Workshop F: Engaging Political Parties to Improve Gender-responsive Governance

- What does gender-responsive governance mean? It’s about women being active participants in the decision making processes of a nation. It’s also about ensuring that the rights and interests of women are advanced as part of national decision making.

- Political parties have an important role to play in ensuring women’s active participation in decision making and in advancing women’s rights as part of the national agenda. Political parties recruit and select candidates for elections and determine the policy platforms that help to form the national agenda.

- Statistics at the global level suggest more can be done by political parties to engage women in the community both as candidates for election and as contributors to the national policy agenda. Less than 20 per cent of parliamentary seats worldwide are occupied by women.

- The reason we need more women parliamentary representatives is not simply to do with fairness. Empirical evidence shows that every 1% increase in female parliamentary representation raises economic growth by 0.16%.

- The United Nations Development Programme indicates that globally 40 to 50 per cent of political party members are women but only 10 per cent of leadership positions in political parties are held by women. If grassroots participation by women in political parties is so much higher than parliamentary representation, we need to consider the impediments to women entering parliament and how political parties can help remove those impediments.

- One issue is the number of women that are selected by political parties to be candidates for what are considered to be winnable or ‘safe’ seats, where historical voting trends overwhelmingly favour that particular political party. If women are only selected for marginal or even unwinnable seats then there is less chance that they will be elected to parliament and much less chance that the proportion of women in parliament will change over time.

- In Australia the Australian Labor Party decided to implement a policy of affirmative action to increase the number of women selected as candidates for winnable or safe seats. The target set in 1994 was women candidates selected for 35 per cent of winnable seats at all elections by 2002.

- While such policies or quota systems are a clear statement of intent, they also need to be backed up by support for women candidates, through training and mentoring. In Australia, an organisation called Emily’s List was established, based on a US model, to assist Labor women candidates by providing them with a support network.
• But there are differences of opinion on the merits of affirmative action with some people in the community arguing that it creates a second class of people, who are chosen by gender not by full merit. Arguments of this nature need to consider the cultural and historical impediments that have hampered women’s progress in politics and whether affirmative action can help to overcome some of the barriers that exist.

• It is also important to note that in a number of Commonwealth countries, for example in the Pacific region, there is not a strong tradition of political parties within parliament. As such, candidates rely on more traditional networks in the community to support their election to parliament. In those countries where cultural norms favour the election of men, for example in countries where chiefly systems still operate, the challenges for women seeking to enter parliament are particularly significant.

• Recognising this, the Australian Government has recently announced a 10-year initiative to improve gender equality in the Pacific region, with mentoring and training for women parliamentarians and women candidates an important focus of the initiative. Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Australia is looking forward to contributing to this initiative because there is an understanding that gender equality does not only require a national commitment but also a regional commitment.

• Perhaps the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association could direct more attention to the issue of mentoring of people and groups who continue to be underrepresented in parliaments of Commonwealth nations, highlighting good practices in Commonwealth countries so that we can learn from each other.

• As well as the support that they provide for women candidates, political parties also can contribute to improved governance from a gender perspective by ensuring that their policies are gender-sensitive and that their policy platforms meet the aspirations and expectations of women in the community.

• Representation of women on party policy formulation committees is one way of ensuring that party policies reflect women’s input. At the same time political parties need to consider how well they engage with women in the community, including through civil society organisations that focus on the issues and interests of women.

• A particular challenge for political parties is to mainstream gender issues. For example, party platforms on employment and workplace relations should address issues such as continuing pay inequality between men and women and the role of childcare in encouraging increased women’s participation in the workforce.

• In the economic field, political parties need to ensure that their economic agendas address women’s economic development. As women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions within big business, political parties also need to have strategies that encourage economic development at the grassroots level, where women are often engaged as sole traders, in partnerships or in family businesses.

• As well as lifting the percentage of female representation in parliament, perhaps we should also be making sure that at least 50 per cent of the national discussion is directed to those issues which are of particular concern and interest to women. Otherwise true equality will not be advanced.