



The Commonwealth

8 March 2017

International Women's Day 2017

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

Excellencies, distinguished guests, Commonwealth colleagues and friends, sisters.....and brothers...

International Women's Day 2017 is being celebrated as we complete twelve months of celebrating 'An Inclusive Commonwealth', and our focus for the year ahead shifts to 'A Peace-building Commonwealth'.

Our Commonwealth values lay the foundations of inclusiveness, and equality of opportunity. Respect for the dignity of each individual regardless of gender or any other identity, is the base on which we build peace in our homes. Without it, there can be no lasting peace in our communities - nor the wider world.

It is appropriate that on International Women's Day we should consider the need for peace and protection in our homes and communities, because the economic and social costs of violence against women still vastly outweigh the costs of that perpetrated against men.

That is why we still need International Women's Day: for the world to come together to raise awareness of such inequalities, to demand remedial action, and to celebrate the achievements of women who - with or without the help of men - have succeeded in overcoming some of the barriers of prejudice and discrimination.

A peaceful life, free from violence, is a fundamental human right. Yet, simply because of gender, women and girls are disproportionately subjected to violence.

It crosses boundaries and can affect anyone, regardless of place or position. Even in what ought to be a safe haven - the home - violence and intimidation against women can be all-pervasive.

Only the cold hard figures will drive home the impact of this scourge. Research indicates that the cost of violence against women could amount to around 2% of the global gross domestic product. That is equivalent to US\$1.5 trillion, roughly the size of the economy of Canada.

Furthermore, findings reveal that domestic and intimate partner violence causes more deaths and entails much higher economic costs globally than homicide or civil war.

According to a UN Women study in India, a woman loses an average of five paid work days for each incident of intimate partner violence, while in Uganda, about 9% of



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violent incidents forced women to lose time from paid work, amounting to approximately eleven days a year.

In her well-known report, Sylvia Walby reliably estimated the total cost of domestic violence in the UK to be £22,869 billion in 2001. The good news is that she calculated the total figure had come down to £15,730 billion by 2008.

Imagine the positive impact on our economies if this trend were continued and replicated in every member state of the Commonwealth.

Imagine if we could reduce domestic violence against women in the rest of the Commonwealth as they did in the UK. The world would be an immensely better and richer place for us all to live in.

Despite cultures of violence and discrimination, women around the world are raising their voices, demanding basic human rights, and making an unequivocal stand against intimidation and fear.

Rather than being united in vulnerability, and by the denial and violation of fundamental human rights, women are choosing to combine in practical action and activism to defend each other - particularly those who are most vulnerable and marginalised.

On this day of all days, it is important to spread awareness and information about violence against women, men and children, because it is still an urgent issue around the world and within our Commonwealth.

At the beginning of my term in office as Secretary-General I committed to making the elimination of violence in the Commonwealth one of my very top priorities.

Our Commonwealth Charter declares: 'Gender equality and women's empowerment are essential components of human development and basic human rights. The advancement of women's rights and the education of girls are critical preconditions for effective and sustainable development'.

They are not just words; they have powerful meaning. By making our Commonwealth focus for International Women's Day this year '*Peace in The Home: Ending Violence Together*', we acknowledge that structural discrimination and inequality is perpetuated in our home settings.

It is sobering to consider that every day and night, millions of girls and women around our world face consistent threats in their homes, where they should be most protected and secure. And that is a reality.



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In the Commonwealth we are making March 2017 a 'Campaign Month of Activism Against Gender Violence'. We want to mobilise decisive and concerted awareness and action for the safety and wellbeing of women and girls, and to end the mental and physical suffering and pain that limit opportunity and fulfilment.

Significant strides have been made in the struggle to end violence against women in some of our member countries, and there is much we can learn from each other - particularly by sharing experience of what has or has not worked.

The Common Law, our shared language, and the similarities of our institutions of governance and administration, mean that within the Commonwealth there is immense scope for mutual support through technical assistance to accelerate legislative reform. This month, we will share many examples of good practice, and highlight experiences of success already achieved throughout the Commonwealth.

But we still have a long way to go before the vision of eliminating the scourge of violence against women and girls within the Commonwealth becomes a reality. We press on with firm resolve and clarity of purpose, determined that every girl and woman should be free to fulfil her potential to enjoy her fundamental human rights.

Our Commonwealth commitment for International Women's Day 2017 is to continue in the forefront of changing thinking and attitudes towards gender equality, and on practical action to achieve fully the economic and social inclusion of women and girls.

We know from 'The Power of Parity' report of the McKinsey Institute that between \$12 and \$28 trillion could be added to the global economy if women played an equal role.

Let us all - women, men and children - spend time in reflection this International Women's Day on the difference we can make as individuals, wherever we are.

May our Commonwealth aspiration to leave no one behind be realised, because it has been established that any enterprise can only be successful if women and men are involved 50/50.

Together in the Commonwealth as women, as men, as human beings of every age and identity, we commit ourselves to the pledge of 'Planet 50/50 by 2030'.