REPORT OF THE BUSINESS MEETING
AND SESSION OF
THE COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS

Theme:
Is There Such a Thing as a Women’s Agenda in Parliament?
If Not, why Not? If So, What Should It Be?

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Venue: BMICH

Prepared by
HANSARD DEPARTMENT
Parliament of Sri Lanka
Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Session  
Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall  
Colombo, Sri Lanka  
12th September, 2012  
Theme: Is There Such a Thing as a Women’s Agenda in Parliament?  
If Not, why Not? If So, What Should It Be?  

Present:  
Moderator – Hon. (Ms.) Alix Boyd Knights (Dominica)  
Discussion Leader – The Hon. (Dr.) (Mrs.) Sudharshini Fernandopulle (MP, CWP President, Sri Lanka)  
Discussion Leader – Senator (Ms.) Helen Polley (Commonwealth of Australia Branch, Australia)  
Discussion Leader – The Hon. (Ms.) Myrna Driedger (Manitoba, Canada)  
Discussion Leader – Ms. Kemi Ogunsanya (Commonwealth Secretariat)  
Session Secretary – Ms. Meenakshi Dhar  

Dr. William F. Shiha, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.  

And, Delegates from other countries.  

After being welcomed by the Moderator, the Hon. (Ms.) Alix Boyd Knights, the Delegates sang the Women’s Anthem at her invitation.  

Before moving on to the adoption of the Agenda, the Moderator inquired from the Delegates whether they have anything to be taken up under “Any Other Business”. A Delegate from Australia said that there are a lot of issues concerning women to be discussed. A Delegate from South Africa proposed that the matter regarding the time allocated for the CWP should also be taken up for discussion under that Item, with which the Moderator also agreed. The Discussion Leader, the Hon. (Dr.) (Mrs.) Sudharshini Fernandopulle suggested that hereafter the President of the CWP should be recognized and be invited to the Opening Ceremony of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference and everybody agreed to it.  

A Delegate from New Zealand proposed the topic “The Role of Woman in the CPA”, which would involve a broader debate discussing the woman’s status and recognition within the organization. Those matters were left to be discussed under “Any Other Business”.  

Then, the Moderator recalled what she stated at the vote of her election in Kenya, that she would devise a workshop based on the strategies for bringing in more women to
Parliament during her tenure, where she also mentioned the three “M”s: Mentoring, Motivating and Mobilizing. Thereafter, she presented a book titled “Women in Parliament in Dominica, Past and Present” to the President of the CWP, who was also the Discussion Leader, which was produced and published as a result of her research work and which she hoped would help to motivate women to come to Parliament. She urged all the countries to produce such books. She invited the Delegates to share the best practices and their experiences through networking on the CWP Facebook Page to improve the delivery of their services.

The Hon. (Ms.) Lovitta Foggo informed them that the Caribbean Region has a team of three women building a bank that will historically document all female Parliamentarians who participated in the political arena throughout the Caribbean area to change the mindset of women on their ability of leadership.

Moving on to Item No. 2 of the Agenda - the Report of the 16th CWP Steering Committee Meeting held at the Hilton Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka on 8th September, 2012 - the Moderator invited the President of the CWP (Discussion Leader) to brief them on the happenings at the Steering Committee. The Hon. (Dr.) (Mrs.) Sudharshini Fernandopulle explained that the Steering Committee agreed that there should be a Strategic Plan for the next three years, which should focus on the important topics of women and gender and of the entire budget; 80 per cent should be divided equally among the Regions and the balance should be kept for any other urgent or important matters like developing a web page, updating the existing CWP leaflet etc. She further stated that the broader theme “Engendering Democracy” and four different topics have been suggested for the 2013 CWP Session to be held in South Africa. The election of a Chairperson is due to be held next year, she stated.

Then, a Delegate from Malaysia asked how she could give a feedback as there were some mistakes with regard to the figures relating to the South-East Asian Region in the Steering Committee Report. The President of the CWP (Discussion Leader) responded by saying that the Representatives of the respective Regions have been advised to make a note of it and inform them of the corrections. The Malaysian Delegate undertook to e-mail it to them.

Then, Dr. William F. Shija, the Secretary-General of the CPA, welcoming the Members of the CWP Business Meeting said that the CPA Secretariat takes great interest in working for them in communicating, as accurately as possible. He further said that in case the Regions have to make inputs to the Secretariat, they are always ready to hear from them. He said that the working relationship between the CWP and the Secretariat in London built by the previous Chairpersons has become stronger and stronger. He was of the view that more ought to be done for the development of women.

