

Guide for Mainstreaming Gender into Commonwealth Ministers' Meetings



The Commonwealth

Introduction

The Commonwealth recognises that achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls are basic human rights; and essential elements of human development, which is indispensable for the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth member countries collectively promote gender equality as a core value enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter¹ and the Commonwealth's four priorities on gender equality:

- i. women in leadership;
- ii. women's economic empowerment;
- iii. ending violence against women and girls; and
- iv. gender and climate change.

Gender mainstreaming in the Commonwealth has been mandated at successive Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs), most recently reaffirmed in the 2018 CHOGM Communiqué.² In line with international instruments and commitments of member states on gender equality – including the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the 2030 Agenda – the Commonwealth Secretariat in its Gender Equality Policy³ explicitly adopts a gender mainstreaming strategy, with gender equality identified as critical pre-condition and component of all of its targets.

Gender mainstreaming is a cross-cutting outcome of the Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2017/18 to 2020/21.⁴ Cross-cutting outcomes reflect the Secretariat-wide commitment in these areas:

Cross-cutting Outcome 2: Gender Mainstreaming

Gender equality and the empowerment of women integrated in the Secretariat's policies, frameworks, programmes and projects.

This means that the whole organisation needs to be engaged in promoting gender equality through its work programmes, operations and systems. Many teams are already planning, delivering and reporting on this outcome; however, there remains significant scope to do this in a more systematic and co-ordinated way. Failing to mainstream gender will result in high social, economic and political costs for the Secretariat.

Gender mainstreaming is an approach, a tool, to better understand the causes of inequalities between women and men in our societies and come up with appropriate strategies to address them. The goal is to achieve equality between all persons, women, men, and others. The full participation and equal involvement of women are needed to accelerate and achieve sustainable development.

This guide begins with a brief overview of the role and format of ministerial meetings, followed by an explanation of the main gender mainstreaming terms. The subsequent section presents questions that need to be answered, as well as activities that must be undertaken in order to ensure that gender is mainstreamed effectively in ministerial meetings. It also provides examples of good practice identified through the gender analysis. The Guide ends with a gender mainstreaming checklist to assist all those working on ministerial meetings in their gender mainstreaming efforts, and a list of additional resources on gender mainstreaming.

The Guide is a knowledge product of the work of the Gender Section for the 12th Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (WAMM) held in Kenya in September 2019, and a commissioned paper undertaken by a consultant, Dr Jo Cribb, which provided the rich material for the Guide.

Objectives of the Guide

Given the importance of gender mainstreaming as a process to accelerate gender equality, and the clear direction provided by CHOGM to mainstream gender equality into legislation, policies and programmes, it is of crucial importance that the Commonwealth Secretariat's staff are equipped with knowledge on how to integrate gender mainstreaming in their work.

Much of the business of the Commonwealth is conducted through regular meetings of ministers. The aim of such meetings is to accelerate development in their countries and across the Commonwealth. This is done by sharing good practice and dialogue, which results in shared commitments and collective action. A gender analysis was undertaken of a sample of Commonwealth ministers meetings using a framework developed to guide the analysis. The framework was designed based on best practice for gender mainstreaming in meetings.

The purpose of this Guide is to assist Commonwealth Secretariat staff and teams who convene and deliver policy dialogue through ministerial meetings, as well as for monitoring and evaluation of the Secretariat's work programmes. It is also envisaged that the Guide could be useful to all individuals or organisations interested in learning more about gender mainstreaming and how it can be implemented in project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and, in particular, high-level meetings.

The ultimate aim is to provide recommendations on how to make Commonwealth meetings more effective in the future. Ensuring that women's and men's perspectives are integral to the processes and discussion will enhance the outcomes of ministers meetings; this will in turn play a decisive role in accelerating progress towards gender equality and improving development outcomes for all citizens and all countries.

Consensus Building and Policy Dialogue

The Commonwealth Secretariat's convening power, based on shared values, brings together its membership of 54 government representatives to meet and discuss the most pressing issues facing the Commonwealth citizens, to amplify their voice and achieve collective action on global challenges. The Secretariat convenes the biennial CHOGM and facilitates high-level participation by Commonwealth members countries in ministerial meetings.⁵ Ministerial meetings provide opportunities for consultation, consensus building and policy development at a high political level in the Commonwealth.

Some ministerial meetings are stand-alone such as WAMM, while other ministerial meetings are 'piggy-backed' or held in the wings/margins of other major international meetings. For instance, immediately prior to or after their meeting, finance ministers proceed to the annual International Monetary Fund/World Bank meetings; health ministers meet for a day before the annual World Health Organization's World Health Assembly; environment ministers now meet in the margins of United Nations Environment Programme meetings; and foreign ministers meet in the wings of the United Nations General Assembly.

