There is a lot of groundwork that they had to be done within their own organization. They are focusing largely on how to strengthen the CWP in Canada.

Speaking on the housing problem, the representative of the Caribbean region stated that they do not have severe problems of housing.

The Representative of Canada briefed on the role of CWP in Canada. She highlighted the need to solve her country’s problems before solving problems in other member countries. She also emphasized the need to develop a website for Canada in regard to CWP. Other than the women Parliamentarians, the involvement of women who can contribute to this area was also considered and their views were much valued. Accordingly, it was encouraged to look at this matter by other sections of the society also.

It was mentioned that South Africa has already prepared a strategic plan. It was brought to the notice of the Committee that the CWP Australia has developed a website and the need of CWP Canada to develop such a website.
The Canadian Regional representative said that CWP Australia has also moved ahead and developed a strategic plan and has set up a website as well. Canada is also expecting to do so. She said that they have decided as part of their strategic planning to set up two working groups: one was to look at the development of a website for CWP Canada. They decided to set up a working group to develop a proposal and a website. In order to have a website they need funding. She said that they do not have a significant amount of funds to do anything. They would be happy if funds can be allocated from CPA to help them develop this website.

She said that all women in Canada want to participate more often but they cannot accommodate many. They hold outreach programmes in areas where they think it will be more effective in getting women to participate in the political process and they help women in remote areas. She said that they go out for outreach programmes and meet with women, community groups, young women in universities and colleges and bursaries of colleges and high schools. The outreach programme is one of the most successful programmes that they have done as CWP.

They also have campaigns. They have had three campaigns in Canada and in different provinces. Throughout their campaigns they help women to enter politics and it has been successful in getting more women into politics.

She said that they have a database with e-mail addresses of every elected woman MP in the country and they are communicating with them strategically to ensure how they can work together.

They are also in the process of developing their first brochure. It is going to be available to every woman across the country. They are going to use it in their own legislature. She said that if a website is not available, a lot of opportunities are lost.

She said that there is an Institute in the United States for women on how to train women to be in politics. There are some researches done about women organizations through social media to find out how they can help poor women. There are some opportunities of working together and sharing information.

She said that they have women politicians addressing the issues of trafficking of women and girls. An agenda is being put in place involving legislation to show how women politicians can make a difference. She said that in her province she has forwarded 4 or 5 private members’ bills. Two are more specifically on prevention of sexual assault and the other one was on creating an awareness month on sexual assault.

She said that there is another group in Canada called “equal voice” and CWP can link with those organizations out there. Now, they want to have a Canadian website linked with lot of women organizations.
An official from the Secretariat said that at the CWP conference in 2007 they launched a website. She said that she would like through the CPA Headquarters, to be able to have resources. Then, they could share information and some of the other groups might be able to help them.

Representative from the Australian Region:
Lisa Baker, our representative, is disappointed that she is unable to be present here. I am also new to this but the CWP Steering Committee Meeting that was held earlier this year gave me a great insight. When we look around, considering the experiences we have, I think we have very different challenges and we can see that those challenges are somewhat different from region to region.

The Member from Canada also talked about equality. In Australia it is very disappointing to me that a lot of young women see that the job has been done – that we do have equality. They have access to universities and to higher education. They have access to good jobs. But we still have to overcome some disparities in the government sector. We have to look at the business community also. There are some laws delays as well.

One of the great challenges we have in the Australian community is this. We have so many good females becoming doctors. But, after they are getting married and have families they do their job as part time ones. So, this is giving us some concern. There should really be a lot of communication among women all around the country. We have to first engage your own members in this discussion. So, we have to adopt some strategies. When there are new parliamentarians, they have to go to the Senate School. where you get a total introduction of legislation and the things you should do and some of the things you should not do as a Member of the Senate.

The CWP is giving the opportunity to do a presentation about our organization. We do have a database. So, I would e-mail it to each of you. I think all Parliamentarians are inundated with emails. Therefore, we want to look at another way of communicating. We are now working on that. At the end of this year we will be sending out a card for the International Women’s Day next year. In that we also actually highlight all the important days for women throughout the year. I am making you aware of that so that we all can be proactive in our communities. We have to encourage female member Parliamentarians to talk about these issues.