Regarding the allocation of money equally amongst the nine Regions, a Delegate from Australia said that some consideration should be given to the ability of the Regions to continue the work based on the small amount of money provided. She said that some regions would not need that support because they are better placed. Her view was that the
theme “Engendering Democracy” and the other topics are very good and there are also issues such as the absence of women in peacekeeping negotiations and so on, to be taken up. She also said that the written Reports of the Regions are not attached to the Steering Committee Report and asked them to consider doing that.

When a Delegate from Ghana inquired as to how many Members of the Steering Committee are at the international level, she proposed that Africa be added to the 14 Members and make it 15 and also suggested that more representations of them be made at the higher level so that their views and concerns could be addressed properly. The Moderator stated that she will write to the Speakers of all the Branches asking them to include more women in their delegations. She also stated that the time allocated was insufficient and further said that her first priority was to get a date, so that women’s priorities could be properly dealt with.

Hon. (Ms.) Annette King from New Zealand stated that as the delegate from Australia pointed out, the Pacific nations are among the poorest, and as proposed the funds allocated should be forwarded to the poorest regions by other regions which have sufficient funds. She mentioned that a Delegate from New Zealand had posed the question earlier this week as to whether Sterling Pounds 777,000 could be carried forward for the Budget of 2013 and the Committee was in support of it. So, the Secretariat has to consider whether the budgetary process could accommodate this request. As the Secretary-General of the CPA was present, she made a request that that money be carried forward to the Pacific nations. She stated that in the CPI Executive Committee Report, Sterling Pounds 25,000 has been allocated for the years 2013/2014. She sought a clarification as to whether a greater amount was requested by the CWP and whether it was declined. She also said that as the Secretary-General stated, since they are a very important group within the CPA, more funds should be allocated for the CWP.

The Moderator mentioned that she also made a plea at the ExCo Meeting about the rollover of funds. She said that she did not get a response yet but hoped that it would be a positive one. The Hon. Dr. William F. Shija agreed to the rollover of funds.

The Moderator stated that since her arrival at the ExCo, she has been pleading for more money for women. She asked for its Members’ support in voting for it. She said they are asking for Sterling Pounds 100,000 annually. She said that if they succeed in getting the funds, they could really do a lot of work in the regions that need support. She was delighted to hear the Delegate from Australia and New Zealand acknowledging the fact that there are certain regions that are better endowed than the others and their willingness to help the poorer regions. She emphasized that the term “Poorer” is used only in terms of “financial resources” and sometimes they may be poor in money but richer in many other ways. She was happy to hear that there was this sentiment of passing the resources they possess over to another region where there was insufficient resources. She suggested that it can be done officially, as a particular region could declare that they are not it need of assistance and would name another region that is in need of such assistance. She requested the Committee to do it officially as such arrangements can be done in a democratic organization.
The Hon. Dr. William F. Shija stated that as he mentioned yesterday in his speech, the CPA is financially healthy. Therefore, the request to increase the allocation to 100,000 Sterling Pounds has not been resisted and it will be worked on. He added that he himself whispered it to the Chair to make that request. He further stated that they have some unrestricted reserves that they need to plough back. He further pointed out that according to the laws of the Charity Commission, funds cannot be allowed to accumulate. He pointed out that after the Reserves Policy was established in 2008, they have been gaining funds and they want such funds to be utilized by the CWP as well as other organizations.

He observed that some Members of CWP of the Pacific Branches could not attend this Conference as their Branches had not paid up. He suggested that such instances be considered by the Committee and financial assistance be provided to such Members when their branches did not paid up. He requested the Committee to forward their plea to the Executive Committee to be considered. He pointed out that such a step would later on enable female Members to attend these meetings during difficult situations, so that the number of female representations in the CWP could be increased.

A Delegate from South Africa mentioned that there are many regions not only in the Pacific but also in others where females are not given the proper place. She pointed out that there are many issues related to women to talk about and that the time allocation of two hours is insufficient to discuss about women’s empowerment. She also pointed out that those two-hour sessions are also cramped up with important workshops. She made a request to the Secretary-General to extend the duration at least to half a day or even a whole day to discuss business of women. She said that the time allocated for women Parliamentarians indicates the commitment of CPA towards women.

Hon. Senator Helen Polley from Australia mentioned that when the allocation of funds was discussed at the Steering Committee, there was considerable discussion regarding money being provided to the Pacific nations. She pointed out that Australia has more resources than other countries and they would be happy to assist other regions. She referred to the request made by New Zealand regarding the rollover of money and pointed out that at the Steering Committee they were told that funding cannot be rolled over because of auditing and accounting responsibilities. She pointed out to the fact that this morning the Secretary-General agreed to the rollover of funds. She needed an assurance that the funds forwarded to the CWP are properly managed and nobody would accuse them of any wrong doing. She posed the question whether the funds could be rolled over under the auditing and accounting responsibilities of the CPA.

