

**Policy brief for the Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for
Women's Affairs Meeting
16-19 April 2000, New Delhi, India**

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Executive Summary

This year's Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs Meeting (WAMM), *Advancing the Commonwealth Agenda into the New Millennium*, will agree on strategies for implementing the *Update to the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development (2000-2005)*, endorsed at CHOGM, 1999. The Ministerial Meeting will examine the progress made by Commonwealth governments on the implementation of the *Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women and Development (POA)*, adopted by CHOGM, 1995, and identify continuing constraints, through the sharing of best practices, innovative approaches and lessons learned. Ministers will consider strategies for advancing the Commonwealth's vision on gender equality into the new millennium, taking into account critical and emerging gender issues in the areas of Commonwealth comparative advantage (gender mainstreaming, human rights, political participation and peace, macroeconomic reform, globalisation, and social development). A strategic objective of the sixth WAMM will be to identify mechanisms for articulating a Commonwealth voice in gender agenda setting processes internationally and regionally.

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1. Status, representation, recent meetings

The sixth Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs Meeting was originally planned to be held in August, 1999, in New Delhi, India. However, because of the Indian General Election in October 1999, the Meeting was postponed, just six weeks before, in July 1999. A final date for the Women's Ministers Meeting was not decided upon until February 2000. Despite the Secretary-General's and the Commonwealth Secretariat's insistence that the Meeting be held in February (the Secretary-General's term of office ends in March 2000), it was decided that the Meeting would be held on April 16-19, 2000. It was important that the Meeting was held before the UN *Beijing Platform for Action* +5 to be held in New York in June 2000, so that its recommendations could be tabled at the UN.

Despite the postponement of the Meeting, the *Update to the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development (2000-2005)*, which is to be tabled at the sixth WAMM, was endorsed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), held in

November 1999, in Durban. However, it is unfortunate that the Women's Affairs Meeting, which was designed to take decisions into the new millennium, was postponed until April 2000. It is unlikely that any other Ministerial Meeting would have been postponed for so long and is perhaps evidence of the relatively low level nature of the Women's Affairs Meeting. It is testament to the relative isolation of and lack of co-ordination between the Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, that they did not collectively oppose the postponement of the Meeting. Despite the fact that the Women's Ministers Meetings are relatively small affairs, with only approximately 80 people attending, it would have been difficult to change the venue of the Meeting, since India had already put up the funding. At the fifth WAMM Ministers failed to identify a back up country. There was, therefore, no budget for a back up. It is interesting to note that at this WAMM, Ministers will identify a back up of at least two countries.

Participation levels at the Women's Ministers Meetings, which usually take place every two to three years, compare favourably with many other specialist meetings of Commonwealth Ministers. For instance, 45 out of a possible 54 countries were represented at the fifth WAMM in Trinidad and Tobago, 1996, and 33 Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs were present (Britain's delegation was led by a civil servant.) There were 11 Observers present at the Meeting. Due to the lack of advance warning for this WAMM, however, it is possible that many Ministers will be unable to attend.

The provisional draft agenda for the WAMM, *Advancing the Commonwealth Agenda into the New Millennium*, was prepared in March 1999, by a meeting of senior officials working with staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat. This agenda was endorsed at CHOGM, Durban, 1999. A provisional annotated agenda was subsequently prepared in February 2000.

The Minister responsible for Women's Affairs of the host country always chairs the meeting; in India this will be the Hon. Ms. Sumitra Mohajan, Minister, Department of Women & Child Development, Ministry of Human Resources Development. The new Secretary-General, Don McKinnon, will lead the Secretariat team. (Baroness Margaret Jay of the UK Women's Bureau, is expected to represent Britain at the Meeting.)

Because delegations are usually small, and the host government is responsible only for the accommodation of the head of government and spouse, the costs are lower than for other international meetings. The cost of hosting this meeting is approximately £86,000 - £100,000. This is considerably less than the cost of hosting other Commonwealth Ministerial Meetings. The relatively low cost means that smaller Commonwealth countries find it possible to host this meeting. Prior to India, the following countries have offered a venue in recent years; Kenya, 1985, Zimbabwe, 1987, Canada, 1990, Cyprus, 1993 and Trinidad and Tobago, 1996.

