“Without women’s equal participation, democracy is incomplete”

In this context, Parliaments as independent institutions, sitting at the centre of a web of accountability reaching into the Executive and the other branches of government, are well placed to set an example and lead by changing gender equality and inclusion in all sections of our societies in their composition. This not only ensures participatory decision making but engenders legitimacy and public confidence in our democratic institutions.

So, what is the global picture and across the Commonwealth in respect of female representation?

Recent figures from UN Women show that although the number of women Parliamentarians has nearly doubled in the last 20 years, this only translates to around 22% of women in national Parliaments today, or 9,000 Members of Parliament globally. Lamentably, only 18% of all Commonwealth Parliamentarians are women, leaving 82% who are men.

So, what can Commonwealth Parliaments do to increase the representation of women in their jurisdictions?

Parliamentarians of Mauritius, among the many areas of development discussed with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Caucus, there was an ambition to establish a Parliamentary Gender Caucus. Mauritius and the CPA offered support to the National Assembly to achieve this goal in March 2017.

At the launch of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus in Mauritius, I offered my congratulations to Santi Bai Hanoomanjee, Speaker of the National Assembly of Mauritius on her personal leadership and determination to promote gender equality through the establishment of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus which provides a catalyst for the promotion of gender equality across the independent institutions in Mauritius and also for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

The establishment of gender caucuses is a vital ingredient in bringing greater equality between men and women in the daily operations of our democracies. The CPA, through the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network and our international partners, is committed to promoting gender equality in Parliaments and increasing the representation of women in leadership roles. As one female activist I recently noted had written on a poster “without women’s equal participation, democracy is incomplete.” Globally, over 80 Parliamentary women’s or gender caucuses have been created since 1995 – support for such initiatives is incredibly high, as is the growing acceptance for the inclusion of men within such structures, underscoring the need for men to be aware of and shoulder their responsibilities with respect to gender equality. There is clear evidence from the experience of Rwanda and other gender caucuses that the inclusion of men has helped to avoid caucuses becoming marginalised, and indeed have contributed to them becoming a prominent institution within Parliament.

There are a number of ways that the Parliamentary Gender Caucus can and should be creating change across the Commonwealth and the CPA has been at the forefront of this work over the last thirty years:

1. Influencing Parliament’s legislative priorities – the gender caucus can play a pivotal role in ensuring legislation is gender sensitive, and the legislation that advocates for gender equality is introduced in Parliament. In Rwanda, women’s caucuses have been successful in passing legislation to end violence against women and in Kenya, the Women’s Parliamentary Association was instrumental in helping to pass the much needed Domestic Violence Act in 2011.

2. Women’s or gender caucuses have a positive track record in helping build the capacity of women in Parliament. Through workshops, training, and support, gender caucuses provide a safe space to help women Parliamentarians to be more effective in their role as Parliamentarians in an often male-dominated domain. The Parliamentary Women’s Caucus in Lesotho provided leadership training programmes to build the confidence of women Parliamentarians and empower them to stand up and challenge their male colleagues and make their voices heard. The Uganda Parliamentary Women’s Association (UWOPA) formed in the 1990s and was instrumental in its lobbying campaign for gender equality clauses in the Ugandan Constitution including provisions on non-discrimination on the basis of sex, equal opportunities for women, a quota for women of one third for local government seats, and the establishment of an Equal Opportunities Commission.

3. Gender caucuses have enormous potential to analyse how gender sensitive our Parliaments are. Through these changes, can be made to ensure that Parliament’s practices are gender equal, and to ensure that gender is mainstreamed into effective and key decisions made. Kenya and Uganda’s gender caucuses led the way in proposing changes to the Standing Orders to ensure the representation of women in leading Parliamentary Committees. There are many examples of the influence of women’s caucuses in making significant changes to the way Parliaments operate including the introduction of day care centres in Parliaments for the children of Members and staff.

4. The potential for Parliamentary Gender Caucuses to influence the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals is significant given its remit. To achieve one of the overarching ambition of the 2030 SDG Agenda and this agenda reaffirms gender equality as both a human right and a driver for development.

The demands of ensuring a vibrant democracy are extensive. The success of the gender caucus will not rest solely on gaining support from both male and female Parliamentarians, rather success will also depend on securing support for the caucus and the issues it will address from across the political spectrum. There is always the risk of politics creeping in and shifting the attention from the positive gains to be made, to polarising political issues that are difficult or impossible on which to reach consensus.

The importance of identifying cross-party initiatives that all women and men can support can also prevent gridlock. Justice Nasira Iqbal in Pakistan has attested that the success of women Parliamentarians can make a big difference if they take charge, instead of toying their party lines.

Of course, one of Parliament’s fundamental duties is one of representation – reaching out to all sectors of society is key. Engaging and gaining the support of civil society, young people and other key activists in the work of any gender caucus will strengthen the message and the aims of the caucus in seeking greater gender equality.

The former UNDP Administrator and Prime Minister of New Zealand, Rt Hon Helen Clark was observing the focus of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 on reducing gender inequalities and empowering women that is key to driving progress; but SDG 5 is also integrated across the other 16 Sustainable Development Goals which reflects the growing evidence that gender equality has a powerful multiplier effect across the spectrum of development whether through health, education, labour markets, and the other areas that will lower poverty and increase prosperity. Failing to address gender inequalities and discrimination against women will hinder the full achievement of the SDGs.

As Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, I am committed to supporting the work of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network as we mark the 30th anniversary of its establishment and recognise its many achievements. However, the work to build the capacity of Members to produce and promote gender sensitive legislation, to work towards more gender-sensitive Parliaments and to fulfill the overarching goal of increasing the number of women Parliamentarians in the Parliaments and Legislatures of the Commonwealth continues in order to reach our goals.

In the words of the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan: “there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.”

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This article is based on a speech given by the CPA Secretary-General at the launch of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus at the National Assembly of Mauritius in November on 20 March 2017.

“Data from IFU National Parliament database at 1 December 2018.

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