The Hon. Dr. William F. Shija stated that the reason why he told that it could be done was that they do not want to lose the money available. He said that it cannot be rolled over through accounting in terms of using the word “rollover” and it has to be done through the budget. He said that budgeting should be done including that figure so that it is not lost.
Hon. (Ms.) Lynda Voltz, Delegate from Australia inquired whether the minutes need to be amended as it states at page No. 7 of the 16th CWP Steering Committee Meeting Report that the Executive Committee allowed the “carry over” of funding to the CWP programmes. But, she mentioned that the term “carry over” is not the appropriate term. She asked whether this money should be referred to as “reallocation”. She was of the view that the term “carry over” should be replaced by “reallocation”.

The Moderator pointed out that they agreed to recommend to the CPA Executive Committee that the remaining funds be allowed to rollover. She said it was only a recommendation. She stated that the answer comes afterwards and accordingly it can be rolled over or reallocated. She pointed out that the minutes were correct and that was what was discussed at the Steering Committee and the request was made in that format.

Under “Any other Business”, Hon. (Ms.) Noma Mfeketo, a Delegate from South Africa suggested that they first adopt the Report. She also referred to the establishment of a Steering Committees in each region. She said that the African Region has a Steering Committee under a Chairperson and each sub-region has its own representatives. She further stated that funding must also go along with the programmes and they should also have more workshops to encourage women. She added that the workshops that were held in Nigeria and in Sierra Leon in 2003, helped to increase the number of women representation and that model was very effective. She stressed the fact that it has helped not only Parliamentarians but women groups in all regions. She said that increased funds could be allocated for programmes for women in order to not only increase women parliamentarians but also to get more women engaged in politics. She stated that in 2005 the Commonwealth Heads of Governments signed an agreement to the effect that there should be 30 per cent women representation in all Commonwealth Parliaments. She pointed out that they have not done much towards that and there should be more workshops to encourage people. She further stated that those workshops should not only be for women but also for men because the problem is with men, as they do not want to give women space and do not understand the problems that women face. She especially thanked the Delegates from Australia and New Zealand for volunteering to rollover their funds to the African Region.

The Moderator said that before they proceed, they should adopt their Report and pointed out that due to an electrical problem in the office and some administrative inability, some regional reports were not attached to the Report that the Members have in hand. A Delegate from South Africa wanted it to be on record that there is some misreporting in the Report and that the African Region is not there.

The Moderator said that if it did not appear in the Report, the Report should be amended and it would be mentioned in the “apologies” section.

Hon. (Ms.) Lovitta Fogo from Bermuda proposed that the Report be adopted, as amended, and Hon. (Ms.) Paula Biggar from Price Edward Island from Canada seconded it. The reported, as amended, was adopted unanimously.
Then, the Committee moved to discuss matters under “Any Other Business”.

Hon. (Dr.) Roberta Blackman-Woods from the United Kingdom said that at the previous meeting she proposed to have strategic links with “UN WOMEN” and it was accepted last year as something that they should pursue. She wanted to know whether they have any such programmes and if there has been any progress in this regard. She said that next year’s programme has a number of events and that IPU and UN WOMEN are developing and mentoring programmes using social media. She stressed the importance of CWP members to get actively involved in these programmes.

The Moderator, accepting her point, replied that they were trying to get Ms. Robbeto Clerk of “UN WOMEN” who was in the Caribbean Islands to be one of their panelists, but she just moved from Barbados to Thailand and was unable to be with them. She said that in the Caribbean Islands through her they have developed a lot of linkages between UN WOMEN and CWP. She stressed that it was high time to increase such links in the CPA as a whole and by dealing with more agencies, groups and organizations, they can encourage more women.

Hon. Moono Lubezhi from Zambia expressed her dissatisfaction over their inability to work on time and the limited time allocation. She pointed out that some delegates were almost one hour late for the meeting. She was of the view that had they started on time, they would have had more time to discuss important issues. She proposed to, at the next session, start the meetings on time instead of waiting for the members to turn up.

She further pointed out that though there were a lot of protocol instruments that have been passed at the CWP, the domestication of such instruments is not there and inquired as to why they cannot walk the talk and help countries to see that those instruments are properly domesticated to improve women representation in Parliaments. She said that they were like a rhetoric organization and nothing is happening. She further cited an example from her country and said that they have 108 parliamentarians but there are only 17 women. She strongly pointed out as to what steps they could take to improve the number of women in parliaments and insisted that they walk the talk.