While no decision has yet been made, it is possible that the seventh WAMM will take place in Africa or the South Pacific region. It is unlikely that this WAMM will be held before the next CHOGM, due to be held in Brisbane, Australia, in October 2001, since WAMM meetings are usually held every two to three years. The recommendations of the sixth WAMM will, therefore, be presented at the next CHOGM.

2. Record for policy

The Commonwealth has a unique role in gender policy making. While decisions - reached, of course, by consensus rather than vote - may not always have a direct impact on global gender policy, the fact that the results of WAMM deliberations have in the past contributed significantly to global gender policy, indicates that the gathering has potential weight. For example, when Commonwealth Women's Ministers met in Cyprus, July 1993, they asked that the *Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women and Development, 1987*, be updated to reflect the needs and aspirations of Commonwealth women in the 1990s. Following the Meeting, an Expert Group on Women and Development prepared a new Plan of Action, which was presented as part of the Commonwealth official contribution to the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. Since the Commonwealth was the only international organisation with a comprehensive plan of action, the new *Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women and Development (POA)* heralded the UN *Beijing Platform for Action, 1995*. All Commonwealth countries have since signed the *Beijing*

Platform for Action. The Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) in Auckland, November 1995 adopted the POA.

It is unfortunate, however, that the momentum achieved at Beijing has not been maintained. Since the fifth WAMM, Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs have tended to adopt a rather isolationist position. The strength and historical link made with the UN in 1995 has not been sufficiently exploited. During the intervals between WAMM meetings, there is an absence of a Commonwealth voice. At the sixth WAMM, one of the main aims is to identify mechanisms for articulating a Commonwealth voice in agenda-setting processes internationally and regionally.

The sixth WAMM provides an ideal opportunity for Women's Ministers in the Commonwealth to make another significant contribution to global gender policy. One of the strategic objectives of this WAMM is to endorse the presentation of the *Plan of Action Update* as the Commonwealth contribution to the June 2000 Special Session of the UN General Assembly on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The *1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development* provides the policy framework for efforts to achieve gender equality in the Commonwealth. Through the Gender Equality Programme, the Commonwealth Secretariat seeks to realise this vision, focusing on areas in which the Commonwealth has a comparative advantage. The strategic objectives of the *Plan of Action* include strengthening institutional capacity to integrate a gender perspective into the mainstream of all government and Secretariat activities, and focusing on the key issues of gender and macroeconomics, women's human rights, and gender in politics, peace and conflict prevention. The Secretariat's gender mainstreaming initiatives have been commendable. The Secretariat has adopted new strategies to ensure that all programmes and activities incorporate gender concerns.

As with other Commonwealth gatherings, there is a strong measure of voluntarism in who does what following any Meeting. (Guidelines rather than treaties are adopted). While some countries have a good track record, therefore, others are less impressive. As a consequence, there is an uneven

level of achievement across the Commonwealth. A comprehensive and sustained level of implementation is necessary. This is one of the challenges facing the Commonwealth Women's Ministers in the new millennium. It is common for representatives of developing countries to be defensive about their success in achieving Commonwealth goals at these meetings and governments need to be encouraged to be objective about their achievements. Personality counts, and the recommendations of the Meeting depend largely on which Ministers are present.

3. Agenda for 2000

The provisional draft agenda, which will be confirmed or amended on the eve of the meeting, is as follows:

3.1 Advancing the Commonwealth agenda into the New Millennium (2000-2005): An Update to the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development

*Review the progress made by governments and the Secretariat on the implementation of the *1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development*. Particular emphasis will be placed on overcoming constraints that impede progress.

*Locating the challenges facing governments in the new millennium related to advancing gender issues, as described in the updated *Commonwealth Millennium Plan of Action for Advancing Gender Equality, 2000-2005*; and proposing strategic objectives and action points for its implementation.

3.2 Gender Mainstreaming: Overcoming Constraints, Achieving Results, Lessons Learned, and New Opportunities

*Sharing of best practices, innovative approaches and results achieved in mainstreaming gender in individual countries

*Challenges faced and lessons learned by Ministries of Women's Affairs in seeking to mainstream gender in government policy-making, planning and service delivery.

*The Secretariat's experience of developing the Gender Management System (GMS) as a Commonwealth approach to gender mainstreaming.

