Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians
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“With equal opportunities, both women and girls can improve their own lives, and in so doing, the lives of others, their communities and nations.

From birth, to their first day in school, having a successful career – and everything in between – women and girls must be given the chance to succeed and become the agents of change we need.

By breaking down barriers that prevent them from achieving their full potential, we can accelerate development, for the benefit of all.”

Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, MP
Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and Former Commonwealth Chairperson-in-Office

Despite constituting half of the world’s population, women continue to be disproportionately represented in governance and at all levels of decision-making.

To affirm its commitment to strengthen the participation of women in government and society, the Commonwealth Heads of Government committed themselves to gender equality in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991. This was anchored by the CW Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 Plan of Action (PoA), which draws on international commitments for the realisation of women’s rights.
Recognizing the need of increasing women’s representation in political institutions, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) established a structure and governance body to work on strategies on how to increase women’s participation in Parliament and mainstream gender considerations in all CPA activities and programmes.

The emergence of a women’s organization within the CPA

“Heads of Government reaffirmed their commitment to the fundamental values of the Commonwealth as set out in the Harare Declaration of 1991 and emphasized that democracy, good governance, sustainable development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms were interdependent and mutually reinforcing. They commended the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association for its work in strengthening the democratic culture and effective parliamentary practices, and its efforts to enhance the participation of women in public life”.

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 1997

In order to tackle existing imbalances of female representation in decision-making, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) was developed from an informal meeting of women...
Parliamentarians held at the 35th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Barbados in 1989.

In 1997, the CPA Executive Committee approved a budget to enable the senior Steering Committee Members to attend the annual conference and officially meet before. In 1998, an overt commitment to gender equality was formally adopted into the CPA constitution at the General Assembly of the Association.

To help the CWP play a more significant role in the Association, the size of the CWP Steering Committee was reduced to 11 Members, one nominated from each region for three years plus the Chairperson and a new post of CWP President nominated by the Branch hosting the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference.

It was also decided that the post of CWP Chairperson should be elected for a term of three years by those Members attending the CWP business meeting at the time of the Annual Conference, and

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that the CWP Chairperson be an *ex-officio* Member of the CPA Executive Committee. Elected CWP Chairpersons from 2003-2013 include Hon. Lindiwe Maseko, MPL, Chairperson of the CWP Steering Committee (Gauteng) (2004-2007), Ms Kashmala Tariq, MNA, Chairperson of the CWP Steering Committee (Pakistan) (2007-2010) and Hon. Alix Boyd Knights, MHA, Chairperson of the CWP Steering Committee (Dominica) (2010-2013).

**CWP Steering Committee**

**Structure of the Steering Committee**

The Steering Committee comprises 11 Members: one Member from each of the nine CPA Regions, a nominated President and the elected Chairperson. Each Steering Committee Member serves a term of three years, apart from the President who holds the position for a one-year term and is nominated by the Branch hosting the annual CPA Conference.

A meeting is held once a year immediately preceding the Annual Conference, where attendance is at the host Branch’s expense. However, it is preferable for the Branch to nominate the Steering Committee Member as a formal delegate with voting rights.

**The Strategic Aims of the CWP**

The Strategic Plan for the Association for the period of 2013-2017 includes the commitment to improve representation...
for Commonwealth women in Parliament and for Women Parliamentarians in the CPA. Core Objective 6 states:

‘To promote gender equality in the work of the CPA and across the Association’

a) Encourage women to stand for election to representative bodies by advocating the removal of barriers to their participation and to facilitate their professional contribution as Members;
b) Ensure that gender continues to be mainstreamed across all activities to assist Parliaments and Legislatures to exceed the Commonwealth Heads of Government target of having women occupying no less than 30 per cent of decision-making positions.

The CWP has developed a Work Programme that considers how the situation of women in public life can be enriched. The Work Programme is part of the long-term strategy of strengthening Parliament to promote democratic values and policies, which give people equality, freedom and a voice in their governance. The continuing goal is to improve the representation of women in decision-making positions throughout the Commonwealth and the professional development of women Members once they are in Parliament.

Women on the Executive Committee

At the CPA General Assembly in Bangladesh in 2003, the historic decision that the CWP Chairperson serves as an ex-officio Member with full voting rights was taken. The General Assembly at its meeting in Kenya in 2010 agreed to constitutional amendments to make the Chairperson of the CWP one of the Officers of the Association and to enable the CWP Steering Committee to provide an alternate to
the Chairperson, should she be unable to attend CPA business meetings. A proposal to make the Chairperson a member of the CPA Coordinating Committee will be considered by the General Assembly at its meeting in 2013. She will join the Chairperson of the Executive Committee, Vice Chairperson of the Executive Committee and CPA Treasurer.

