WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

The Chairperson of the CPA’s Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians argues that more and sustained action is required if Commonwealth countries are to meet the target of 30 per cent female representation in Parliament by 2015 or, for most, as soon as possible thereafter.

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This subject is anchored within the context of Millennium Development Goal 3: Promoting Gender, Equality and Empowering Women. The Commonwealth’s commitment to gender equality is demonstrated by a plan of action (PoA) for gender equality to cover the period 2005 – 2015 which was adopted by member governments in 2005. In this PoA, four critical areas for Commonwealth Action have been set out. They are:

• Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict;
• Gender, Human Rights and Law;
• Gender, Poverty Eradication and Economic Empowerment; and
• Gender and HIV/AIDS.

And by these points, therefore, the setting and ambit of this consultation have been defined.

It has always intrigued me that great men, even from ancient times, who determined that the concept of democracy was (and is) the ideal, have had difficulty in accepting women as being part of the democratic process. And so I ask: What could be more democratic than the two genders that equally share the space on this planet, to equally share its governance as well? So why then did it take over 2,600 years for women in governance to become “standard”?

And I use the word “standard” advisedly, since we have not yet arrived where we need or desire to be. Because the impediments to women becoming involved in politics are well known, they bear repeating here and include:

• Religious, Social and cultural barriers;
• Preservation of the male status quo and old boys network;
• The cut and thrust of political mud-slinging and smear campaigns;
• Lack of finance;
• Little or no family support;
• Women constituents supporting men candidates over women;
• Prevailing political, party structures that present obstructions;
• Women being less inclined to use unethical and dubious campaigning strategies;
• Requiring the ability to multitask, juggling home and work (long hours); and
• Media phobia.
Of course, this list is not exhaustive since the type of impediments varies from country to country.

Let us face it: when the first women took their place in Parliament amongst their male colleagues, it was with the concurrence of some, if not all, of the men present.

In perusing the biographies of these parliamentary pioneers, a school of thought seems to emerge that these women asked for no quarter, no concessions, no consideration of their gender. They were just determined to prove, and did in fact prove, that they were as good as, if not better than, their male counterparts at running their countries. Indeed women leaders such as my own country’s Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, Golda Meir of Israel, Indira Gandhi of India and Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom come to mind.

There is no doubt that these formidable women made their mark on the political landscape way beyond their own country so that other women all over the world who were secretly nurturing political ambitions began to feel brave enough to venture forward albeit tentatively at first. Women within political parties began claiming their right to be more than just foot soldiers.

Opportunities knock

In the Caribbean in the 1970s, as in many countries all over the world, women were now being given opportunities in education, business and in politics. The liberation process was taking off in earnest. The sound of shattering glass ceilings was sweet music to the ears of the stakeholders on what was then termed the women’s liberation movement. But the groundswell did not always translate into leadership roles for women.

A typical example is what we observed at the Faculty of Law at the University of the West Indies in Barbados in contrast with what was happening in judicial circles.

Whereas in the 1960s, 1970s and up to the early 1980s very few women opted to study law, by the mid 1980s women were catching up and...
so by the end of that decade, there were more female than male law graduates. Yet by 2000, the cream had not risen. Yes, we were seeing more and more women judges on the Bench; but at Court of Appeal level – very few. The cream just was not rising as expected.

I feel very proud now, though, to recall that although it was not until 2011, the full Court of Appeal of the OECS was comprised of women, sitting in Antigua. Today, the OECS Chief Justice is a woman who was appointed a few months ago. I know one other Caribbean jurisdiction that has had a female Chief Justice.

It is a combination of many factors, therefore, that have shown that in order for women to achieve true equality, they have to be part of the decision-making process at all levels, including of course, the highest institution in the land.

