

Foreword

Women have an equal role to play in addressing some of the most pressing issues we face today – eradicating poverty, combating HIV/AIDS, preventing and resolving conflicts. If we do not enable half the world to play their part in solving these problems, we will only get half the solutions.

The year 2005 marks a decade of successful initiatives since Commonwealth governments adopted the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development, which was presented to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

This Reference Book for Gender Ministers provides a snapshot account of the Commonwealth's achievements in promoting gender equality over that decade and records the advances made by women during the 1995–2005 period. The publication also highlights the work of member countries and partner organisations across the Commonwealth and will allow us to build on achievements and learn from the challenges we have encountered. Further, it outlines emerging challenges we shall be addressing in the decade ahead.

I am grateful to all Commonwealth governments, Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, civil society organisations and partners for their contributions, which reflect the breadth and diversity of good practices and strategies throughout the Commonwealth. The lessons drawn from this experience will help shape the global

review of the Beijing Platform for Action on Gender Equality.

The mid-2004 Seventh Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs held in Fiji Islands adopted a new Plan of Action for Gender Equality (2005–2015). This 10-year plan constitutes a road map for Commonwealth action and provides a common agenda to tackle the persistent and emerging challenges we face in the area of gender equality.

Women are the strongest link in the virtuous circle of growth and development: educating women, for example, leads to better health for the entire family, and better health and education facilitate economic empowerment and growth. The education of women also results in significant social gains including lower fertility, better household nutrition, and reduced maternal, infant and child mortality. It also helps prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Giving women access to training, credit, land and property rights, as well as information on markets and technology, can improve livelihoods and increase productivity at all levels.

More and more women are being accorded their rightful place alongside men in political decision-making. Three Commonwealth countries have achieved 30 per cent of female representation in national parliaments, some 13 countries have attained over 20 per cent and 23 countries have more than 10 per cent. Women leaders at local government level in many countries have reached the



50 per cent target.

In 2004, the African Union took the unprecedented step to adopt parity representation of women and men within the organisation, and appointed the Honourable Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, as the first President of the pan-African Parliament.

The challenges facing the Commonwealth are many but not insurmountable. Peace, social and economic progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms are dependent on the active participation, equality and development of women.

Women must continue to be at the centre of the Commonwealth development and democracy agenda. This is critical to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. It is crucial if women are to have more choices and attain more power and control over their lives and the future of their communities and societies.

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