The CPA continuously aims to improve the number of women nominated to serve as Regional Representatives on the Executive Committee. The Chairman of the Executive Committee therefore continues to write to all Branch Presidents and Secretaries encouraging them to ensure that more women are chosen as Regional Representatives to serve on the CPA Executive Committee. Between 1996 and 2013, the percentage of women on the CPA Executive Committee has increased from 6.5 per cent to 16.7 per cent, peaking in 2012 with 19.4 per cent.

“Aim 2: To assist in increasing the representation of women in Parliaments throughout the Commonwealth.”
Extract from the Dhaka Outcomes Document from the Commonwealth Workshop on Women's Political Party Caucusing, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 16 June 2013

Members emphasized the adoption and implementation of mechanisms to advance women’s effective participation, by considering affirmative action policies, including quotas, constitutional, legislative, electoral and political party reforms.

Members further acknowledged the importance of a gender-sensitive Parliament; increased roles of women as Presiding Officers, heading parliamentary committees; rotation of leadership positions such as Chief Whip, Minority/Majority Leader(s); mentoring and shadow leadership; and encouraging debate on gender as a cross-cutting issue and gender responsive budgeting. They also recognized the need for developing the capacity of women once elected to Parliament, the need to strengthen national women’s machineries, the need for building links with civil society, and the need to encourage mentoring.

Samples from the CWP Work Programme
Parliamentary Workshop at the 10th Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 2013

The CPA in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Parliament of Bangladesh organized a strategic advocacy workshop on ‘Women’s Political Party Caucusing’ for Parliamentarians as a satellite meeting to the 10th Commonwealth Women’s Affairs Ministers Meeting.

The workshop drew on the successes and challenges faced by women in political processes and developed strategies for translating women’s presence into strategic advocacy to advance the participation of women in politics. Discussions were held around the subject of Women’s Political Party Caucusing and ways in which parliamentary processes could be used to develop an effective caucus of political leaders across party lines to enhance women’s participation.

The meeting issued a Communiqué to Ministers which was delivered by the Chairperson of the CWP.
CWP Conferences
CWP Conferences are organized once every three years in the final year of the CWP Chairperson’s term, on the eve of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. The programme for the Conference is decided by the CWP Steering Committee. Previous CWP Conference Themes have been:

First CWP Conference (India, 2007)
Strategies to Overcome Barriers Preventing Women’s Equal Participation in Decision Making” and “The Role of Women Parliamentarians in Dealing with HIV/AIDS and Poverty Reduction

Second CWP Conference (Kenya, 2010)
The Status of Women on 2010:
• Strategies to Increase Women’s Representation in Parliament
• Enhancing participation of Women in Decision Making
• Women as Migrant Workers
• Reform of Political Parties- Working Towards Democracy

Third CWP Conference (South Africa, 2013)
Engendering Democracy:
• Increasing Women’s Political Participation: Leadership, Electoral Systems and Campaign Funding
• Women Parliamentarians and Social Media
• Informal Economy and Entrepreneurship
• Women, Poverty and Homelessness

The opening of the first CWP Conference in New Delhi, India, in 2007.
The CWP Conference facilitates the largest networking opportunity between women Parliamentarians of the Commonwealth and allows Members to share and disseminate information and policy ideas on how women Parliamentarians can achieve gender equality and contribute to development, democracy and peace. Members are also able to exchange ideas on how to improve effective parliamentary practices and ensure all Legislatures of the Commonwealth are gender sensitive.

Regional Activities
Through the CWP Work Programme, developing CWP at the regional level has been prioritised by the CWP Steering Committee.

CWP Africa Region- Promoting Political Participation
The 3rd CWP Africa Regional Workshop took place in June 2013 and looked at ways to promote political participation of women in Central Africa.

Participants called on all political parties to adopt and implement affirmative action for the equal participation of women in politics and advocated for political parties to formulate retention policies for female Members of Parliament and women in all political structures.
They also urged political parties to provide moral support and funding to women politicians participating in local government, parliamentary and presidential elections, while encouraging women to realize that it is their human right to take part in the governance processes of their countries.

