6 March 2020

International Women’s Day message from The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland QC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth

Our Commonwealth Charter speaks of gender equality and women’s empowerment as being essential components of human development and basic human rights.

It goes on to declare that the advancement of women’s rights and the education of girls are critical preconditions for effective and sustainable development.

So International Women’s Day is an important fixture in our Commonwealth calendar.

This year, we are making it more special than ever.

We are designating this month, March 2020, as Commonwealth Gender Equality Month.

We do so for a very practical purpose: to sharpen focus on the need to accelerate the rate at which action is taken by our member nations to achieve gender equality, particularly through the economic empowerment of women.

In essence, this means working together in the Commonwealth spirit of mutual support on Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Many countries require assistance with this, and so we are also cooperating to provide the wherewithal.

Today we launch a consultation on our Commonwealth Gender Equality SDG5 Implementation Toolkit.

Once completed, the toolkit will provide guidance on devising culturally sensitive training programmes, bystander intervention initiatives, and motivational campaigns to bring about positive change more swiftly - including on challenging gender-based violence.

For such efforts to be effective, baseline data needs to be gathered and statistics compiled so that progress can be measured.

Again, the Commonwealth Secretariat is providing practical assistance to member countries with this.

Our Commonwealth Innovation Hub is disaggregating and combining data to provide more accurate and in-depth understanding in national, regional and pan-Commonwealth contexts.

The exercise is revealing where additional data needs to be collected and compiled to inform policy decisions and targeted intervention.
So it is fascinating and extremely informative - if not altogether surprising - to discover that companies with three or more women on their executive committee or board scored higher on the Organisational Health Index than comparable less gender balanced enterprises.

It is very useful to know that, on average, for every £1 invested in a business, those with all-male boards show a loss of 2 per cent, while those with two or more women yield a return of 6 per cent.

Companies with more women in top positions achieve 16 per cent higher return on sales and 26 per cent higher return on invested capital.

The International Women’s Day theme for 2020 speaks of being ‘I am Generation Equality’ - a powerful incentive for us all to act and bring about change.

In our Commonwealth spirit we think too in terms of ‘We Are’, which gives us the encouragement of mutual support, cooperation, and of learning from one another.

This means men and boys just as much as women and girls; we can all be agents of change.

So my takeaway message today and for Commonwealth Gender Equality Month is: Let us give each other the tools, and work together to finish the job of achieving women’s empowerment.