The Moderator said that the points stated by the previous speaker have been well-received and it is very important to develop those workshops that surround strategies to get more women into Parliaments. She pointed out that there may be some specific issues in each region and there maybe common issues in different regions. She said that the main point is getting the men feel more comfortable to have women colleagues. She further said that when we have Youth Parliaments, the number of male and female representation has to be equal and that is where the “comfort zone” begins to take effect. Her point was that young people should get accustomed to having a colleague of another gender close to them. She further said that they are hopeful and optimistic that in five years’ time, men would become more comfortable having women colleagues. She said that it is not applicable to the entire CPA and that certain regions are more affected. She stressed that they are working on it and they must work harder to achieve that goal because many of them are behind the Millennium Development Goals.
Hon. (Dr.) Vindhya Vasini Persaud from Guyana first expressed her disappointment that they did not get the report beforehand to peruse it. She said that in Guyana, they have achieved the 30 per cent women representation in Parliament; they have exceeded it and women occupy key positions in her Parliament. She said those countries which have succeeded in having achieved this goal, should work along with those who have not and thereby they can share many issues in different regions. She said that many issues are shared by women in different regions. She hoped that when they meet again, they will have more time to discuss specific issues making use of a longer period of time than this.

She thanked the Members of the CWP for having agreed to allocate their funds to countries that need them. She praised the work that the CWP is doing at the moment for the regions. She hoped that they could achieve their goals for women all over the world and in five years’ time, they will be able to have 30 per cent women representation and true gender equality in Parliaments.

Next, a delegate from Malaysia hailed the idea expressed by the Moderator that men and women should work together and pointed out the importance of member-countries considering that seriously. She said that women should not be confined to womanly matters only and that they should be given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process also.

Responding to the comments made by the Members, the Moderator said that though the suggestions made by the Members can be advocated as a policy of the CWP, they cannot inflict the policies of the CWP on various countries and branches. She further pointed out that the CPA has taken a decision to allocate more funds to the Youth Parliament and hold it annually and she was confident that the proposal would be approved by the General Body. Then the Moderator said that in her country, in Dominica, the two candidates who emerge victorious in school debates are accommodated in the Youth Parliament and advocated that as an effective way to improve the structure. Further, she requested the branches to consider setting up of Youth Parliaments with equal participation.

Subsequently, a delegate from Seychelles stated that though her country is small, they are having a balanced Youth Parliament and that the men in her country are supportive and co-operative.

A delegate from South Africa stated that they too have Youth Parliaments in different provinces and advocated that as a right step towards improving the structure. She stressed the importance of focusing more on gender equality because women are not treated on par with men.

Agreeing with the idea expressed by the delegate from South Africa, the Moderator said that a male from some country told her that women in his country need not represent Parliament because they are well taken care by the men. She said that she was stunned by that attitude and emphasized that these in-built, archaic ideas need to be eradicated.
A Delegate from Uganda representing East Africa pointed out to financial constraints as being the major factor which prevents women entering politics. She lamented about the pathetic state of women who contribute immensely to the national economy and legislature and asked whether the CWP could facilitate empowering them politically and economically.

A Delegate from the South African Region said that the African Region was given observer status in the CPA so that they have a link with the African Parliamentarians. Further, she was of the view that as Youth Parliaments, Women Parliaments too should be established.

The Moderator stated that since the Members have many issues, the CWP need more time for its meetings, for which the Committee unanimously agreed. She stressed the importance of linking political and economic aspects and wanted women to be enriched with funds. Making another valid point, she said that 20 minutes should be allocated for the feedback which would retain the continuity of the process. Finally, she earnestly requested the Members to make use of their website and the Face Book Page in order to communicate and promote each other’s businesses.

Then, a delegate from the UK detailed as to how they have laboured to get the CWP into being and was happy over its progress. She further stated that while a change in the attitude is of paramount importance, women need the encouragement and the support of men.

Thereafter, the Discussion Leaders, Senator (Ms.) Helen Polley from Australia, Hon. (Ms.) Myrna Driedger from Manitoba, Canada, the Hon. (Dr.) (Mrs.) Sudharshini Fernandopulle from Sri Lanka, Ms. Kemi Ogunsanya of the Commonwealth Secretariat were invited to commence the Discussion Session. Each Discussion Leader made a brief introduction of herself and the first to speak under the theme, “Is there such a thing as a Women’s Agenda in Parliament? If not, why not? If so, what should it be?” was the Hon. (Dr.) (Mrs.) Sudharshini Fernandopulle from Sri Lanka. Commencing her presentation, she detailed about the vital role played by the Parliamentarians. She then described about the plethora of problems faced by women who contribute immensely towards the development of the economy, and stressed that it is the duty of women Parliamentarians to address them. As a measure of narrowing down gender inequality, she suggested setting up of Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committees in Parliaments. She suggested that women representation should be increased at every decision-making body and women should engage in politics actively.