Delegates furthermore pressed all women politicians and political parties to come up with media strategies that would enhance positive publicity for women politicians. They encouraged women politicians to embark on mentorship programmes to prepare other women for entry into key decision-making positions. Finally, participants stressed the need for Civil Society Organizations to continue working closely with women politicians through the provision of capacity building programmes.

CWP Australia Region– Commonwealth Connects Programme
In 2011, the CPA Australian Region established a Commonwealth Connections programme to better connect the Australian community with the Commonwealth and Parliament. To that end, the CWP Australian Region Steering Committee coordinated a two day Young Commonwealth Women’s Forum to provide the opportunity for young Australian women to learn more of the CWP. Young women aged 18-25 from each of the 10 CPA Australian Region branches were selected to attend the forum, which linked

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into the theme of Commonwealth Day 2011, “Women as Agents of Change”.

The forum sessions included: Discussions with women Parliamentarians; The opportunity to observe women Parliamentarians at work during a parliamentary sitting week; Meetings with senior women in Parliament to provide a gender perspective on leadership; and a roundtable where forum participants had the opportunity to speak about issues of interest to them relevant to the Commonwealth agenda.

CWP Canada Region- 2013 Outreach Programme
Recognizing the importance of creating awareness and sharing information with women and girls about the role of Parliamentarians and the parliamentary system, the Canadian outreach programme provided an invaluable opportunity to encourage involvement. During the sixth annual Outreach Programme of the CPA Canadian Region, in Québec in 2012, a delegation of members from across the Region met with members of the following institutions: Group Femmes, Politique et Démocratie (GFPD), an organization that promotes political involvement; Members of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec, working towards providing support to First Nations women who were already active in politics, those who were looking to pursue a career in politics, or to those who wanted to get involved in their communities, and Students from Neufchâtel Secondary School. The school’s student model Parliament is the first in the Québec City area and the fourth in Québec to have changed its student council into a model Parliament.

CWP Pacific Region – an example of cross-regional working
The Pacific Region has the lowest percentages of women’s representation in the Commonwealth. It is therefore remarkable that

“We must open doors and we must see to it that they remain open, so that others can pass through.”
Rosemary Brown, first African-Canadian woman elected to a provincial Legislative Assembly (British Columbia, 1972)
a number of women have in 2012-2013 won seats in both General and by-elections, including in some Parliaments which previously did not have any women members. The Pacific Region faces a number of challenges: it is a geographically vast and isolated area, both from each other and from the rest of the world, with economic and social development varying across countries. Nevertheless, the CWP Pacific Region is one of the CPA’s pioneer regions in terms on inter-regional cooperation.

In February 2013 when the Australia Region hosted a meeting which brought together women Parliamentarians from all across their region, they included women Parliamentarians from the Pacific

Samoa women: The Pacific region has the lowest percentage of women’s representation in the Commonwealth.
as well. The Pacific region is currently lobbying for the creation of a CWP group in every Parliament, even in those with no women members. The aim is that with the presence of such a group, it will serve to normalize the representation of women and the expectation that women will — and should — be members of Parliament.

CWP Communications and Outreach Activities
To integrate the CPA’s overall communication strategy to reach its Members, all CWP activities such as the Election of the Chairperson of the CWP have been communicated through CPA publications and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. Initiatives to raise the visibility of the CWP Association include the provision of a quarterly column for the CWP Chairperson in The Parliamentarian (established in 2009) and the listing of the CWP Chairperson with the Executive Committee in the Newsletter First Reading and in the CPA’s promotional booklet.

Details of the CWP, its aims, activities, and its Steering Committee, have been posted on the CPA’s website, along with information on regional activities as well as women representation gathered from Branches. The CWP also has its own Facebook group that is administered by the CWP Chairperson called ‘Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians’.

Parliamentary Information and Reference Centre
The CPA’s Parliamentary Information and Reference Centre (PIRC) is open to respond to queries on women’s issues by the provision of statistical data, Acts and Bills, parliamentary reports and other documentation. The Centre is well placed to obtain specific pieces of legislation or documentation relating to women by reference to its network of Clerks and Secretaries of Parliament, typically the Secretaries of CPA Branches.

The most recent project of the Centre is the compilation of a list of parliamentary and non-parliamentary global women’s organizations to facilitate the work of women Parliamentarians to promote the gender agenda. The list can be accessed in the CWP Section located through Women MPs which can be found on the banner of the homepage of the CPA website www.cphaq.org.