For example, earlier this year we had a major issue in Australia and for that I received 8,000 e-mails on that one issue and that is what I said I am no longer going to check all my e-mails. E-mail is a good way of communicating, but not the most effective. We have launched a website, “www.com.” which would help know each other within our community.

Last year we launched www.com and it was held in Canberra. There were 40 applications of young women who wanted to come to Canberra and participate in that. There were ten young women in the age group of 18 and 25. They were brought to Canberra for a two-day programme where by they met Parliamentarians, got an
opportunity to meet clerical staff, lobbyists, and media representation and also people from the diplomatic forum. So they had exposure. That was all funded by the CPA. That helped getting young women around the country from different ethnic perspectives of our community. We are now this year going back to write to those women to say, what have you been doing? Part of their duty is to do something on behalf of their community.

We are slowly going down with the female representation in Parliaments. We have two Houses in Parliament. The Upper House the Legislative Council and the Lower House and we have Local Government as well.

We run workshops to encourage women to contest in Local Government Elections every year. In our Parliamentary system Local Government is a spring board into federal Parliament. There are so many things we can do to educate young women that still the job has not been done.

I am proud of the fact that we have a female Prime Minister. But there is also some down - siding in terms of the media being very critical towards her and there is a threat to channel off young women going to the Parliament. There are a lot of female Members in our Parliament. For example, Minister of Health and so on. We have to overcome the critics as Parliamentarians rather than women.

In our Steering Committee we put a lot of emphasis on developing a website and better communication in the Parliamentary system in Australia. We have actually chosen two issues for CWP women to focus on to highlight, not only within Parliament but also within the community. The first one is the issue of digital enhancement of images in print and electronic publications. When we give a speech, in the Senate through the Secretariat of CWP, that will be put up on our website. People can see that and we also can share it.

The other issue is, we try to get media coverage on speeches in Parliament - universal screening of media for young men and women. The general overarching issue is that the CWP is looking at the sexual harassment of young children. We will try to get everything under one umbrella which brings everything together.

We try to engage the countries around us ensuring that we like to have a forum whereby we can build on a friendly relationship among our citizens, so that we can mentor the women within the region as Parliamentarians.

Last year we tried to bring together a forum in Canberra but the numbers fell off. In terms of equality we have come a long way. In a forum like this we can help each other.

There is an area of interest - homelessness and how does it affect families. Homelessness is now finally in the agenda, that was added by the former Prime Minister.
This is an empowering opportunity to share experience with each other. I would be happy to answer any queries that you may have. I do not twitter. I have a website; I use facebook. They are great tools to keep us updated. Certainly from a campaigning point of view, they are great tools. We have to grasp new technology and do things somewhat differently.

Representative from Canada:
I have a question and I was very excited to hear this morning that the Australian Region of the CWP has just launched a website. Can I ask how you went about working among CWP in order to develop it and that who funded that?

Representative from Australia Region:
Actually it was the Steering Committee and we have representations from each. It is important to fully engage with all the members in order to get the feedback. Part of the responsibility of the secretariat is maintaining the website and we got the funding for establishing it from the budget. It is great to have a website and it should be relevant to make sure that it is interactive. It is useless talking to all the women, but we need them to be interactive with us.

The process is evolving and is really good. The speeches made in Parliament can be uploaded. We also want to go one step further and have some video clips of members either speaking or sending a message. We were lucky to get some funding – it came from the CPA.

The President:
Funds for designing a website could be discussed under Item 8 of the Agenda and we could request the CPA’s approval for funding.

Representative from Canada:
It would be better if we can have a unified website. Then you only have to develop one website and may develop a personalized website from your own country or region.

The President:
That is a good idea, then there could be one site and link it to the regions.

Representative from Canada:
It is important to engage more young girls and women in this process. It is important to note as to how many girl guides you have in your countries. Last time after the Regional Conference it was decided to establish a girl guide badge called “Women in Governmental Leadership” so that those girls would get to know the women Parliamentarians in their areas and then earn a badge after doing a certain number of things. In order to reach the young kids, we have added those things in the school curriculum. Establishment of a girl guide forum as in Canada can be considered in other countries and regions as well.
The President:

With your permission, may I go ahead with the regional report, because it is the final one?

Listening to the reports from all the regions, I feel a little bad about not having to present any innovative report, like interventions and new things which we have done for the women in the countries in our region.