She further went on to state that marginalization of women in governance is a common problem faced especially by South Asian countries and that not only in Parliaments but also in regional, provincial and local government institutions, women’s representation should be increased significantly. The general lukewarm attitude of some women Parliamentarians is a great hindrance in achieving the expected goals. Therefore, women’s issues are inadequately addressed and their voices are not heard. Generally women are marginalized at decision-making. Due place is not given to women by their
political party hierarchy. Women find it hard to compete with their male counterparts due to associated violence and lack of funds aggravates this problem. In the legislatures too, they are not given adequate time to express their views on key issues.

She further stated that in Sri Lanka, women play a pivotal role in the national economy and the highest source of foreign exchange is earned by migrant workers mainly employed as domestic workers in the middle-eastern countries of whom the majority are women. The second and third sources are from the garment manufacturing trade and tea plantations respectively where the majority are female workers. Some of female migrant workers are subject to cruel treatment by their employers; some are not paid salaries and some are detained against their will. As a result of female migration, families are disintegrated and education of their children is disrupted. All these issues have to be addressed by the law makers and solutions found to those.

She added that although Sri Lankan women have enjoyed voting rights since 1931, they remained among the least represented in the world. In the current Parliament, there are only 13 Women Parliamentarians out of 225 Members. Although Sri Lanka elected the world’s first woman Prime Minister and an Executive President, women representation remains low at all levels of governance. Representation at Parliament remains at a mere 5.8 per cent; at provincial level it is around 5 per cent and local government levels, it is around 1.8 per cent. Of the 13 Women Parliamentarians, most have a political family background or have been elected after the death of their husbands who were politicians. However, in Sri Lanka important pieces of legislation concerning women had been passed by Parliaments over the years. Maternity Benefits Ordinance, No. 32 of 1939 and Prevention of Domestic Violence Act, No. 34 of 2005 are prominent among them.

Apart from that, the Parliament of Sri Lanka has ratified important international treaties and covenants such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as Act No. 56 of 2007 and the Convention on Preventing and Combating trafficking of women and children for Prostitution by Act, No. 13 of 2005.

She said that the prolonged armed conflict in the country ended only three years ago and that women and children were the most affected including herself. Women have lost their husbands, siblings and offspring. The number of families headed by females has increased in the past decades. There are approximately 90,000 female-headed families in the North and East alone. In other parts of the country, a lot of young women have lost their spouses in the armed forces and have become the sole breadwinners of their families and they need assistance to build up their families.

In Sri Lanka, the Women Parliamentarian Caucus was formed in 2006 with the objective of empowering women and eliminating all types of violence and harassment against women. It coordinates its activities with the UN Agencies and other stakeholders. The approach of the Caucus is apolitical and efforts are being made to draw the attention of Parliament to questions concerning women. An Adjournment Motion was also moved by the Members of the Women Parliamentarian Caucus on elimination of violence against women in November 2010.
A vision for the future is needed to address the immediate priorities. Women Parliamentarians must highlight the issues concerning women. Parliament is an effective mechanism to achieve gender parity. Parliamentarians are national legislators and female Parliamentarians should take the initiative in introducing legislations favouring women. Parliamentarians are powerful policy monitors who can influence public policies. They are natural campaigners who can create awareness in the society. As the allocation of Government expenditure is the prerogative of Parliament, Parliamentarians can influence policies pertaining to women’s issues through the national budgetary process.

In conclusion, she said that women’s agenda in Parliament that ensures gender equality and equity is absolutely necessary and all women Parliamentarians should have genuine and determined efforts to reach their goals.

The Discussion Leader, Senator (Ms.) Helen Polley from the Commonwealth of Australia Branch said that statistics at the global level show that women make up 20 per cent of all Parliamentarians. The highest percentage of women Parliamentarians can be found in the Nordic countries which is 42 per cent and the lowest being 13 per cent in Arab countries and in the Pacific region, it is 17 per cent. However, it is 3.7 per cent in Australia and New Zealand. The topic can be considered in a number of different perspectives. One is by improving the level of women’s representation providing better opportunities for women in the community to engage with Parliaments particularly in countries where women’s representation in Parliaments is low. The other is by making Parliaments gender-sensitive so that Parliaments are institutions of both men and women, who can legitimately convey and respond to the issues of gender equality. When addressing the issues and concerns that are most important to women in the community, there is also the question of whether Women’s Agenda in Parliament might not marginalize the work of women in Parliament.

