The last time that I wrote an article for *The Parliamentarian* was in 2001, when I was the Chairperson of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Australia Region. My article was about increasing women’s political and parliamentary representation, which is still my passion today. It is therefore with great pleasure that I am contributing again, almost two decades later, as the inaugural Chairperson of the new CWP Alumni Initiative, which aims to leverage the expertise of former women Members of Parliament to support sitting women MPs. I thank the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) for the privilege to champion this program and promote it across the Commonwealth.

In 2001, women comprised 14% of MPs in the Parliaments of the world. In 2019, women still comprise only 24% of MPs, indicating the extent of the challenge ahead to achieve gender equality. In this article, I would like to review the current parliamentary representation of women across the Commonwealth, and describe the role the CWP Alumni Initiative can play in contributing to the goal of gender equality in women’s representation by 2030.

**Current parliamentary representation of women**

Women currently comprise 24% of MPs in the lower houses of national Parliaments in the Commonwealth, matching the world-wide parliamentary representation of women MPs. Rwanda leads both the world and the Commonwealth with 61% women MPs in its Parliament, and the Commonwealth now has 12 countries with more than 30% women Members in their national Parliaments. However, at the other end of the scale, there are still 12 Commonwealth countries with less than 10% women MPs in their national Parliaments. 

High performing countries, such as New Zealand, have no women MPs. Most concerning, the rate of increase in women MPs worldwide is now stagnating, with an increase of only one percent from 2016 to 2019. It is evident from extensive global research that a multi-faceted approach is required. 

Women’s political under-representation is due to the combination of institutional and structural constraints, as well as cultural and attitudinal barriers that suggest women should not have a leading role in public life. While temporary special measures, such as candidate quotas and reserved seats, are a powerful tool and work should continue on implementing such measures, but they alone are not enough. The other recognised barriers also need to be addressed, particularly deeply entrenched gender norms.

I recently contributed to the design of a new program funded by the Australian Government to increase women’s political participation in the Pacific region, where advocacy campaigns to implement temporary special measures have had limited success. Women leaders in the Pacific identified the need to transform gender norms as a key priority to enable them to achieve the legitimacy needed to participate and lead in the political sphere.

**Response from the Commonwealth**

The Commonwealth Women’s Forum (CWF), held in April 2018, focused on the theme ‘An Empowered Future for Women and Girls.’ The CWF developed an Outcome Statement and called on the Commonwealth Heads of Government to implement a number of recommendations to increase gender equality. Recommendations 2 and 6 were of particular significance for women’s leadership.

**UN Women Theory of Change**

The 2016 UN Women Theory of Change provides a useful framework to guide future work on women’s political leadership. It proposes a four-pronged strategy, including the need to focus on both current and future women MPs, as set out below:

1. Support development and implementation of robust legal frameworks and administrative arrangements that facilitate women’s participation. This includes relevant reforms to constitutions, gender equality laws or party statutes, and policy actions such as setting numerical targets for women in leadership positions with temporary special measures and reforming party statutes.
2. Expand the pool of qualified and capable women to run for election, including developing programmes that boost women’s confidence and capacity to lead, enhancing their campaign strategies and techniques and promoting linkages with supportive civil society organisations.
3. Transform gender norms so that women are accepted as legitimate and effective leaders including through developing campaigns that sensitize the media, male political leaders and electorate on the need for women in public life at all levels.
4. Support women leaders in gender-sensitive political institutions, including Parliament, political parties and Electoral Management Bodies to attract, promote and retain women leaders, and highlight the constructive contribution they make to decision-making.

The CWP Alumni Initiative

The CWP has primarily focused its efforts on supporting women leaders in Parliaments, which matches the fourth component of the UN Women’s strategy. However, it has also recognised that success in supporting women Members and highlighting the constructive contribution they make to decision-making can contribute to changing gender norms. Thus, attitudes can change when voters and male leaders learn about and experience successful women MPs who perform their roles honestly and effectively, delivering for their constituencies and serving their countries. They can also be influenced by women performing well in the high-level roles of Speaker, Minister, Prime Minister or President.

Such women MPs can demonstrate to their male colleagues, and the wider community, that women do in fact perform well in the high-level roles of Speaker, Minister, Prime Minister or President. The new CWP Alumni Initiative, as outlined in the CWP Strategic Framework, aims to build on the global movement to accelerate progress to gender equity and empowerment and to use the Secretariat’s convening power to bring together a high profile and visible taskforce of champions made up of both male and female leaders from political, public and private sectors at the national, regional and local levels to champion gender equality and promote women’s access to leadership positions across the Commonwealth, and to hold governments and businesses accountable on reaching the global target of 50% representation across all levels of decision-making.