The specific objectives and outcomes of ministerial meetings differ, depending upon the subjects they address. However, generally, these meetings help to:

- address common concerns which require international co-operation, and develop a consensus position or perspective on issues that are of benefit to member countries and could, in turn, act as a platform for wider global understanding and action;
- give member countries opportunities to speak to their national experiences in the relevant sector, and achieve a wider understanding of how other countries are addressing similar problems, identifying specific issues for the consideration of Heads of Government;
- launch initiatives and programmes that can be implemented through Commonwealth co-operation;
- provide mandates and guidance for the Secretariat's work and pledge resources for the Secretariat's funds (e.g. for the Commonwealth Youth Programme [CYP] and the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation [CFTC]);
- provide opportunities for ministers and senior officials to get to know each other and hold bilateral conversations in the margins of the meeting; and
- provide opportunities for other Commonwealth or non-Commonwealth organisations invited to attend meetings (as observers) to interact with ministers and senior officials and provide inputs (when invited to do so) at the meetings.

Moreover, since the venues of ministerial meetings such as WAMM rotate across the Commonwealth's membership, they provide an opportunity for host governments to demonstrate their commitment to the Commonwealth and enable meetings' participants to learn more about the culture and history of the host countries and regions.

Over the years, ministerial meetings have carried recommendations or decisions, which are normally endorsed by CHOGMs, that have had a significant impact on the content of the Secretariat's work programme in a wide range of areas. It is arguable that many of these important areas of work, which have been of considerable benefit to the Commonwealth, would not have been undertaken without the guidance, experience and collective will of ministers.

What is Gender?

'Gender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women, girls and boys. Your gender will dictate how you are treated and valued in your society, whether and how you have access to resources, representation and power.

Gender tends to be assigned on the basis of our biological characteristics, but gender is not biologically constructed. It is a social construct that is contextually bound – i.e. it can, and does, change throughout history, just as it differs across cultural contexts. What is expected from a woman or a man in the UK today differs greatly from what was expected 100 years ago. Expectations for women and men in Botswana are not the same as those in Tuvalu. While people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and workplaces. When individuals or groups do not 'fit' established gender norms, they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion. It is important to be sensitive to different identities that do not necessarily fit into binary male or female sex categories.

What is Gender Mainstreaming?

Gender mainstreaming was established as a strategy for affecting change in the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted by the 1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women. It underpins the approach of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. Gender equality and women's empowerment is not just one of the 17 SDGs; it is integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development, and is thus a prerequisite to the achievement of all SDGs. The Commonwealth Secretariat, as well as many other national and international organisations, has adopted gender mainstreaming in its work.

Women and men, girls and boys, have different needs and circumstances, including unequal access to decision-making, resources, human rights and institutions such as the justice system. The aim of gender mainstreaming is to take these differences into account, so that government actions benefit both men and women and are more effective. Therefore, gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for men and women of any planned action including legislation, policies, programmes and projects. Assessment of the implications should occur at all stages of the development of all actions of government and across political, economic, social and environment spheres. Even the processes that decide what issues governments seek to focus on should include a gender perspective.

Gender mainstreaming is not about adding women's concerns as an afterthought or add-on to a policy process; it is not about including a paragraph that states women were consulted. Nor is it about assuming men and women are homogenous groups with a single aim, needs and circumstances. Gender mainstreaming involves ensuring the equal participation of all men and all women in decision-making at the beginning and throughout any policy or programme development. It is about taking into account women's and men's multiple identities, such as their age, ethnicity, social status, sexual orientation or (dis)ability. It simply means asking the appropriate questions like:

- Who has access?
- Who is missing out?
- What needs to be done for equitable access?
- How will I benefit as an organisation or as an individual?
- Who is missing? And
- How to equitably address those benefits 'leaving no one behind'?

As mentioned above, the aim of gender mainstreaming is to take differences into account, so that government actions benefit both men and women and are more effective. Gender mainstreaming will also help ensure that the work of government does not increase the inequalities, which can often unintentionally occur from policies or programmes. The ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality, which will help to accelerate sustainable development. Decision-making informed by the experiences of ALL Commonwealth citizens can help to eradicate poverty by pursuing inclusive growth, while preserving and conserving natural ecosystems and promoting social equity.

Key Considerations When Mainstreaming Gender into Commonwealth Ministers Meetings

For the most part, practical gender mainstreaming is about running through a checklist of questions to ensure you have not overlooked anything or anyone. It is about asking the right questions, so that you can see where limited resources should best be directed.

1. Consider **WHO** is attending the meeting and who is invited to speak. Best practice would see a gender balance in attendees and those invited to speak.

While the Chair and organising committee cannot control the gender balance of ministers and officials attending, they can encourage member countries to create gender-balanced delegations and go as far as to encourage member countries to include emerging women leaders in their delegations.

Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (CHMM), 2018

The CHMM meeting is to be congratulated for the diverse range of speakers invited to contribute. Five women and four men presented papers or led sessions. While the gender breakdown of the ministers participating was skewed to towards men (78 per cent of ministers attending were men), the gender breakdown for officials was even, as was the gender breakdown of those observing the meeting.

This will ensure there is a pipeline of women leaders in the Commonwealth. Organisers should also ensure that the agenda is balanced, and invited speakers include as many women as men.