The Asian region comprises of Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Although we have achieved significant economic growth, still gender inequality and inequities are persisting in our region. Still the women struggle with the basic requirements like access to health, education, nutrition et cetera. Poverty and unemployment are also relatively high among women in this region. Also, their participation in governance is quite low and added to this is the issue of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. Where health is concerned, Sri Lanka has the best indicators where almost all the childbirths are taking place in institutions compared to 24 per cent in Bangladesh, 84 per cent in Maldives and 39 per cent in Pakistan. The maternal mortality rate is also quite low in Sri Lanka. It is around 39 per 100,000 whereas it is 260 per 100,000 in Pakistan, 37 in Maldives and 314 in Bangladesh. Where education is concerned, it differs from country to country. Sri Lanka’s population with at least secondary education is 56 per cent. I am happy to say that where education is concerned, there is no obvious gender discrimination. I find that females have overtaken the males where as far as the secondary and tertiary education is concerned. In Pakistan, at present the secondary education is around 23.5 per cent, in Bangladesh 13.8 per cent and in Maldives 31.3 per cent. However, it is heartening to note that the literacy rate among women is gradually increasing in the different countries. Where labour force participation is concerned, it is again low in the region. In Sri Lanka, participation rate of males in the labour force has been almost twice as that of females. However, the unemployment rate among women has come down in 2010 compared to 2005. The highest source of foreign exchange earners are the migrant workers of whom the domestic workers contribute to the major portion of foreign exchange earned and among the domestic workers majority are females.

The second and the third sources are from the government manufacturing trade and tea plantations in Sri Lanka, where again the majority are female. In Pakistan, the labour force participation rate remains quite low. In Bangladesh, it has improved over the years and females contribute substantially to their households and to the country’s economy through employment. In the Maldives, the participation of women in the labour force has declined from 60 per cent in 1978 to 37 per cent by 2005 and the female participation in the tourism sector is only 5 per cent.

Where law and justice is concerned, it is very unfortunate that very often justice is denied to women in our regions. The legal systems are biased and sometimes equal treatment is not given with regard to divorce and property rights.

The Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees equal rights for women. A significant number of women are subjected to domestic violence and the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act was passed in Parliament in 2005. Apart from that, a National Human Rights
Commission has taken initiatives to form sexual harassment investigating committees in all government institutions. In Pakistan too, domestic violence is widespread. It is considered that women have to remain with their husbands because divorce is considered to be a shame. Sexual harassment at work places, abuse, beating and rape are some of the forms of violence against women. Even in Maldives, gender discrimination still exists to a large extent. In Bangladesh, women Parliamentarians have taken the leadership to introduce new Bills to introduce severer punishments to those engaged in violence against women. Gender-based poverty is also widespread in our region.

In Bangladesh, women Parliamentarians have taken leadership to bring in new Bills in order to introduce severe punishments to those engaged in violence against women.

Gender-based poverty is also widespread in countries in the Asian region. In the Asian region, women suffer due to absence of sound socio-economic polices.

The women in the rural areas do not have access to employment because of the restrictions on access to education. They are compelled to work under difficult conditions and the wages paid to them are quite low.

Women’s participation in politics is quite low and their representation in national Parliament is inadequate. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, women’s representation in politics is only 5.8 per cent. Out of the 13 women Parliamentarians, only two hold Cabinet portfolios and one is a Deputy Minister. In Pakistan, approximately 10 per cent of women hold ministerial posts and they have a 22.5 per cent female representation in the Lower House and a 17 per cent representation in the Upper House. In the Maldives, three women Parliamentarians hold ministerial posts while their women’s representation in politics is around 6.5 per cent. In Bangladesh, four women hold ministerial posts, which is around 14.3 per cent. There, the women’s representation in politics is 19.7 per cent.

With regard to Sri Lanka, the Chairperson went on to say that it does not have a CWP structure as such, but a Women Parliamentarians’ Caucus formed in 2006, which coordinates with the UN agencies and other stakeholders. The main objective of the Caucus is to empower women and eliminate all sorts of violence and harassments against them. The Women Parliamentarians’ Caucus in Sri Lanka had a training programme for grass-roots level leaders on the theme of economic and political empowerment, which will pave the way for more women to enter into the political stream. A Women’s Caucus was formed in Pakistan in 2008 with the Hon. Speaker of Parliament as its patron. A regional seminar organized by the Asia Foundation was conducted on the role of women Parliamentarians in promoting gender responsive governance.

