

HRH The Countess of Wessex's speech at the Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting, in Nairobi, Kenya

Thursday 19th September 2019

Jambo,

Your Excellencies, Madam Secretary General, Ministers, honoured guests, I am delighted to be here for the 12th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting and I would like to thank the Commonwealth Secretary General and the Commonwealth Secretariat for organising this important gathering as well as the Government of Kenya for being such generous hosts.

Today I bring you special greetings from Her Majesty The Queen, who is delighted this meeting is convening once again and, as you would expect, I am honour bound to return with a good account of the full and productive outcomes of this conference, particularly as it is such an important precursor to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda next year.

Gender equality is a fundamental right but it is not yet the reality for many. Changing this is the best chance we have in meeting some of the most pressing challenges of our time - from financial and economic crisis, lack of healthcare, climate change, to violence against women and escalating conflicts. Women are not only more affected by these problems, but also provide some of the solutions and leadership to solve them; it is imperative that women are included in addressing these issues.

As a passionate advocate of the Commonwealth, I believe that this great family of nations has a vital role to play in leading the world on gender equality issues. Together we need to have an increased focus on ending gender inequality and discrimination, and an increased focus on building environments that enable women's political participation and economic empowerment. Only by ensuring the sustained rights of women and girls will we see justice and inclusion and a transformed future.

Earlier this year I publicly committed myself to championing women's meaningful participation in peace processes and to support the vital role women are already playing in resolving conflict, countering violent extremism and building peace at the local level. I am also urging greater support for all survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, both male and female, and for the many children born of rape.

To truly achieve sustainable peace and security, it is imperative that women's voices are heard when peace is being negotiated. It is so encouraging to hear about the positive impact of initiatives such as the network of Women Mediators across the Commonwealth and FEMWISE, in helping to build the capacity and confidence of women mediators and to champion their role in building peace.

But we must not limit our ambitions - we also want to promote women as negotiators, as ceasefire and peace agreement monitors, as front-line peacekeepers and as political leaders. Women throughout the Commonwealth, particularly at the grassroots level, have experiences to share that we can all learn from; their expertise should be recognised and promoted. But, for the benefit to be really felt we need to find more sustainable, flexible ways to support them, including protecting them in the roles they play.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda is a powerful tool for moving from exclusive to democratic decision-making, from gender inequality to gender justice, and from conflict and violence to sustainable and feminist peace. To realise the transformative potential of the WPS agenda it is time to move from verbal commitments by Governments, civil society and the private sector to action and implementation across the board.

However, the right conditions need to be in place for women's meaningful participation in resolving conflict, countering extremism and building peace, and this needs to start with how we empower our young women. We all know that education has the ability to transform young people's lives. It is crucial that all girls receive at least 12 years of quality education in order to realise their rights, increase their political participation and to open opportunities for them to secure better jobs and livelihoods.

I am delighted that tomorrow I will join the launch of the next Platform for Girls' Education policy paper on gender responsive education sector planning, encouraging states to adopt a whole system approach to advancing gender equality in and through education. It is good to see the UK and Kenya working together to advance this important area.

We must also fight to end violence against women and girls, including conflict related sexual violence. This violence significantly undermines their educational and employment opportunities; it harms women and girls' prospects in so many ways.

The public and private business sectors of the Commonwealth must also step forward to realise women's human rights to live free from violence. The *SheTrades* initiative, for example, focuses on economic growth and job creation in Commonwealth countries through the increased participation of women owned businesses in trade. Since April 2018, 2,500 female entrepreneurs have received support to create business linkages in Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. 318 companies have participated in trade fairs and

met buyers, resulting in trade leads, which if converted into sales, will be worth over 22million US\$. Initiatives like this really do work, empowering women, giving them equality and the dignified prospects they deserve.

In November, I am pleased to be attending the *Time For Justice: Putting Survivors First* international conference on tackling conflict-related sexual violence. The event in London is a global call to action to strengthen justice for survivors and hold perpetrators to account, to address the stigma endured by survivors, and to strengthen efforts to prevent sexual violence in conflict. I very much hope the Commonwealth membership is strongly represented at the conference and that it brings us together again to constructively address these issues.

Looking ahead, 2020 is a big year with the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action on gender equality and the 20th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. CHOGM will also be an opportunity to demonstrate how the Commonwealth is actively progressing gender equality and women's rights.

Her Majesty The Queen reminded us all earlier this year as we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Commonwealth that the "nations of the Commonwealth agreed to move forward as free and equal members". This equality I believe does not just mean those in government, or at the top of the tree of enterprise... it encompasses all of society regardless of gender, of background, or origin, race or religion.

More and more women's voices are being heard. However, we still have a long way to go before we can honestly say that these voices are not only being listened to, but being acted upon. Therefore we must ensure that we are keeping these issues high on the political agenda so that women and girls may play a full role in all aspects of life.

To effect change we need to live up to and embody the original values that the Commonwealth was founded upon; to uphold human rights, to strive for peace and security, to promote tolerance, respect and understanding, to ensure access to education and to accomplish gender equality.

It is an honour to be a part of this collective effort and I will continue to support and champion your work in tackling gender inequality across the Commonwealth. This will not only secure a more equal platform on which women and girls can build, but deliver an empowered – and ultimately brighter – future for the women of our Commonwealth family.

Asante.