

16 April 2018

Commonwealth Women's Forum

'An empowering future for women and girls'

Keynote Address by the Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth

Home Secretary, UN Deputy Secretary-General, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, Commonwealth Friends and colleagues...

I think it's fantastic that we are starting this summit here together.

This is great, it is uplifting to see you all.

In fact, I feel like launching into song - but I'll spare you that.

Instead I'll simply say:

We are family: I got all my sisters with me!

Living life is fun

And we've just begun

To get our share of the world's delights

High hopes we have for the future

And our goal's in sight

No we don't get depressed

'Cause here's what we call our golden rule

Have faith in you and the things you do

You won't go wrong - this is our family jewel.

So we are a family, the Commonwealth is a family, the women of the Commonwealth 1.2 billion of us are sticking together and it's wonderful that all of you have chosen to be here and chosen to be the difference that we are going to make in our Commonwealth. And I'd just like to celebrate all the brave men who are here with us.

Because what faith, what a future, and what a jewel!



Our Commonwealth family jewel, empowering women and girls. The famous stone that turns everything to gold

So every day, every hour it is transforming the lives of millions of people – women and girls in our member countries, and the men and boys of their families and their communities too.

Because by empowering women, and working together for gender equality and inclusiveness, we really are putting the real wealth back into Commonwealth and we are putting the common back into wealth.

And the way in which we do this is by mutually supporting and reinforcing.

Our Commonwealth approach is to see gender equality as central to our collective goals of social and economic development, democracy, and peace-building.

So it is good that there will be a session at this forum on 'Women, Peace and Security', when the focus will be on the special contributions that can be made through women's mediation.

We also lay particular emphasis on the need to open up access by women to financial services, including in the informal sector of developing economies and for women entrepreneurs engaged in micro, small and medium sized businesses. And when we look at those businesses that is where most women start at the micro, small and business-sized level.

So there is a strong correlation between increasing the capacity of women to engage in economic enterprise and wider empowerment of women for leadership that will lead to achieving gender equality and sustainable development.

And even though a third of Commonwealth countries have successfully achieved and surpassed the 30% global target in politics, women's leadership within the private sector and the executive of public and corporate boards remain comparatively low with few countries attaining more than the 30% benchmark.

Therefore, through Commonwealth programmes and technical assistance, we are working to increase the participation of women in corporate decision-making at all levels.

And this requires real reform. Reform of banking services so that there is provision of products that are tailored to serve the particular needs and demands of women.

Alongside this, equitable access to climate financing is essential for greater adaptation and resilience strategies, so that the inclusion of women is not hampered by other pressures.

Indeed, women and girls play a crucial role in efforts to address climate change.

The 2030 Agenda provides the platform and pathway for addressing gender equalities, and as we the Commonwealth collectively come together we are well positioned to work collectively to join up the dots – making the case that women’s economic empowerment is a critical factor in tackling climate change.

The value of Commonwealth connection and cooperation lies in the ease with which member states are able to work together with respect and understanding, and to offer mutual support in a real spirit of goodwill and camaraderie.

That really helps us to build on our Commonwealth Advantage of having similar systems of democratic governance, the Common Law, shared language, and similar institutions of administration and education. That’s where we get our 19%

At the 2015 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, leaders reaffirmed their conviction that gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls should be mainstreamed into development, and reaffirmed the commitment to prioritising the issue in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and within the work that we were undertaking at the Secretariat.

And the heads also really welcomed the continuing efforts that were being made by all our member states and our Commonwealth bodies to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation as barriers to development and the full realisation of the girls’ potential.

They encouraged cooperation across the regions, and the real global effort and concerted effort at the national level to develop and implement a holistic and comprehensive response.

In the light of the above, and taking into account the internationally agreed development goals, we set four priorities.

First, women's economic empowerment. Second, women in leadership - and what a sight we have before us this morning of what women's leadership looks like and we are very proud that the Home Secretary who has joined us this morning happens to be, I think you'll agree, a good woman. So ending violence against women and girls; gender and climate change, they are our lode stars and we together are going to make a real difference. It is great that these priorities are really central areas of the focus for this forum. So what you do, what you say, how we come together, the things we learn we are going to suck it all up so that we are able to empower this agenda with your intelligence, your vitality, your knowledge. So please allow us to feed from all of that.

It is going to make such a difference because millions and millions of our people will be affected by what we do.

And the impact of domestic violence, the impact of physical and sexual violence is huge. The scourge is one of the most terrible we have - it's one in three women across the world and it is avoidable. So working together we can and must eradicate the stain and suffering that comes from violence against women.

And it's an imperative and it is not enough just to look at the economic cost which is spiraling socially, we've got to look at dysfunction and the demands on health provision, and lost productivity.

In all these areas our Commonwealth values and principles call us all to action

We can only do that once the fear and terrible reality of mental and physical violence is removed from the daily lives of mothers, sisters and daughters which affect our men and our boys too. And those of every woman and every girl in our own local communities and worldwide.



Our Commonwealth priority is tackling the scourge of domestic violence and we have got to have peace in the home because if we don't we will never have peace in our world. And that is how through these forums, through your work commit towards a really common future.

And we have to have a future where there is zero tolerance of abuse in the workplace, zero tolerance to human trafficking and we have to protect the sexual and reproductive health of our girls and working together I think we can make a real difference.

So the education and training of girls needs to be geared towards preparing them for full participation at all levels on equal terms, and with the expectation that opportunity to fulfill potential is not limited by any gender-related considerations or constraint.

I think I've said this before but every time I look at an empowered group of women I remember what my mother said. She said: "We don't let men do anything else on their own so why do we let them run the world?"

They need our help fifty-fifty. Fifty-fifty. They are great but all of the women are too.

So I think we will end as we started because if we are going to have a fairer future, if we are going to empower the future of women and girls I need all my brothers and sisters with me and so do you. And so let's get down to work, let's keep this song in our hearts, let's hug all the good men to us, with us to make sure they are on this journey and let's end as we began...