Then, the Chairperson invited the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake to elaborate on the situation in Sri Lanka.

The Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake, elaborating on the Sri Lankan situation, said that her country’s situation is bleak when compared to the rest of the countries in the region with
women’s participation in politics at the national level at only 5.8 per cent, 5 per cent at
the provincial level and 1.8 per cent at the local level, when countries like Bangladesh,
Pakistan and the Maldives, which are primarily Islamic countries, have gone ahead.

She said gender indicators show that Sri Lanka is a success story as far as health and
education sectors are concerned, surpassing even those in the neighbouring regions. Sri
Lanka has a very high rate of literacy especially amongst women, but most of the jobs
that they are engaged in are low paid and labour-oriented. When taking up the decision-
making realms, she said Sri Lanka is very unhappy with the situation. The female
Members of both the Government and the Opposition work hard through the Women
Parliamentarians’ Caucus to engage women’s issues prevailing in the country. A Ministry
to look into the affairs of women and child development had also been set up.

She further said that though Sri Lanka is a signatory to every Convention on women, still
there are so many gray areas which we have to be open about, pay attention to and to
eliminate. One such gray area is absolute poverty with the Government assisting below-
poverty-level families through programmes such as Samurdhi. When it comes to
reproductive health, Sri Lanka tops the list, but there is the problem of unwanted
pregnancies, which would lead to unsafe and unethical abortions. Sri Lanka likes to see
women involved in decision-making realm, especially in Parliament with a 33 per cent or
at least a minimum of 20 per cent women’s representation.

She pointed out that the Local Authorities Election Act is to be amended to somehow
introduce a 33 per cent representation. In the Amendment Bill, it is stated that 15 per cent
will be allocated to the youth and in that, both men and women will be included. The
Amendment Bill proposes a change to the political system with a mixture of the First-
Past-the-Post system and the PR system. It is still at the discussion level. The 13 women
Parliamentarians in Parliament today have a tailor-made voter base because of the PR
system. Most political parties do not find women very attractive to give nominations
simply because they cannot fight the gun culture, thuggery and the character
assassination involved. It is through a system of quota or reservation of seats that women
can be engaged in the decision-making realm.

She said that in the post-war Sri Lanka, in the war-affected areas, there is unemployment,
human trafficking, domestic violence and abuse, which are paid attention to by
organizations like Club 1325 with a four-pillared agenda that was handed over to the
Government. The four pillars are, women, peace, security and development.

In Sri Lanka, there is a very high literacy rate, the majority of the population and 57 per
cent of the voters are females. India increased its women’s participation from 33 per cent
to 50 per cent as they saw a change being made as far as good governance and
eradicating poverty is concerned.

She went on to explain that right now, elections at all three levels – the local level, the
provincial level and also the national level - are based on PR. The Local Authorities
Election (Amendment) Bill proposes a 15 per cent representation for youth with the First-
Past-the-Post system and the PR system introduced at a 50:50 ratio. The ratio might change to 60:40. She said that her party proposes that it is mandatory that the first two or three candidates would be women.

The Member for the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic Region questioned Sri Lanka’s decision to revert back to the First-Past the-Post when, at the global level, it is the PR System that supports to increase the numbers in female representation. In answer to that the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake said that under the PR system, it enables the minority parties to come in, but women candidates have to fight with a lot of candidates who represent the whole district. It engages an enormous amount of finances, a lot of corruption and people who are not worthy of holding those positions.

Then, the Representative of CPA Secretariat said that about four or five ears ago, the Asia Region tried to establish a regional structure for the CWP and that it stalled due to lack of financial commitment from the regional structures to sustain it. Some members had said that it is down to the Speakers of those Parliaments and their discretion about whether money is earmarked for the CWP. It is an issue of political commitment.

Then, the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake posed the question, how do we go beyond that together with India, the South-East Asia and Asia? The Representative of the CPA Secretariat’s answer was that it is fine to have one in India or South-East Asia.