*The need for applying new policy approaches, possibly based on the system-wide principles of the GMS, to deal with critical and emerging gender issues, e.g., poverty alleviation, 'male marginalisation' in the Caribbean, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

3.3 Gender, Macroeconomic Policies and Globalisation

*Examination of the differential impact of globalisation on women and men and the opportunities and challenges for governments, the private sector and labour.

*How best to raise awareness of gender issues within globalisation to the appropriate global decision-making fora.

*Assessing the impact of the Commonwealth's pioneering project on integrating gender into macro-economic policies, using the national budget as the key policy instrument and the extension of the project, and how to raise awareness of this innovative budget work throughout Commonwealth countries.

3.4 New Challenges: Women's Human Rights, Political Participation and Peace

*Examination of ways to enable governments and the Secretariat to achieve the Commonwealth target of 30 per cent of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by the year 2005.

*Assessing key strategies emerging from Commonwealth regional symposia, for increasing the participation of women in peace-processes at all levels.

*Examination of innovative strategies for addressing violence against women, particularly in situations of war and armed conflict, in particular, the Commonwealth's integrated GMS approach, and discussion on the feasibility of violence against women legislation.

3.5. Looking to the Future: Collaboration for Enhanced Sustainability in Advancing Gender Equality

*Examination of strategies for advancing Gender Equality in a sustainable manner, through co-operation between governments, and between governments and the Secretariat, NGOS and other international organisations.

3.6 Any other business

*Papers for information

*Communiqué

*Acknowledgments

*Next meeting

*Close

4. Comments on numbered agenda items

1.. The Secretary-General's Report on the Implementation of the *1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development* will be tabled and there is likely to be an implicit acceptance that the POA has not been sufficiently implemented. Although progress has been made in advancing the political, social and economic rights of women, gender inequalities persist at all levels and in all countries. The reality for most women in the Commonwealth still falls considerably short of the vision expressed by

Commonwealth Heads of Government of "building a world in which women enjoyed their full rights and were equal partners in shaping the economic, political and social development of their countries." It is clear that the Commonwealth Vision for Women by the Year 2000 has not been adequately realised. The majority of Commonwealth women have not entered the twenty-first century as equal partners with men. The promotion of equality and equity of outcomes for women and men is, therefore, still critical. Ministers will focus on the constraints that impede progress and what can be done to implement the POA in the near future. There will be a renewed commitment by Ministers to the objectives of the POA. The updated Commonwealth Plan of Action, *Advancing the Commonwealth Agenda into the New Millennium (2000-2005): An Update to the 1995 Plan of Action on Gender and Development*, which will be tabled at the WAMM, is intended to provide a framework for assisting Commonwealth governments to meet this challenge. There will be particular emphasis on implementation strategies. Ministers will also agree on the monitoring mechanism for implementation of the *Plan of Action Update (2000-2005)*.

It is important that the adoption of the *Plan of Action Update (2000-2005)*, is more than an example of over-bureaucratisation and that the failure of Commonwealth governments to achieve the objectives of the POA, 1995, is not blamed on the inadequacies of the POA itself. There is no shortage of international instruments ensuring women's rights today. What is lacking is the observance and implementation of such instruments.

Ministers at the sixth WAMM will endorse the presentation of the *Plan of Action Update (2000-2005)* as the Commonwealth contribution to the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on the Beijing Platform for Action in June 2000, to bring issues and recommendations of particular Commonwealth relevance to international attention. Ministers will endorse the focusing of priority areas of the *Plan of Action Update* into those areas of Commonwealth comparative advantage, namely; gender mainstreaming, human rights, political participation and peace, macroeconomic reform, globalisation, and social development.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government in Durban, South Africa, in November 1999 endorsed the *Plan of Action Update (2000-2005)*. CHOGM approved the *Plan of Action Update* as the Commonwealth contribution to the June 2000 Session of the UN General Assembly. It also

took note of the report by the Commonwealth Secretariat on the implementation of the *1995 Plan of Action*. In the CHOGM Communiqué, Heads of Government were "urged to ensure provision of adequate resources to strengthen National Women's Machineries in order to achieve gender mainstreaming in all government policies, plans and programmes, in collaboration with other stake holders, including international stake holders." The Committee invited Heads of Government to endorse the message from the Women's Ministers to "ensure future Commonwealth support to governments and the Secretariat to mainstream gender, to enhance women's participation in political decision-making and peace processes; to promote women's human rights; and to address the impacts of globalisation and macro-economic changes on women and vulnerable communities."