Maintaining the numbers
I want to warn about complacency. Drawing again on the experiences of the Caribbean, by the late 1980s there were more female graduates than males in the faculty of Law, but this was not the only one. A new phenomenon had been taking place.
levels, and not just in the traditional disciplines either. Boys were the new underachievers. While the girls were doing better, the boys were doing something which I refer to as “self-marginalization.” Too many boys were drifting into antisocial behaviour, drugs, violence, et cetera. And even while this new trend of male marginalization was taking root, even up to now, as in the world of law, the cream was not rising in the corporate world, the public service or the world of politics.

In fact, what we’ve seen in politics is that the fortunes of women candidates change from election to election with the percentage of women in Parliament going up and down. Even in Dominica we have moved from 20 per cent female representation in Parliament to a mere 12.5 per cent today. Of course, this lack of sustainability is most unsatisfactory. The lesson to be learned here is that mechanisms for maintaining and increasing whatever gains are made should be deemed to be necessary components of whatever strategies are devised. Furthermore, such mechanisms must be ongoing even after set targets have been met.

I was recently (once again) complaining to one of my male parliamentary colleagues about the dearth of women in our Parliament, and in reply he asked: “What do women bring to the parliamentary table that men do not?” I replied: “You’ll never know if you don’t put women there.” That may have seemed like a cop-out response, but I just wanted him to consider that he could not condemn what he did not know. Despite my colleague’s sentiments, there is a growing awareness of the significant contribution of women in political and other leadership positions at community, national, regional and even international levels. Striving for gender equality is therefore not just a noble goal, but a demonstration and acceptance that co-operation between the genders enhances the possibility of the advancement of society generally.

At the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians business meeting last year, the discussion session centered around the question: Is there such a thing as a woman’s agenda in Parliament? In response, some women said that setting forth a woman’s agenda (and I am paraphrasing here) would further marginalize women. Others expressed the view that Parliament was established by men, run by men and the decisions taken by men need not be for the benefit of women. Therefore, such decision-making ought to be filtered through gender lenses so as to maximize the benefits accruing to society overall.

All participants, however, agreed that women’s participation in Parliament is crucial and that CWP Members themselves ought to take the lead in encouraging and empowering women, especially young women, to become involved in politics.

Implementing the strategies

There are as many strategies devised, as there have been countries effecting ways, for encouraging more women into politics and Parliaments and I am sure all of us know some if not all of them: Quotas, affirmative action, constitutionally laid out percentages, political party arrangements, et cetera.

My personal choice, in the absence of affirmative action and quotas, is the 3 Ms: mentoring, motivating and mobilizing. I am particularly keen on the mentoring idea. When I speak to women MPs most tell me there was a woman they admired who influenced their decision to enter politics.

I am pleased to note, then, that the Commonwealth Secretariat’s PoA has been extended to foster greater empowerment of women and to adopt other strategies for increasing our numbers in the political arena. Such forward movement on the part of highly regarded organizations such as the Commonwealth Secretariat and the United Nations gives added credibility to the gender equality ideal.

What is more, the re-socialization element and the role adjustment aspect which are so crucial to bringing about greater acceptance of and less discrimination against women as politicians have a better chance of taking place, and in turn assist in engendering sustainability.

However, even as we strive to encourage more women into politics and Parliaments, let us consider Rwanda. When the Rwandan conflict was over, the country’s women took on the responsibility of rebuilding their country.

Their progression into Parliament to continue that building process was inevitable. Has the Rwanda experience translated into tangible gains for the women of that country? I would imagine that it has uplifted the profile and status of women in that country generally; but I’d like to know: what else?

Is it soon enough to know how the high percentage of women in the Parliament has been able to make a difference in the lives of the average Rwandan young girl? This is a story the world needs to know. And it must be told by our Rwanda sisters themselves. It is one movie I’m patiently waiting for.

And so, as 2015 approaches and our countries will be called to account, how many countries will have attained the desired goal of 30 per cent women in their Parliament? Some countries will, but most won’t Rwanda, keep that 56 per cent flag flying. We need to reflect on it every so often so that our countries’ aspirational must be maintained.