The Member for South-East Asia commented that they do not have a budget. They had wanted to do a programme and the Chairman of CPA had requested them to send in a proposal. They had sent that proposal and then the CPA had promised a certain amount of money, but they have to find their own money as well.

The suggestion of the Member for the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic Region was, with the objectives of further democratizing the CPA, the CPA Members should have a budget allocated for the development of CWPA and in that way, perhaps the females in each Parliament can gain a louder voice because of the fact that within the benchmark set out, you are putting something in place, enforcing recognition of the female Parliamentarians within that organization.

Another suggestion made by the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake was that the CWPA should discuss engendering democracy.

On the item in page number 2 of SE 6, the Member for the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic Region requested that a template be provided so that everyone’s report can come in, dictating how they report without giving bullet point guidelines. The Member for the Pacific expressed that there is a difference in structure of Parliaments throughout. Therefore, setting a template would restrict the opportunity for other regions to be able to comment in some of the areas. But, she said it is really a good idea. The Member for the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic Region said that by a template what she meant was something in terms of guidance so that it allows you to give your presentation by following the basic blueprints that are there.
The Representative of CPA Secretariat said that a semi-flexible type of system was introduced with bullet points as it gives flexibility. She further said that there is a variation of support where some regions have a team of CWP writers, whereas the other Members themselves write by hand because they do not have that support in Parliament. So, that gives enough containment, she said.

Commenting on the documentation, the Pacific Region representative stressed on the importance of highlighting the key points in point form and said that it would enable them to incorporate any important issue worth reporting to the CWP from the Regions they represent. The President too agreed that matters concerning the Regions should be reported to the CWP.

[Suspended for lunch]

[On Resumption]

Item No. 7 on the Agenda – Data on the Number of Women in Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures based on information forwarded by the Branches.

Members were requested to go through the paper and see whether the information given was correct and if not to point them out. Item No. 7 was agreed.


Members were requested to consider the themes and topics for discussion for 2013/2014 and also a theme to be discussed for the 2013 CWP Conference scheduled to be held in South Africa.

The President requested the Secretariat to give a briefing.

The Secretariat stated the following:
The Members at the last Steering Committee Meeting held in London decided to consult their own regions about whether there are potential organizations and academic institutions that they could collaborate with. However, to date, the Secretariat has not received a feedback on it.

The Secretariat wished to know whether any Member had a proposal prepared on it for this meeting.

Money had been allocated by EXCO for CWP work programmes in 2012. Of the Pounds 25,000 allocated, a little has been spent on the CWP Chair’s participation at the meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Meeting for Women’s Affairs in New York in February and her attendance at the Caribbean Regional Conference. Out of the Pounds 25,000 allocated, Pounds 20,892 is left for this year.
For next year, there is an undertaking by the CWP and the Executive Committee to have a CWP conference every three years at the time of the Annual Conference.

A proposal in the paper is out of the Pounds 25,000 allocated for 2013, Pounds 15,000 will be for the host branch, South Africa to accommodate all the women delegates for that extra night.

Out of the Pounds 10,000 left regional needs could be responded to.

The allocation of Pounds 25,000 for 2014 will be to do a substantive CWP programme.

To use the CPA strategic plan as the guidance to prepare a separate CWP work plan.

The Members from South East Asia and Asia were of the opinion that they draw up an action plan.

The Member from Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region expressed that the CWP as a group need to be more organized and come together often in order to advance and report the progress made on the various programmes the regions are carrying out with the allocations granted.

It was discussed whether the money should be given to the individual countries if they have a solid plan.

The Members expressed that it should be so.

The Representative for Canada believes that each of the Member Regions should find ways to strengthen their own regions since everything is based on having a regional structure so that every Region does have a steering committee and is able to accomplish the many goals.

She suggested that money offered by the CPA should be utilized to do what the CWP needs.

She suggested that if there is extra money the CWP could develop a central website where everybody could link into.

The other thing she pointed out is to develop a quality strategic plan in order to achieve success. She cited that Africa and Australia had done such a plan and Canada is in the process of doing a strategic plan. She also stated that being part of CPA they could share it right across CWP.

