Women’s Forum: A Call for Action on Gender Equality beyond 2015

We, the participants of the first Commonwealth’s Women’s Forum, held in St Julian’s, Malta from 22 to 24 November 2015, applaud the Government of Malta for successfully hosting this Forum, under the theme ‘Women Ahead: Be All That You Can Be’ which reinforced amongst other things the importance of women’s economic, social and political empowerment and the need to “leave no women behind, including women with disabilities and women with different choices”, the need to strengthen women’s access, participation and leadership in education, health, employment, technology, political and economic decision making and the judiciary. These will advance social justice and women’s human right as key contributing factors to achieve equality between women and men and better quality of life and sustainable development.

Considering the mandates of the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth’s commitments to gender equality, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, and other international instruments and national development commitments for the realisation of women’s rights and women’s empowerment: We, the participants of the Commonwealth Women’s Forum call on Commonwealth Heads of Government to recognise this Outcome of the Women’s Forum and seek to:

1. Reaffirm the importance of women’s leadership, equitable participation and empowerment as critical drivers for inclusive sustainable development;

2. Acknowledge the importance of the Women’s Forum as a platform: (i) to transform the mainstream processes with an effective monitoring process to be observed by member states and (ii) to ensure commitments to gender equality and women and girls’ empowerment takes centre stage and remains essential dimensions of sustainable development, and high on the agenda of Heads of Government;

3. Recognise that in order to achieve full gender equality all policies and initiatives should be gender mainstreamed, gender-responsive budgeted and monitored and assessed accordingly;

4. Accept the Commonwealth Women’s Forum as a permanent forum preceding the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM), support accountability mechanisms that contribute to the decision-making of CHOGM; and


Political Leadership

6. The Women’s Forum noted that in the Commonwealth, men continue to be significantly over-represented in political institutions and leadership and similarly
in ministerial positions, public service, diplomatic corps, judiciary, parliaments, and local governance.

7. The Women’s Forum recommended that member states identify and develop the strategies to improve opportunities for women to actively participate in politics at all levels, and for civil society groups, media to advocate for the role of women in political positions as key agents for responsive government that promotes sustainability.

8. Furthermore, the Women’s Forum calls on all Heads of States and Government who have not yet committed to the Global Leaders call to commit to the ‘He for She’ campaign to do so without delay. The ‘He for She’ is to engage men and boys as agents of change for the achievement of gender equality and women’s rights.

9. Political decision makers in democracies should reflect the societies they represent and therefore an equal balance of representation between women and men so that the decisions that are made better reflect the interests of society. The Women’s Forum calls for strategies to improve opportunities for women to effectively participate in the political processes and consider temporary measures such as quota and/or a target of female representatives in the Commonwealth.

Corporate Leadership

10. Observed with concern the under-representation of women leaders and decision-makers at the executive and non-executive roles in corporate boards for both private and state owned companies.

11. Called for strengthened systems to increase representation with a minimum of 30% and target timelines to meet target of 50% of women in decision-making at all levels, including through effective measures, regulations and voluntary codes where appropriate, for advancing women’s leadership.

Leadership in the Judiciary

12. Called on the need to assure equal pay for both female and male judges across the judicial sector and member states.

13. Acknowledged the influential impact of women’s judicial leadership across the Commonwealth in amending discriminatory laws, advancing the rule of law, equal justice and the rights of women and girls across Commonwealth countries. Called for strengthened measures to advance judicial diversity including terms and
conditions of service which enable women’s representation on the bench and progression through the ranks.

**Enterprise Development**

14. Called on the Commonwealth and Commonwealth governments to:
   - enact laws that promote a level playing field for women and men;
   - find new solutions to persistent problems/barriers preventing women from starting, running and growing their businesses. They noted that government procurement is an important dimension of international trade making up to 10 to 15% of the GDP of developed countries and up to 30 to 40% of the economies of least developed countries (LDCs). Governments therefore are urged to ensure their procurement processes are enabling and supportive for socio-economic advancement of women.

15. Reaffirmed the importance of women’s enterprise development and emphasise financial literacy to be extended to all women and girls, and women’s holistic empowerment as a driver of economic growth, political stability, peace, social justice and inclusive sustainable development.

16. Reiterated that it is critical to facilitate the process of women’s economic empowerment, for which a multi-pronged approach is required. This includes macroeconomic processes, an inclusive business, enabling environment for women’s employment, and increased access to productive resources such as land, property and financial services, and improving women skills and education for increased employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

**Access to Finance**

17. Called for the Commonwealth to explore innovative, inclusive and accessible financing mechanisms including public private partnerships and collaboration with all Commonwealth partners.