2. When Women's Ministers met in Trinidad and Tobago for their fifth Meeting, the theme of the meeting, *Engendering the Agenda*, provided the opportunity to review the progress which had been made in the implementation of the *Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development (POA)*, since its adoption by Heads of Government in 1995. They discussed further strategies for achieving effective implementation of the POA and ensuring that gender was integrated into critical economic, social, human rights and political issues. Their challenge was to be innovative but pragmatic as they explored new avenues that would enable Commonwealth women to achieve equality in the new millennium.

It is to their credit that they reached agreement on strategies which were forward-looking and which set realistic goal for their governments. They were determined that gender integration into all government policies, procedures and programmes would become the norm rather than the exception on every issue. They saw women at the centre of the process of promoting the Commonwealth's fundamental political values and advocated that women should play a dynamic and pivotal role in politics at both national and local levels, as well as in peace and conflict resolution. They agreed that gender integration into macroeconomic policies was a powerful strategy for promoting women's economic empowerment, addressing poverty alleviation and promoting national economic development. They stood firm in their belief that the rights of women and the girl-child are an integral part of human rights and should be promoted and protected with rigour.

The institutional strengthening of national women's machineries - be they women's bureaux, ministries responsible for women's affairs or dedicated units or offices responsible for gender mainstreaming - to enhance their capacity for gender mainstreaming, is being addressed through the Gender Management System (GMS). This is a comprehensive network of structures, mechanisms and processes to ensure the effective integration of gender concerns into all government policies, plans and programmes, and thus to advance gender equality and equity.

Women's Ministries are often the least resourced ministry and so many national machineries are operating with finite resources. This severely limits their capacity for effective gender mainstreaming.

A series of GMS publications, including a *Gender Management System Handbook* and sector-specific resource materials, designed to aid gender analysis and planning, monitoring and evaluation, were published in mid-1999.

A major focus of the programme is the provision of technical assistance to member governments on mainstreaming gender and establishing a GMS. By mid-1999, GMS Preparatory Missions had been undertaken in 11 countries in all regions of the Commonwealth, and further missions are in the planning stage. The Secretariat has also provided a long-term gender expert to assist the Government of St Kitts and Nevis, the first country to pilot the GMS model.

Ministers will use the sixth WAMM to identify creative, dynamic and sustainable forms of partnership to advance gender mainstreaming in the Commonwealth, among governments, (e.g., bilaterally, regionally, across regions, between developing and developed countries), and between the Commonwealth and other agencies.

3. The Fancourt Commonwealth Declaration on Globalisation and People-Centred Development reads: "...the benefits of globalisation are not shared equitably. Prosperity remains the preserve of the few. Despite the progress of the past fifty years, half the world's population lives on less than two US Dollars per day. Many millions live in conditions of extreme deprivation. The poor are being marginalised." With women constituting

one of the poorest groups in the world, globalisation is having a negative effect on the position of women. Not only is the gap between rich and poor growing, so is the gap between men and women.

At this Meeting, Ministers are likely to consider collaboration with other Commonwealth Secretariat Divisions and international agencies active in this area, including the private sector, on developing a public policy agenda to examine the differential impacts of globalisation, trade liberalisation and the financial crisis on women and men. Ministers will discuss what they and the Secretariat can do to ensure that the Commonwealth effectively contributes to the current international debates on gender and macroeconomic policy issues.

At the fifth WAMM Ministers recognised that the globalisation of capital markets and liberalisation of international trade had created an environment which had significant implications for the process of engendering macroeconomic policies. It was recognised that macroeconomic policy was important in shaping women's living standards and their prospects for economic empowerment. Macroeconomic policy can worsen or improve the living standards of different groups of women and contribute to narrowing or widening gender gaps in incomes, health, education, nutrition etc. The Commonwealth Ministers also acknowledged the way in which gender inequality can constrain the outcomes of macroeconomic policy. For instance, by constraining women's supply response to economic reforms, and by constraining women's ability to invest in human resource development. The Women's Ministers recognised that integration of a gender perspective into macroeconomic policy has therefore both an equality and an efficiency dimension.