WHO will be there?

Ministers

- Will there be a gender balance in those participating in the meeting?

Speakers

- Will there a gender balance in panels and keynote speakers?

Officials/staff

- Will there be a gender balance in those in attendance?

2. Reflect on **WHAT** is on the agenda, what will be discussed, and how meeting participants will be prepared and supported for the meeting.

Best practice in gender mainstreaming is ensuring that gender issues are included as specific agenda items, as well as integrating a gender perspective into all discussed topics.

Commonwealth Education Ministers Meeting (CEEM), 2019

The Proceedings show that gender issues were integrated into discussion throughout the meeting, with topics such as increasing the number of girls taking science and mathematics and addressing boys' underachievement covered. Statements issued by CEEM post-meeting included references to gender: (i) encouraging actions to ensure both boys and girls have access to 12 years of quality education; and (ii) encouraging countries to take action to address gender inequalities in education.

The different experiences of men and women should be acknowledged and considered as part of decision-making. There is an opportunity for ministers meetings to enhance their discussions and decision-making by integrating a gender perspective.

This can be achieved with background papers that include gender issues and data disaggregated by gender, including gender experts as officials supporting the meeting, and including specific gender items on the agenda. The resulting actions will ensure policies and programmes are more effective for all.

WHAT will be discussed and agreed?

Planned discussions

- Will the meeting include discussion of the different experiences and perspectives of men and women?

Agreements and Communiqués

- Do the final statements and communiqué include gendered recommendations and actions?

3. Deliberate on **HOW** the meeting will be conducted. In order to support gender mainstreaming, background papers and agendas need to support discussion.

Background papers should include data disaggregated by gender and coverage of gender issues.

Chairs and organising committees have control over the agenda and the commissioning of background papers.

As such, they should use such influence to ensure a gender mainstreaming approach is taken. This will result not only in acknowledging the importance of gender-based actions, but will also translate into gender-based recommendations and actions.

Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting (CLMM), 2017

One agenda item was specifically focused on gender issues and gender analysis was included in some of the background papers. For example, gender mainstreaming was seen as an important action to enhance democracy; with strong democracies being critical to counter extremism. Preventing sexual and gender-based violence was included as a regional priority for some law ministers and as a critical issue to address in conflict situations, so as to promote and implement international humanitarian law.

HOW will the meeting be conducted & supported?

Agendas

- Do the agendas specifically include gender perspectives:
 - Integrated into agenda items?
 - As a separate item?

Background and supporting papers

- Do background and supporting papers:
 - Include data disaggregated by gender?
 - Identify existing inequalities and how they are being addressed?
 - Include the different experiences of men and women?
 - Identify potential risks and opportunities of decisions for men and women?

Checklist for Mainstreaming Gender into Commonwealth Ministers' Meetings

Considerations	Gender analysis of	Guiding questions	Answer
WHO was there?	Those participating (ministers)	Was there a gender balance in those participating in the meeting?	
	Invited speakers	Was there a gender balance in panels and keynote speakers?	
	Those in attendance (officials, staff)	Was there a gender balance in those who were in attendance?	
WHAT was discussed and agreed?	Discussions, as recorded	Did the meeting include discussion of the different experiences and perspectives of men and women?	
	Agreements and communiqués	Did the final statements and communiqué include gendered recommendations and actions?	

Considerations	Gender analysis of	Guiding questions	Answer
HOW was the meeting supported and conducted?	Agendas	Did the agendas specifically include gender perspectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated into agenda items? • As a separate item? 	
	Background and supporting papers	Did background and supporting papers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include data disaggregated by gender? • Identify existing inequalities and how they are being addressed? • Include the different experiences of men and women? 	

Resources

Gender Mainstreaming Guidelines for Project Planning (2017), available at: <http://compass.comsec.int/docs/gender/gender-mainstreaming-guidelines-for-project-planni-en>

Gender Equality Policy (2019), available at: <https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us/gender-equality-policy>

For further support:

Contact the Gender Section in the EYSDD: EYSDD-Gender@commonwealth.int

Endnotes

- 1 See: <https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/page/documents/CharteroftheCommonwealth.pdf>
- 2 See: <https://www.chogm2018.org.uk/sites/default/files/CHOGM%202018%20Communique.pdf>
- 3 See: https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Commonwealth_Gender_Equality_Policy_Oct2019.pdf
- 4 See: https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/CommonwealthSecretariatStrategic_Plan_17_21.pdf
- 5 **Annual ministerial meetings:** Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting (CFMM); Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers Meeting (CFAMM); Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (CHMM); **biennial ministerial meetings:** Commonwealth Law Ministers Meeting (CLMM); Meeting of Law Ministers and Attorneys General of Small Commonwealth Jurisdictions (LMSCJ); Trade Ministers Meeting; Sports Ministers Meeting; **triennial ministerial meetings:** Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers (CCEM); Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (WAMM); **quadrennial ministerial meetings:** Commonwealth Youth Affairs Ministers Meeting (CYAMM).

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