18. Acknowledged the continuing role of private financing and government financing programs that are mandated to support women’s entrepreneurship with a target of 30%, particularly for many poor women-headed households. The Women’s Forum stressed the importance of greater access for women to a full range of financial services and products and for the Commonwealth and development partners to consider ways to support women in this area.

19. Recognised the benefits of members of the Commonwealth to share good practices and developing support networks. Called on governments to support the collection of gender-sensitive data, ensure key economic and financial data are current, accurate and disaggregated by sex.
20. Progress on gender equality and women’s rights is only possible with a strong and effective women’s movements. It is therefore essential that women’s civil societies organisations are provided with adequate finances to carry out advocacy and support services in favour women’s right and gender equality.

Media and Technology

21. Highlighted measures at creating and leveraging media (digital, broadcast, print) and technology to empower women and girls in the Commonwealth through increase opportunity to education and leadership training in the fields of communication, media and technology.

22. Recommended active engagement with journalists, media practitioners and media houses to address through the promotion of proactive roles of women and men in public and domestic sphere and use media as a tool to break stereotypes of women and men in the media; encourage gender-sensitive reporting by governments, international agencies, regional bodies and civil society; and support an enabling environment for women’s innovation and enterprise.

23. Recommended the promotion of and access to technology tools so as to bridge the digital divide for women as an enabler for communication, education and business.

24. Recognized the need for the women of today to act as catalysts, role models, and mentors, to support the women of tomorrow in the field of ICT and beyond.

Social Development

25. Noted that poverty and under-resourced education and health systems have undermined access to quality meaningful education, basic health, employment and employability.

26. Acknowledged the importance of intergenerational cooperation to combat gender inequality. Young people especially girls must be meaningfully engaged in this process.

27. Recommended multiplicity of interventions at all levels necessary to effectively address the exclusion of girls and under-achievement of boys in education, combat related health matters involving women and girls’ health, and reduction of maternal mortality.
28. Recognized the need to embrace a holistic set of women and girls’ concerns into future women’s forums and ensure that as the gender agenda of the Commonwealth advances with member states and civil society to end all forms of discrimination including, sexual orientation, gender identity and women with disabilities.

29. Called on the Commonwealth to renew emphasis on the purpose and outcomes of education in the context of gender equity giving impetus to STEM through transformative education systems align to the goals for sustainable human development and economic empowerment.

30. Media and education are two pillars that can promote change for young women and girls but when we combine them into media education they can be a profound game changer. We recommend that media education and gender equity training be built into the curriculum and syllabi across all the Commonwealth countries beginning in kinder (age 4) right up to tertiary.

31. Called that special attention be made with regards to small island developing states (SIDS) as set out in the Outcome of the 2015 SIDS Conference, the “Samoa Pathway”, to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in disaster and climate change.

**Gender-Based Violence**

32. Underscored the need to address the wide spectrum and the root causes of power and control of sexual and gender-based violence (such as sexual and cyber harassment, stalking, rape, prostitution, trafficking, pornography, Female Genital Mutilation, domestic violence, forced and early marriage), as it continues to undermine the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims, yet it remains shrouded in a culture of silence. Noted the increasing rife social taboos and endemic cultural practices, which allows for child marriages, female genital mutilation/cutting, sexual violence and transmission of diseases on women and girls in the Commonwealth.

33. Called for
   - relevant strategies that will help policy makers’ shape and design programmes to support victims, legally deal with perpetrators and eliminate harmful cultural practices that have a negative impact on women and girls in the Commonwealth;
   - education of males to value females and their contribution to poverty eradication and sustainable livelihoods; and
   - implementation of laws and policies with respect to women’s health and safety.

34. Noted the prevalence of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) retards development in the Commonwealth and the consequences of CEFM on the rights of
women and girls and particularly their health, education, agency and right to be free from violence. Urged member states to continue to raise awareness of gender-based violence, and highlight support available to survivors and reference the issue of holding perpetrators accountable.

35. Welcomed continuing efforts by member states and Commonwealth bodies to prevent and eliminate Gender-Based Violence which includes CEFM, and encourage these efforts to be further strengthened particularly working with national and regional human rights institutions, traditional leaders, as well as survivors of CEFM through the Champions Against Child Marriage platform (CHAMP).

Conclusion and way forward

36. Called for the Commonwealth to establish an independent Technical Working Group on gender equality and women’s empowerment in alignment with the targets for the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to report progress to subsequent CHOGM.

The Women’s Forum requests the Commonwealth Heads of Government to endorse the Women’s Forum’s Outcome.

24 November, 2015