The aim of the Commonwealth is to contribute to the better design of policy. A better-designed macroeconomic policy would ensure that macroeconomic policy itself contributes to the reduction of gender inequality, and hence lessen gender constraints to successful macroeconomic outcomes. The aim is the simultaneous improvement of growth and human development performance in ways that also contribute to the empowerment of women. Since the fifth WAMM, the Commonwealth has attempted to integrate a gender perspective into fiscal policy, which is one of the most important areas of macroeconomic policy.

The focus has been on the national budget, with the main emphasis on public expenditure.

In order to encourage the development of gender-aware macroeconomic policies, with particular emphasis on the differential impacts of national budgets on women and men, the Secretariat has developed a set of tools for producing gender-sensitive national budgets, from which requesting member governments can choose the most appropriate for their national circumstances. Five countries have received technical assistance to pilot the tools. In collaboration with AusAID, the Secretariat has developed a manual entitled *How to Do a Gender-sensitive Budget Analysis: Contemporary Research and Practice*, focusing on issues, methods and strategies for the first year of a gender-sensitive budget initiative.

At this Meeting, Ministers will assess the impact of the Commonwealth's pioneering project on integrating gender into macro-economic policies, using the national budget as the key policy instrument, in existing pilots such as Sri Lanka and South Africa. Ministers will identify practical measures that can be initiated by governments and the Secretariat to further advance the process of mainstreaming gender into national budgetary processes.

Ministers will also discuss options for expanding the programme on engendering national budgetary processes, for example, exchanges between pilot countries and other interested member countries, additional pilots; and/or new fiscal policy areas for intervention, such as a) the revenue side, with particular attention paid to taxation; and b) credit policy and women's access to credit, which would facilitate women's entrepreneurship and address poverty alleviation issues.

Ministers may consider collaboration between Women's Ministers, Ministries of Finance, Planning and other sectoral Ministries, as part of the process of integrating gender concerns into the national budgetary process.

4. In 1985, Women's Minister's, meeting before the UN Nairobi World Conference, which marked the end of the Decade for Women, called for immediate, pan-Commonwealth action to confront violence against women. *Confronting Violence: A Manual for Commonwealth Action*, 1987, produced by the Women and Development Programme, emerged in

response to this urgent mandate. At that time, Ministers were concerned, in particular, to promote Commonwealth action against violence in the home, sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The Manual sought to provide an action guide for women's groups, lawyers, and health and media professionals, the police and the judiciary that would truly assist in confronting violence.

Thirteen years have gone by since the first edition of the Manual. During that time, Commonwealth governments have become more aware of women's victimisation. They have undertaken legal reforms, provided remedial and support services and publicly acknowledged and condemned the violence to which women are subjected. However, although progress has been made in the development of measures to reduce the incidence of such violence and to support and rehabilitate its victims, there is still much to be done.

Critical issues raised at the fifth WAMM included: the need for Commonwealth governments to ratify and implement the international covenants on women's human rights; the need to eliminate violence against women; and the need to address the commercial sexual exploitation of the girl-child.

Combating violence against women and the commercial sexual exploitation and abuse of children continues to be a priority for Commonwealth governments. The Secretariat has programmes on the elimination of these problems, and on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women.

Forty-seven Commonwealth countries have signed the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Under CEDAW states have an obligation to remove discrimination and take affirmative action within their governmental structures through which the realisation of women's rights can take place. CEDAW also requires action to protect women against discrimination by non-state actors. Country reports are considered by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women at its annual sessions held in New York. At these sessions, governments have the opportunity to plan and put in place appropriate

responses to the *1995 Beijing Platform for Action*. It is important that Ministers at the sixth WAMM utilise these reports and examine the responses of Commonwealth countries.

In response to a recommendation made by Ministers at their 1996 Meeting, the Secretariat has developed a model framework based on the GMS methodology, providing a range of measures, structures and mechanisms to address violence against women in a comprehensive manner. The framework is being piloted by the Government of Mauritius, which has opted to establish a GMS in the area of human rights. A national workshop to review the model framework was held in March 1999 for representatives of ministries, organisations and NGOs. Participants agreed a draft national action plan on violence against women that will form an integral part of the national gender and development action plan. This initiative will be further examined and assessed at this Meeting.