The Representative for Canada questioned whether the brochure prepared by Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians in 2005 is still in use or whether there is another one replacing it. If not, she suggested that some of the money could be used to prepare a brochure so that it could be used as a tool when speaking to women’s groups,
kids’ groups, men and colleagues and say this is CWP. All of that leads to structure and setting up goals. She stated that unlike Africa, Canada did not go through a whole strategic planning process, but they developed a vision and a mission statement and looked at values.

She also stated that if people keep changing all the time as the Constitution does indicate, members of the Steering Committee will be for a term of three years. Therefore the commitment of the people is required to move this organization forward.

The Representative for the Caribbean Region stated that taking into consideration the comments made about the website and while technology and IT knowledge is accessible to the rest of the world, it cannot be applied for a part of the Pacific Region where technology may not be that advanced. Therefore, the suggestion of a website might not be an option for the Pacific Region. She said that members should be committed when they are part of the steering committee and there is a need to request for more funds and it should be divided evenly among the regions. Each of the regions should be given a time frame to submit an Action Plan.

The Representative for the Pacific Region pointed out that using technology might be something that is very well used by the rest of the world. But when compared to the Pacific Region, it must be well in advance. Therefore, creating a website would be not an option to the Pacific Region.

She further stated that while looking at the meetings of the CWP, it is not so much about how often it meets, but how effective those meetings can be. The effectiveness should be concentrated around the regional steering committee.

She stressed on the fact that there should be an Action Plan as a result of a regional strategic plan which is vital because when there is an Action Plan, there is a time frame for this committee to report in an annual meeting.

She stated that the CWP should utilize the funds and encourage requests for more funds and divide it amongst the regions evenly.

The Hon. Member for Australia agreed that creating a website is very important so that everybody could link into it.

The Representative of South East Asia questioned about the FB Account for CWP that was mentioned by the Chairperson last year and the Member in charge of IT explained to the Committee about what has been explored so far in terms of options for CWP. She stated that the Commonwealth Secretariat has launched something called “Commonwealth Communities” which has got a lot of features.

For the information of members, it was stated that in 2011 the CWP allocated funds and it was distributed among the regions. All of the regions did not take it out but only Canada, Australia and the Caribbean. None of the other regions submitted any proposal despite reminders.
In response to a question on funds, the Representative of the Secretariat said that the funds given by the CWP can be expended according to the contract entered into. She explained the restrictions imposed by the UK to send money abroad.

The Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake suggested that the President of the Steering Committee can submit an Action Plan based on the urgent needs of the respective regions.

Taking into consideration the concerns of the representatives, the President insisted on developing a strategic plan based on which allocations could be made, with which the Representative of the Caribbean, Atlantic and American Region agreed.

The President invited all inactive regions to participate in the Regional Meetings which would enable the participants to share their experiences.

The President sought the approval of the Committee on the Strategic Plan for three years to pool the money and use them within that stipulated time and they unanimously decided to use money within that time frame, not bi-annually. The Representative of the Australia Region stressed the importance of using money on a go-forward basis.

A Representative from the Secretariat told that at the last year’s meeting, Ex-Co members agreed in principle to fund the CWP three-year work programme and further mentioned that the budgets for the CPA are decided each year at the mid-year meetings.

In response to a question as to how the annual budgetary allocation is made to each region, the Representative from the Secretariat stated that they have not decided on that yet and additional funding would be made available and insisted on the necessity of using those funds according to the aims and objectives of every region. She further mentioned that it would be useful to set aside a certain percentage for emergency situations. She mentioned that 80 per cent of funding could be allocated to nine regions and 20 per cent could be kept for emergency situation.

The Representative of the India Region stressed the importance of preparing a strategic plan to strengthen the regional committees. The President too agreed with that view and said that the funds should be diverted to achieve the objectives of the CWP.

The President mentioned that a portion of the funding could be retained with the CPA and the rest could be equally divided among the regions within the next three years. She invited the ideas on broader activities which are going to be carried out during the next three years from the representatives.

The Chairman inquired whether they need special permission to use the funds made available for 2012 in 2013. If it is not possible, she suggested that it be considered. Everybody agreed to make a request based on the activities.
The time frame of the Action Plan for regional activities was discussed. It was decided that a three - six month period is adequate for that.

The Representative of the Secretariat said that funds could be released after the Action Plan is prepared.

