HISTORY OF THE COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS (CWP)

Celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, the first elected CWP Chairperson reflects on the 30 year history of the CWP.

Background
One would like to congratulate the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) on the 30 years of existence and the strides it has taken. It’s journey has been well documented and I will not dwell on this history.

While South Africa was one of the founder members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) together with Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, it has done well in the area of women’s representation in Parliament. When South Africa attained its democracy in 1994, it was rated at number 144 on the index of women’s representation in Parliament. Today the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) rates South Africa at number 10 on the index of women representatives in Parliament.

The phases of the struggle for liberation in South Africa paved the way to a new reality. Women achieved in different epochs of liberating women from the protracted structural challenges of race class and gender had laid the firm foundation, and remains the bedrock to which I draw enormous experience and the zeal to stand and fight for the place or representation of women within the global political landscape and the Commonwealth Parliaments in particular. These milestones which bear the seeds that germinated in the Commonwealth women’s struggles include the 1991 African National Congress Conference, at which ANC women demanded 30% women representation first in the National Executive Committee, then cascaded to all its structures. While women did not attain the said 30% at that Conference, however, they made a mark and were able to attain this in the ANC 1997 Conference.

Subsequently, in 2007, the African National Congress Conference adopted the resolution of 30% women’s representation in all its structures and in government and other state institutions. As a consequence of the strides made through such conferences, South Africa’s ratings on women’s representation globally stands at number 10 in the world index.

Evolution and genesis of women’s representation in the CPA
The early struggles for women’s representation in the CPA began in 1989 from an informal meeting of women Parliamentarians held at the 35th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference held in Barbados in 1989, initiated by Senator Norma Cox-Astwood (Bermuda). For the first year, and for the part of the second year, Senator Cox-Astwood acted as Co-ordinator for the women’s caucus. In 1991, Cox-Astwood was elected in most Parliaments in the CPA on the provinces of women representatives in Parliament. The name Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) was changed into the current name, Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) as an organ of the Association. Following these events, in 2003, I was elected as Acting Chairperson of the CPA for a period of one year whilst the Constitution of the CPA was being amended. Eventually in 2004, I was formally elected at the 50th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Canada as the First Chairperson of CWP for a three year period (2004-2007).

Early stages of CWP work on women’s representation
The first priority of the new CWP Chairperson was to look at how to devise a strategy to increase women’s representation in Commonwealth Parliaments. The Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting agreed to ensure 30% representation in all Commonwealth Parliaments by 2005.

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The Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) is elected for a three-year term at the CWP Business Meeting that usually takes place at the triennial conference of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP). The CWP Chairperson is elected by the women Parliamentarians as delegates to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference.

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The lack of access to well-developed educational and training systems for women’s leadership in general and for orienting young women towards political life.

The lack of political will to promote women’s rights and women’s participation in politics.

Conflicts and wars in different societies result in women as the most affected victims.

The nature of some legislative systems, their rules and procedures are not favourable to women, including the starting times of House Sitting which do not accommodate young family life.

The nature of the electoral system may or may not be favourable to women candidates.

Having been convinced and enlightened through discussion, this particular male MP then committed himself to assist one female candidate to campaign during 2012 elections in Tonga. Indeed, the outcome of that campaign culminated in the election of one woman in Parliament.

Having taken a moment to reflect on the path we have traversed to bring the question of gender equality to the fore with the context of the CWP evolution, a lot has been achieved, but there are still more challenges that lay ahead of us to dismantle the system of patriarchy. As such, this requires a concerted effort of both sexes and the inclusion of all the stakeholders for the confrontation of challenges facing women in Parliament and those who aspire to be in Parliament. This should not be a rhetoric, it must find expression in both legislation and budget planning, and in the allocation of resources for the process of Parliament.

The current CPA Masterclasses on gender equality must be pursued to advance gender advocacy and integrate them in the curriculum of our institutions of higher learning. Constant engagement with Heads of State within and outside Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings should be encouraged and be held accountable to their commitment of ensuring 30% women’s representation in all Parliaments of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians remains an important vehicle of championing the struggles of increasing women’s representation and ensuring gender parity within the Commonwealth and beyond.

To this end, I would like to salute the women Parliamentarians who in 1989 had the vision and courage to fight for women’s rights and recognition of women within the Commonwealth and beyond - Senator Norma Cox Ashwood and those women who were with her in 1989. All the Chairpersons until 2003 and elected Chairpersons who succeeded me. One believes that we have capable women that will ensure that taking about women’s election and representation will eventually be a way of life and not one to fight for, as men and women within Parliaments and beyond will continuously be educated and conscientised on gender related matters.

In my country we say “Wathint’ abatwa, Wathint’ imbokodo (You struck a woman, you struck a rock).” Forward to the women’s struggle, Forward to the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians!!! thank you

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) plays a uniquely important role in bringing together MPs who are from very different countries with very different backgrounds, but who share the same commitment to democracy and equality. And, more often than people would think and certainly with women MPs across the Commonwealth, we find we are facing common problems.

It’s 100 years since the first woman in the UK won the right to stand for Parliament. And all around the Commonwealth, and indeed the world, women have fought to be in their Parliaments and to be there on equal terms with the men.

And women MPs are breaking down barriers. The late Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan, was the first woman to give birth in office nearly 30 years ago and the first woman Prime Minister in the Islamic World. Following her assassination in 2008, the women in Pakistan’s Parliament set up a women’s caucus in her memory. The caucus has spearheaded legislation strengthening the rights of women at work, set up rights commissions and run voter registration drives signing up hundreds of thousands of women. As a strategy it became a site of consensus building across party lines, and it involved their male colleagues too.

Women in New Zealand were the first in the world to win the right to vote in 1893. And now New Zealand has elected the second woman Prime Minister to have a baby while in office – and the first to take maternity leave – RT Hon. Jacinda Ardern, MP. Now, Bangladesh has a woman Prime Minister, Hon. Sheikh Hasina Wazed and their first woman Speaker of Parliament, Hori Shrin Sharmi Chaudhury, MP (who is also a former CPA International Chairperson). Zambia has a female Vice-President, Inonge Muthukwa Wina and Minister of Finance, Margaret Mwanakatwe.

The past 100 years has seen us overcome, less than a transformation in women’s legal rights, in our role in the home and the family, our involvement in the world of work and our participation in politics. It’s been a social, economic, political and personal revolution. But it didn’t just come down with the rainfall. It wasn’t a natural process of evolution – we had to fight for it. So, a massive pat on the back for all of us women MPs. We are all pioneers. Though it is right that we celebrate the progress we have made, we are still, as women in politics, striving to make progress in what remains largely a man’s world.

Once elected, a woman MP is expected to quickly produce results for other women and also faces bigger obstacles to achieving that progress. A woman MP enters an institution where she is in a minority. Getting change in an institution, when you are a minority, is hard. Women remain invisible to Parliament’s procedures in many ways.

The rules have been made for Parliaments of men and as more women come into Parliaments we need to change the rules. Here in the UK Parliament in January 2019, we have finally voted to allow new MP mothers and fathers (and those who are adopting) to be able to choose a fellow MP to cast their vote for them while they are caring for their child. When I was a youngish MP in 1982, the UK Parliament was 97% men. We are now 32%