Improving women’s representation in Parliament can be tackled by addressing social and cultural impediments to women’s participation in public life. There should be specific gender measures within Parliaments, political parties and political systems to guarantee equality in representation in Parliament, ensuring that women are included in the positions of Parliamentary leadership to have the opportunity to influence a positive change.

Leadership among women in the community is a very important factor. It is important to get women in the community to recognize that they have the opportunity to take a leading role in public life. Community members must see that women have a role as community leaders, and women who take up the leadership role should be given support and the advice they need in understanding their roles, which may be new to them. Getting women’s voices heard in Parliament must not rely on representation alone. Parliaments need to examine the process to ensure that women have the opportunity to engage with Parliament even when representation is low. Parliaments should have a gender equality policy or a plan of action. Parliaments should create an environment in which women are welcomed to equal participation and opportunities should be given to women to contribute to propose legislation. There should be a Parliamentary committee to examine
gender issues and a Caucus on gender comprising of women from crossover parties, one party or a coalition of parties of both men and women. There should be a formal mechanism to go with the national women’s machinery.

All those issues lead to the question of how gender-sensitive are the outputs of Parliaments. Parliaments should pass legislation that address discrimination against women, against domestic violence ensuring gender equality. There is also a question to address as to how gender sensitive are the facilities of working conditions of Parliament and how gender-sensitive the culture of Parliament in the use of language is. For example, Parliament addresses the Chair as Chairman as opposed to Chairperson or Chair. Many countries have started to assess the gender awareness in their Parliaments through specific reviews and orders through dedicated committees and research. She stated that in Australia, the Regional Steering Committee for the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians has established a comprehensive action agenda to link women in provincial parliaments. The main focus of the work is to communicate, engage and advocate.

She further stated that the sessions at CPA will provide an opportunity to hear from other countries in the Commonwealth about the steps that are being taken to mainstream gender in Parliamentary work. In discussing gender equality and awareness in Parliaments, it is important that this work involves and engages both men and women. Impediments to inequality will only be removed if both men and women recognize and understand impediments and agree on an action to address those impediments. Therefore, participants in this discussion may outline how their Parliaments and communities are engaged with gender equality and awareness issues.

The final matter to address is about the issues that most women engage in and whether they are different to the issues in which men take an interest. The first woman elected to the Australian House of Representatives once said that any woman who enters the public arena must be prepared to work as men work and justify herself not as a woman but as a citizen shouldering the same burdens. This discussion should not focus only on a Women’s Agenda in Parliament. Issues concerning women are not part of the mainstream debate but are dealt with separately. This discussion should focus on why and how issues of concern to women form part of the 21st Century mainstream debate, if they are to receive adequate attention, appropriate action, freedom of violence, delivery of health services and economic empowerment. We should ensure that these issues are part of the mainstream debate in which both men and women engage in because they are fundamental to the well-being of our societies.

A Delegate from Manitoba Province, Canada, in her presentation stated that the subject of women in politics is a critical area of importance, which has evolved since the day women were first granted the right to vote. The Province of Manitoba was the first to grant its women the right to vote in 1916. She stated that there needs to be a number of strategies to encourage and to get women into politics.
In the Canadian Parliament, out of all the elected representatives, only 24 per cent represent women. In 2007, 30 per cent women representatives were elected from the Province of Manitoba. But, in 2011 that dropped to 27 per cent. The under-representation of women in the Canadian political system is not much different from many other countries.

The reason why there are less women in politics is that the system itself holds back women from engaging in politics. Therefore, reaching out young girls and encouraging them to dream bigger in areas of politics is one of the strategies that need to be addressed.

She inquired as to what barriers keep them from running in the first place. She finds that the public in Canada is becoming more and more disengaged from politics. Many do not pay attention to it; do not think it affects them; they are cynical about politics and politicians, many do not hold politicians in very high regard. Many do not even know the issues at election times and cast their votes based on a number of different issues. Media portrayal is another issue that does not help women to get into politics.

Another reason for women not engaging in politics is because politics is seen as a blood sport and frankly at times it can be so. Therefore, it should not be sugarcoated. The struggle to handle family and work can be overwhelming. Many women never consider contesting elections unless they are asked. When they are asked they worry whether they are smart enough or capable enough. These barriers are very real and are not easily addressed.

According to the UN, a threshold of at least of 30 per cent of female legislators is required to ensure that public policy reflects the needs of women. The very heart of the issue is the issue of democracy. The world is made up of 50 per cent of women and if women are not adequately represented there is a democratic deficit in the representation.