The Secretariat inquired whether a broad Strategic Plan of the Steering Committee will be prepared and sent to the respective branches or whether the regions want an a central CWP Strategic Plan to follow on from their Regional Plans. The Secretariat insisted that every branch should agree to it if it is a CWP Strategic Plan.

The representative from Canada was of the view that a CWP Strategic Plan would be used by the regions to align the Action Plan. She was of the view that a CWP Strategic Plan should be prepared soon and be given to the regions to work out their Action Plans and to give them six months to put their Action Plan in place.

The Secretariat pointed out that CWP Strategic Plan is a long process of consultation with every region and every branch has to agree and it has to be approved by the General Assembly.

The Representative from Canada referred to the “Aims of the CWP” in the brochure and inquired what actually their mission and vision is and what their aims are.

The Representative from the Pacific Region stated that the CWP programme has highlighted five topics and suggested that it can be taken as a guide for the Strategic Plan as it is a high level plan and the regions to come up with their Action Plans. At the same time she said that it should not necessarily be aligned to the CWP Strategic Plan.

The Canada Representative referred to the five themes given in the programme and wondered what the role of the Steering Committee was. She was of the view that the main role was to get more women involved in politics and provide support to them, but the work programme is way beyond that and wondered whether it was within their capabilities to take up broader issues such as, “Work, Family, Work Balance and Domestic Work; Women and Social Media, Women and Health; Women and Entrepreneurship; Women and the Informal Economy” that are brought up in the programme. She pointed out that their aim is to get more women involvement in politics and how to support them. She stated that it is not included in the work programme.

The Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake also agreed with her views. She also said that their objective must be clear and the women involvement in politics must be the primary objective of the CWP. She suggested changing the work programme.

The Chairman said that instead of changing it, it would be better to get the regions to identify what is relevant to each of them.
The representative from the Pacific Region was also of the view that they could change the programme if the majority of the committee agrees. She further stated that five topics was too much and three would be more realistic.

The Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senananyake stated that they need to be very clear on their primary objective.

The Chairman was not certain whether the topics could be dropped altogether and suggested that they add the topic “Women and Politics” or “Women and Leadership” and get the regions to identify whatever is relevant to them.

The Representative of Australia said that it is important to have the fundamentals and foundations built strongly in achieving their goals. She further said that you should communicate, educate and empower women, if they are to take up their leadership roles in Parliament and elsewhere.

The Representative of the Caribbean Americas and Atlantic Region said that it is important to address the major issues affecting women and that they should address them as Parliamentarians. She stated that they have arrived at those topics since they are relevant to women in all regions and especially talked about women in Africa. She stated it was important to address those issues in order to improve the status of women in these regions. She was of the view that CWP exists to enhance female representation and that is a given and that is why it is not included as a topic for discussion.

The Representative of Canada said that CWP should be clear on their role.

The Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake emphasized the importance of having a three-year membership and implementing Action Plans, Strategic Plans et cetera. The Chairman agreed pointing out that the regions are supposed to appoint their Representatives for a three-year period. She wondered why some regions changed membership annually.

A Representative of the Secretariat explained in detail what is included in the four-year draft Strategic Plan of the CWP and how it could be applied in getting funds etc. She further said that if the Committee wants a new CWP Strategic Plan to be adopted, it has to be drafted at the Secretariat and should be circulated to Branches. Then, it has to be approved by the Steering Committee and at the CWP Business Meeting and then only it can be implemented.

The Representative of the Caribbean Americas and Atlantic Region further talked about the importance of enhancement of female representation within governments and Parliaments and pointed out that the topics had been brought in with that aim and that they are relevant.

The Chairman pointed out that women participation in politics will be very low if they have family problems et cetera. She further said that their primary needs should be addressed. She further said that other topics could be included along with these topics if
the Committee agrees. The Representative of the Caribbean Americas and Atlantic Region agreed to it.

The Representative of the Pacific Region further talked about women in politics and the leadership roles of Parliamentarians which were the main goals of the CWP.

The Representative of the CWP Secretariat explained that the primary objective of the CWP, as a parliamentary association, is to support the Women Members of Parliament and not those who are out of Parliament and wanting to get in. The CWP already has a Strategic Plan, which is a way forward and is not contradictory. She said that a Business Plan could be developed within the framework of the Strategic Plan, encompassing the topics identified by the Steering Committee at the last Meeting plus the other issues that have been raised, which could then be distributed to the Regions to develop their regional plans concurrently. She also invited the Regions to share their information as that helps the CWP Secretariat. The CWP is in the process of developing a Business Plan. She stressed the fact that time must not be lost between the meetings and that the Regions must correspond. The Committee agreed on that.