**Recommendation 2: Build on the global movement to accelerate progress to gender equity and empowerment and to use the Secretariat’s convening power to bring together a high profile and visible taskforce of champions made up of both male and female leaders from political, public and private sectors at the national, regional and local levels to champion gender equality and promote women’s access to leadership positions across the Commonwealth, and to hold governments and businesses accountable on reaching the global target of 50% representation across all levels of decision-making.**

**Recommendation 6:** Heads, drawing on Commonwealth good practice and experience, develop practical strategies and legislation that increases women’s access to leadership from the grassroots to national and international levels, to enable meaningful political leadership, by women. Call on Heads to commit to working with all political parties and systems to increase the proportion of women in leadership roles. This includes training, sponsorship, mentoring programmes, and access to networks and mentoring programmes such as the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) and the Commonwealth Women in Local Government Network (ComWLGN), with particular attention given to creating opportunities for young women and girls.


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**Improved representation and influence for women MPs**

Plan (2017-19), proposes using the expertise of former women Parliamentarians to support sitting women Parliamentarians to increase their effectiveness and assist them to become successful role models. Achieving this goal will in fact support many of the strategies identified in the CWP Strategic Plan as well as other strategies like the UN Women’s Theory of Change. Thus, the CWP Alumni Initiative recognises the necessity of moving beyond more numbers and focusses on the impact and influence that women MPs can and do have in Parliament, in their political parties and the wider community - i.e. moving from descriptive to substantive representation.

The CWP’s List of Australia Impact Analysis Report provides a summary of the substantial impact of women MPs in the Government of Victoria in Australia on policies and legislation between 2014-18, categorised according to the core principles – Equity, Equal Pay, Choice, Diversity and Child Care. Further research is currently being undertaken by the Inter-Parliamentary Union to enhance the evidence base of the value of women’s participation in Parliament. Support to women MPs to increase their substantive representation has the potential to achieve the following benefits:

- **Changed cultural attitudes** on the part of male MPs and voters
- **Increased number of women candidates nominated to stand for election**
- **Increased pool of women MPs able to be promoted to higher levels**
- **More young women considering a career in politics**
- **Improved governance and reduction in levels of corruption**
- **Government policies, legislation and funding that advances gender equality**
- **More gender sensitive Parliaments**

It is proposed that mentoring will be used as the key strategy to achieve the goals of the CWP Alumni Initiative. Former women Members will be recruited to act as mentors for newly-elected women MPs and Senators, as well as for those seeking support to progress their parliamentary career to a higher level. It is therefore intended that a database will be created in each region of former women MPs who are interested in becoming mentors to help to widen the network. Mentoring is a well-established and proven technique used to help women progress their careers in the public and private sector. It is also a successful method of supporting women candidates to win elections, as shown by the work of EMLY’s List, which began in the United States and now also operates in the United Kingdom and Australia. Established in 1996, EMLY’s List Australia has supported the successful election of more than 235 women candidates with financial support, mentoring and training. Mary has gone on to become political leaders, including the former Australian Prime Minster, Rt Hon. Julia Gillard and the female Premiers of Queensland and Tasmania.22 Mentoring has also been used as a strategy to support newly-elected women MPs. For example, the International Women’s Development Agency (IDAWA), in partnership with the Myanmar non-governmental organisation (NGO), Akhaya, began piloting a successful mentoring programme in 2017 to support women MPs in Myanmar using current and former Australian women MPs, including myself.15 The pilot evaluation confirmed the mentoring experience supported Myanmar MPs to:

- Improve public speaking skills and confidence in political debates
- Gain knowledge and insights into political strategies such as campaigning
- Engage their electorates on gender equality issues
- Expand their connections with the women’s movement and become active supporters of gender equality.

As a result of the success of the pilot program, another six women MPs will be selected in 2019 and it will continue into 2020, as proposed in the CWP Alumni Initiative. The New Zealand Parliament and CWP Pacific Region mentoring program began in November 2017 with Pacific MPs from Fiji, Nuea and Tonga being mentored by New Zealand women MPs.16 Feedback from both New Zealand and Pacific women MPs was very positive, with lessons learnt including the need for flexibility; commitment to long term support and regular contact; and a willingness to learn from each other. The New Zealand mentoring program is continuing in 2019 with mentoring programs planned for women MPs from Fiji and the Cook Islands.23 The CWP Alumni Initiative will learn from these and other mentoring programs for women MPs to:

- Have public speaking skills and confidence in political debates
- Gain knowledge and insights into political strategies such as campaigning
- Engage their electorates on gender equality issues
- Expand their connections with the women’s movement and become active supporters of gender equality.

**References:**


5. [Commonwealth Women’s Forum Share Experiences](https://www.parliament.nz/en/get-involved/parliamentary-partnerships-project-share-experiences/)


7. Personal communication, Wendy Hart, CPA Pacific Regional Secretary.

8. [Commonwealth Women’s Parliamentarians 2018 Newsletter, Message from the CWP Chairperson, p 1](https://www.parliament.nz/en/get-involved/parliamentary-partnerships-project-share-experiences/)