Women do bring a unique experience to the political arena. Their life experiences are different from men and their perspectives on issues can be different from men. This serves to enhance the quality of debate on a wide range of issues of importance. This does not mean that women have a better perspective than men but just a different perspective. She stressed on the fact that there need to be strategies to encourage more women to run elections and support women at elections and after elections. But her personal belief is, whether a woman’s agenda in Parliaments or legislatures is a healthy one because it can marginalize them. If women wanted to be treated as equals, they have to compete in the same way as the men do.

Finally, she stated that she fully respects other countries that have moved forward and developed a quota system or looked at proportional representation and if it has worked for their countries, she congratulated them.

She concluded by stating that awareness of women’s under-representation in politics has increased and as a result, more men are now becoming champions of helping to improve that. Men have recognized that under-representation of women creates a deficit leaving
half of the population without an adequate voice in political decision-making. She stressed that the Agenda should be on workable, sustainable and dynamic strategies to increase women’s participation in the political process.

The Discussion Leader, Ms. Kemi Ogunsanya, who represented Dr. Sylvia Anie, Director, Gender & Political Development at the Social Transformation Programmes Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, in her opening remark said that the CPA is doing a lot of good and positive work and if they are to only look at the challenges, they may forget the good work that is being done.

She said the distinctive features of the Commonwealth are its level playing field where you have the big and small countries discussing at the same level, which is a privilege and the Commonwealth bringing cultures together thereby addressing the issues of differences in social stature and social issues.

She said that the Commonwealth has its plan of action on Gender Equality, the framework on which the Commonwealth works and is due to expire in 2015.

Ms. Kemi said a positive outcome which they need to be proud of is the fact that there are 20 women leaders in the world and seven being from the Commonwealth countries - Australia, Bangladesh, India, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Malawi and Mauritius, a Vice-President in Uganda and many Speakers of Parliament.

Next, she touched on the challenges faced by women in the Commonwealth countries. They being women experience intense violence when it comes to elections, they have to spend their own money, men feel threatened by women coming up, a woman’s confidence being seen as aggression and pride.

Her suggestions on overcoming these challenges were;

- finding ways in which you work in conciliation and tolerance with the various groupings of men whom she referred to as “male champions.” She cited an example of the female Vice-President of South Africa who if not for the support of the male President would not have got there.

- to find a way to get a 30 per cent women representation in all Parliaments, - the insistence of President Mandela as far back as 1992 to have a 30 per cent women in Parliament and India’s decision to put penalties on political parties that do not have a quota of 33 per cent for women.

- Capacity-building for women to face the media to become more functional in Parliament.

- to find ways to bring in younger generation to the fore.
Questions and Comments from Delegates to Discussion Leaders.

South Africa
A Delegate from South Africa agreed that there is an agenda for women in Parliament but her question was: How do we strengthen and pursue that agenda? She also made a request that the policy of women representation whether it be 10 or 30 per cent, it should be respected and fulfilled by all Parliaments.

Bermuda
The Delegate from Bermuda said that implementation of policies and legislation is void of female input and asked what could be done to get the desired outcome.

Australia
The Discussion Leader from Australia in response citing Australia as an example said:

- Australia has a Minister for Women’s Affairs.
- Australia has Women’s Committees and all pieces of law and legislation there are considered with regard to the relevancy and the effect it is going to have on women and families.
- The Committees encourage male colleagues to attend meetings because the support of men are needed.
- They encourage young women to come into Parliament and to take leadership within their communities.

Dominican Republic in the Caribbean Region
The Delegate from the Dominican Republic expressed the following views:

- Women should not have a separate agenda of their own because by that, women marginalize themselves and the focus should be to get men to see that women’s agenda is the same as their agenda.
- Adopt the strategy of socialization to increase women representation in Parliament.
- Positive attitudes and leadership qualities have to be inculcated from young age so that women can hold positions in Parliaments.

South Africa
A Delegate from South Africa, a Member of the Pan-African Parliament informed that the CWP has got service status of the Pan-African Parliament. She was of the view that CWP will make use of that because they are hosting the Pan-African Parliament Women’s Meeting on the 4th and 5th of October, two whole days.
She was very pleased to announce that South Africa has a very progressive Parliament and all the mechanisms referred to are in place.

She made a request to the Chair to do a similar research as she did on the role of women in her country for all of the women parliamentarians affiliated to the CPA, countries which have ratified it, countries which have signed it, the laws that are there and at what stage those laws are.

The Delegate spoke on female genital mutilation that had been discussed in a forum. She said that it was done not to judge anyone, why they had done it or why they were continuing to do it and said that they understood it from a cultural and social perspective.

She further said that there are six countries in Africa that practice female genital mutilation and would love to see it eradicated. She was of the view that we do it in a very gentle, social and cultural manner because one cannot impose on a country what we think is right and wrong. She made a request that an analysis be done in each country in terms of legislation and share that among each other.