Moving on to the 3rd recommendation, the Chairperson invited the Regions to propose one theme and four topics for discussion at the 3rd CWP Conference to be held in South Africa in 2013. The Chairperson informed the Committee that the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake wishes to propose the theme “Engendering Democracy” for discussion at the next CWP Conference.

(At this stage, the Chairperson of the CWP arrived, making her apologies for being late to come to the Committee since her country has been experiencing serious constitutional problems.)

Then, the Member for the Pacific Region requested the Committee to define the word “engendering” because if it is not clearly understood, they would not be able to draft the action plan. The Chairperson of the CWP defined it as encouraging, producing or highlighting something. She further said that when you say “engendering”, it means that that particular issue is not getting the attention it deserves. The Representative of the CWP Secretariat defined “engendering democracy” as “bringing democracy into existence or give rise to it.” The Member for the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic said that true democracy does not exist unless everybody has equal representation under their governments and that the topic “Engendering Democracy” allows the Regions to pick their own topics which they see would help them to advance female representation. Democracy should always lend itself to change so that it fits the polity they represent, she further said.
Based on today’s discussion, the Representative of the CWP Secretariat suggested the following topics for the four sessions, which, she said, could be rephrased:

- “Women Parliamentarians and the Social Media”
- “Informal Economy and Entrepreneurship”
- “Increasing Women’s Participation in Parliament”, and
- “Homelessness”

The Member for the Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic Region said that the current electoral systems in the Regions will help increase female representation in Parliament. If some country does not want to change the type of electoral system they have, what can they do to further themselves to make the existing electoral system work better for women, was the question she posed. She proposed it as a sub-topic.

Joining in, the Chairperson of the CWP said that when the topic of “women’s participation in politics” comes up, one thing that is talked about is, women do not have funding to run their campaigns. Therefore, she proposed that an international fund be set up by women billionaires to help women politicians to run their election campaigns. The Member for the Australia Region said that if women Parliamentarians are funded in their campaigns, then they would expect you to support their ideas too. She further said that in Australia, federally and also in some states, there is public funding, which helps it to some extent. Explaining the Hon. (Mrs.) Rosy Senanayake’s comments, the Chairperson said that under the PR system, those candidates who throw money win the race and the female candidates stand a remote chance of winning because they do not have access to a lot of funds to spend for their campaigns.

The Representative of the CWP Secretariat said that speakers would be selected from among the Members and also from outside organizations for next year’s sessions.

The Chairperson of the CWP said that there is great enthusiasm and participation in picking up topics, but there seems to be no continuity. She stressed that there should be continuity.

Then, the Committee moved on to Item No. 9 and 10 on the Agenda – the election of the Chairperson and the Vice-Chairperson of the CWP for 2013 respectively. The Chairperson said that for 2013, a new Vice-Chairperson has to be elected as initially, her term was one year and at the last Meeting, it was proposed that she could serve a second term.

The Representative from the Canadian Region was elected as the Vice-Chairperson unanimously.

Under Item No. 11 – “Any Other Business”, answering a question posed by the Representative from the South East Asia whether the password to the CPA Face Book Page is active, the Chairperson responded in the affirmative and stated that the CWP Face
Book Page is a good way of communicating with each other and any member could reach the CWP Face Book Page through the CPA Face Book Page.

In conclusion, the Chairperson thanked the President of the CWP for ably conducting the Session on her behalf and supporting her to carry it out successfully.

On behalf of the Sri Lankan Government and the CWP, the President thanked the Hon. Alix Boyd Knights, Chairperson of the CWP for gracing the occasion. She also thanked all the CWP Steering Committee Members for working hard, being patient and contributing towards the success of the Meeting. The President took the opportunity to thank the CWP Secretariat and the supporting staff for the excellent work done to make the Meeting a success. Finally, she notified the Members about the excursion organized for the spouses and the partners by the CPA Local Branch and invited them to the Dinner hosted at the Ramada Hotel.

[Thereafter the Committee adjourned.]