A manual on *Guidelines for Police Training on Violence against Women and Sexual Child Abuse* has been revised and updated. Another volume, *Advancing the Human Rights of Women: Using International Standards in Domestic Litigation*, was published in 1997. Regional and country studies have been commissioned on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Africa and Asia, and in India, Jamaica, Kenya, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad and Tobago. A 'good practice' guide on administrative and legislative measures to address the problem is being developed for dissemination to member governments. These studies will be further evaluated at this Meeting.

The Secretariat supports the integration of gender issues in democratisation, peace and conflict resolution activities. With the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Foundation, it assists member governments in developing strategies for achieving the target of having 30 percent women in decision-making in the political, public and private spheres by 2005. The 1999 publication *Women in Politics*, documents the experiences of 33 Commonwealth women who have been successful in the political arena.

According to the *Report of the Commonwealth Secretary-General on the Implementation of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development*, 1999, only two Commonwealth countries have more than 30

per cent women in the top political decision-making positions, namely, The Gambia, with 30.8 per cent women in its National Executive/Cabinet and New Zealand with 30.0 per cent in its National Parliament. South Africa has also reached the 30 percent target in its Cabinet. However, as of the same date, there are eleven Commonwealth countries that now have more than 20 per cent women in the National Executive/Cabinet and National Parliament. There are many more countries that have met the target of 30 per cent women in decision-making positions in Local Government, which suggests that women are still entering top decision-making positions from below. The Seychelles, Uganda, New Zealand, India, Canada and the Cameroon have 54 per cent, 40.8 per cent, 37 per cent, 33.5 per cent, 30 per cent and 30 per cent women in Local Government respectively. Britain has a poor record with only 22 per cent women in the Cabinet, 18 per cent women in National Parliament and 27 per cent women in Local Government.

In his opening address to the 1999 CHOGM in Durban, President Thabo Mbeki noted how few Commonwealth leaders are women. In fact, there were only two women on the platform, the Head of the Commonwealth and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. He said that women's participation was a particular Commonwealth challenge.

Female and male parliamentarians, and representatives of regional and international organisations and NGOs have attended symposia on gender, politics, peace, and conflict prevention and resolution for the Africa, Asia/Europe and Caribbean regions. Participants identified training as a critical strategy for overcoming barriers to women's political participation, civic leadership and engagement in conflict resolution initiatives. The final symposium in the series, for the South Pacific region, is being planned to address these issues in a pan-Commonwealth approach, in response to the emerging trend of extreme cases of violence against women seen in recent ethnic and other conflicts.

At this Meeting, Ministers will consider strengthening partnerships with organisations such as Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF), International Parliamentary Union (IPU), and to implement the recommendations of the regional symposia on *Gender, Politics, Peace, Conflict Prevention and Resolution*.

The UN Report prepared by Graca Machel on the impact of armed conflict on women raised concern by highlighting the fact that of the 150 wars which have been fought since the WW11, 130 have been fought in the developing countries. Most of these have been intrastate, ethnic conflicts and have been marked by an increasing disregard for the protection of civilians, in particular, women and children.

In its Communiqué, Heads of Government "expressed their deep concern at the targeting of civilians, especially women and children, including recent attacks on humanitarian personnel, noting that these acts, which violate international law, are often undertaken with impunity. Recognising the negative impact this can have on the building of durable peace, reconciliation and sustainable development, they encouraged all Commonwealth countries to promote compliance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law." Ministers will consider appropriate policies and model legislation to promote the human rights of women, and to address violence against women, particularly in situations of war and armed conflict.

5. This session is intended as a spontaneous session for Ministers to confront the realities of constrained financial and human resources that the Commonwealth works within. It is designed for Ministers to brainstorm new creative forms of sourcing funds. It will look to positive and imaginative solutions through more collaborative sharing of in kind, human and financial resources between countries, regions and other international organisations and forging links with the NGO community. Ministers will examine how the Commonwealth can better share their experiences through new cost-effective mechanisms, for example, investing in local senior-level experts instead of technical experts; in kind costs; regional colloquia and symposia to complement preparatory missions, etc.