Ms. Kemi Ogunsanya in her response to the Delegate from South Africa said that research is being done based on the various treaties, the African Protocol for Women and the countries that have ratified it.

In her response to the Member from Zambia who raised the issue on implementation and the domestication of laws, she said that the reason why most Member states do not want to domesticate laws is because it binds them, they are compelled to do it and there is easy access. She said that when it is not domesticated and a woman has to take her case to the international court it is expensive. So, for some States it is better at international level and that these were the challenges they were working on.

She went on to state that a survey done by the Royal Commonwealth Society showed that the best place to be born as a girl is the Caribbean because Granada has a zero maternity mortality rate; 70 per cent of women are educated and they know their rights and that is the reason someone from the Caribbean would say, you do not need a women’s agenda and someone from Africa would say you do need a women’s agenda, because girls there are not allowed to go to school. She also said that in some parts of Asia, the girl child is challenged in many ways.

Ms. Kemi’s last comment was on the issue of quotas and respect that was raised. She said that she supported quotas to get women representation and the need for women to continue to develop their capacity-building.

United Kingdom

The Delegate from the United Kingdom was of the view that foray of this nature enables us to understand the challenges faced by women in other countries. She said that in the United Kingdom it is of poor level - 20 per cent women representation in Parliament and that it is the same at decision-making levels, in the judiciary, in the media, in businesses.
and boards of companies. She said that much time is being spent trying to understand why it is so. She said that it is not cultural discrimination but there are other problems and one of them was that all these institutions have been created by men, deliberately or not, with long hours of work which women find difficult to deal with because they have other commitments of looking after two generations, children and parents. In her opinion, the way forward is getting a better understanding and involving women at decision-making levels. She said that what happened to Lehman Brothers would not have happened if it were Lehman Sisters because women take a different view about risks and that is why we need better women representation.

**New Zealand**

A Delegate from New Zealand said that New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote in 1893 and it was in 1931 that the first woman was elected to Parliament. She said that she was in Parliament for 27 years elected with the support of women and women need the support of other women and women in the media. She said that women should undertake to work with women journalists. She said that women need to look at voting systems and get the support of political parties to place women high on the list so that they can become Representatives. Her last point was to support women to gain positions of responsibility in the CPA who, in turn, would support women.

As her last remark, she said that the CPA News Bulletin does not give a satisfactory impression on the organization and suggested that they could move forward if they work together.

A Delegate from the Bahamas said that they must begin at the premise that there should be equality in terms of the role of women in human development. In relation to women, there have always been cultural sensitivities at some point of time in every country. An organization such as the CWP must ensure that it acts more as an advocating body against those cultural sensitivities. As the South African Delegate said, she was also of the view that their presence and positions, as those in the halls of power, could be used to advance equality of women, children, and education and to alleviate poverty in their various countries. There has to be some level of heightened advocacy and as women from the Commonwealth Grouping, their profile must be raised in a way that people would not be intimidated.

A Delegate from Uganda stated that she disagrees with the idea that there should not be a free pass. She said that there is nothing like a free pass. Talking of the Ugandan experience with regard to representation of women, she said that they do not have a free pass, but absolute competition; they have to prove worthwhile to be elected. As far as the agenda for women in Parliament is concerned, she strongly believes that there is a critical agenda for women, especially from an African perspective. So, those issues have to be validated from an African perspective, she said. She was of the view that if that 30 per cent representation of women is not implemented by the political parties, it boils down to nothing.
The Deputy Speaker of Cameroon stated that they have ratified all the international conventions and legislations which are supposed to favour women, are in place. To get into elective positions, women, who make up about 52 per cent of the voting population in most countries, have to compete at elections, but they are not elected, which means that women do not vote for women. So, what do we do to make women vote for women, she asked. If they do so, they will certainly come out victorious when it comes to obtaining elective positions because women are in the majority, she said.

A Delegate from Nigeria requested those Delegates from certain regions who could not make their contributions to send those to the Secretariat in writing. The Moderator said that they have made their commitment, but have to go back to their respective countries, ratify those and then send in the letter of commitment to them.

Bringing the Session to a close, the Moderator thanked the Panelists immensely for creating an environment for a stimulating discussion and also apologized for not allowing everybody to make their contributions. She invited the Delegates to log onto the CPA website and go to “Women MPs” to find out what has been happening with regard to women Parliamentarians in the world. She also advised them to read the article titled “For Men Only”, which is very interesting to women. She stressed that they also should read “The National Parliamentarian”, which brings out women’s issues to the fore. Finally, she thanked the Delegates for their attention and attendance.

(After the Women’s Anthem was sung, the Business Committee of the CWP came to a close.)