Ministers will attempt to introduce concepts of accountability to ensure results from efforts, such as sound criteria for partnerships to ensure

efforts are sustained and commitment of government efforts to follow-up are worked out in advance. Ministers will discuss innovative approaches to establishing partnerships with men to advance gender equality of outcomes. Ministers will also discuss the advocacy, brokering, and catalytic role of the Gender and Youth Affairs Division (GYAD), with other social partners, including government-private sector and donor agencies.

It is expected that the Ministers will agree on a strategy for advancing Gender Equality in a sustained manner, through co-operation between governments, and between governments and the Secretariat, NGOS and other international organisations.

5. Interactions with other bodies

It is traditional for the Secretariat to invite several Observers to attend the Women's Ministers Meetings, including UN agencies, Regional Organisations, NGOs, and professional associations. At the fifth WAMM, the following Observers were invited: Caribbean Community Secretariat, Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, Commonwealth Countries League, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, International Labour Organisation, NGO Commonwealth Women's Network, United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, UNDP, UNICEF, UNIFEM, Commonwealth of Learning, and CHOGM Committee on Co-operation through Sport.

It is likely that the presence of UN Agencies, Regional Organisations, NGOs, and professional associations attending the WAMM as Observers will be encouraged to publicise the Secretariat's activities, forge closer synergy and open avenues for further collaboration. It is expected that there will be more than a dozen Observers present at the sixth WAMM. At the fifth WAMM a separate meeting was held for Observers alongside the formal session. It is likely that a similar parallel meeting will be held this year.

6. Other Issues

While forty-six Commonwealth countries have signed the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), eight Commonwealth countries have not yet ratified or acceded to CEDAW. Pressure needs to be placed on these countries to do so. Moreover, fourteen Commonwealth countries - almost one quarter of the entire Commonwealth - (including the UK), have made reservations and/or declarations to CEDAW. This makes a mockery of the Convention. Pressure needs to be exerted on these countries to accept the Convention without conditions. At the international level, an Optional Protocol to strengthen the CEDAW is currently being contested; the US has yet to sign the Convention and many more states oppose the Optional Protocol, including many in the Commonwealth. The Seychelles is the only Commonwealth country that has accepted the Optional Protocol. It is necessary that the Optional Protocol be accepted, without conditions, across the Commonwealth.

Violence against women continues unabated in the Commonwealth and it is important that at the seventh WAMM, this critical issue is given a higher profile. The Secretariat could usefully establish an Expert Working Group on Women and Violence in the Commonwealth to look at the extent of the problem, measures taken by individual countries, and issues for the next CHOGM. Failing the establishment of an Expert Working Group, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) could be encouraged to look at the issue of violence against women. There remains a considerable lack of awareness of international standards concerning violence against women. Judges across the Commonwealth are unaware of existing legislation. A gender aware judicial system is necessary. Violence against women is an issue on which Law Ministers could usefully join hands with the Women's Ministers.

In the light of the fact that the sixth WAMM was postponed and thus the sequence lost a year in 1999, it would be beneficial if the seventh WAMM was held soon after the next CHOGM in 2002.

It is important that the Women's Ministers use the sixth Meeting to decide upon a tight proposal for the UN *Beijing Platform for Action +5*, to be held in New York, in June 2000. The WAMM has the potential to contribute significantly to global gender policy and the UN *Beijing Platform for Action +5* provides an ideal opportunity for the WAMM to regain the momentum that it achieved at Beijing, in 1995. A high degree of continuity and lobbying effectiveness would be achieved if the Commonwealth Women's Ministers could meet together in the context of the UN *Beijing Platform for Action +5* in New York. The Commonwealth has an impressive gender policy. It is the responsibility and challenge of Women's Ministers to ensure that this policy becomes a reality, rather than mere rhetoric, for the majority of women in the Commonwealth in the new millennium.

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Helena Whall, author of this brief, is a part-time Research Associate at the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, which is in the process of formation at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS), University of London. She received her Doctorate in International Relations from the University of London in November 1999. Her PhD thesis focuses on the Peace Process in Sri Lanka. She is a freelance researcher specialising in issues of ethnicity, nationalism and conflict resolution, with particular reference to South Asia. This policy brief is the third in a CPSU series, relating to upcoming specialist meetings of Commonwealth Ministers, designed to assist governments and other interested parties. The author wishes to thank all those who helped her in preparing this document.