

Introduction

A Decade of Commonwealth Action

We pledge the Commonwealth and our countries to work with renewed vigour (for) ... equality for women so they may exercise their full and equal rights.

– Commonwealth Heads of Government, Harare Declaration, 1991

The 16-point Harare Declaration of principles, agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their summit in 1991, has become the standard by which social, economic and governance progress is judged in the Commonwealth's 53 member countries (see *Annex I*). The fourth of these points was the affirmation of equality for women 'so they may exercise their full and equal rights.'

The Commonwealth Secretariat has drawn up three plans of action (PoAs) – the first, the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women, in 1987; the second, the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development, in 1995 (see *Annex II*) which was presented to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing that year (and was given a 2000–2005 Update five years later, see Annex III); and the third, Plan of Action for Gender Equality, in 2005–2015.

The 1995 Plan of Action represented a shift in emphasis from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD), setting gender mainstreaming as the new direction of the Commonwealth's approach to achieving gender equality. The Commonwealth thus moved from a concentration on special projects for women to mainstreaming gender equality issues into the whole spectrum of Commonwealth policies and programmes, including democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and sustainable social and economic development.

The 1995 PoA articulated a Commonwealth vision of the world in which:

'women and men have equal rights and opportunities at all stages of their lives to express their creativity in all fields of human endeavour, and in which women are respected and valued as equal and able partners in establishing values of social justice, equity, democracy and respect for human rights. Within such a framework of values, women and men will work in collaboration and partnership to ensure people-centred

sustainable development for all nations.'

Each PoA was mandated, discussed and agreed on by Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs who meet every three years. Each was further based on extensive consultations with governments and civil society. The plans are usually endorsed by Heads of Government, and the 2005–2015 PoA will be presented to the Commonwealth summit in Malta in November 2005. The effect of this process has been full Commonwealth consensus.

The 2005–2015 PoA takes the Commonwealth into its third decade of working for the advancement of gender equality. Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, who held their 7th meeting in the Fiji Islands from 30 May–2 June 2004, agreed on four critical areas for Commonwealth action in the decade ahead:

- Gender, democracy, peace and conflict;
- Gender, human rights and law;
- Gender, poverty eradication and economic empowerment; and
- Gender and HIV/AIDS.

Within these critical areas, the Commonwealth aims to build on and deepen the gender mainstreaming approach introduced in the 1995 PoA and its 2000 Update.

Beijing Platform for Action

The year 2005 also marks a decade since the 1995 Beijing conference identified 12 critical areas of concern for women's advancement globally:

- Women and poverty;
- Education and training of women;
- Women and health;
- Violence against women;
- Women and armed conflict;
- Women and the economy;
- Women in power and decision-making;
- Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women;
- Human rights of women;
- Women and the media;



Equal rights for women and men to express their creativity in all fields

- Women and the environment; and
- The girl-child.

These form the core of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) (*see Annex IV*).

The lead-up to 2005 has thus been a time for reassessing the status of women, measuring progress and identifying gaps, and reiterating the global commitment to implementation.

Priority Concerns – The Commonwealth Survey

In 2003, as part of its contribution to the Beijing +10 process, the Commonwealth Secretariat commenced compiling the collective experiences and progress of member countries in advancing gender equality within the framework of the BPfA and Commonwealth PoAs. National Women's Machinerys (NWMs) were requested in a questionnaire to rank their priorities for national action from among the BPfA areas of critical concern and describe progress, constraints and plans in the top four or five areas. They were also asked to identify issues they believed would be of concern to them and to their regions in the next few years. All member countries responded, many with CEDAW reports attached¹.

Analysis of the survey shows broad progress in the advancement of women across the Commonwealth, although the extent and depth of change varies

considerably. Generally, countries have established NWMs, although these vary in size, influence, because of their location in the government structure, and funding. Most countries have gender equality policies. Gender mainstreaming is either part or planned to be part of national policy.

Education is seen as critical for advancing gender equality with all countries emphasising education of girls at least at primary school level – enrolment at secondary and higher levels is variable and appears to be dependent on a number of factors, including public expenditure on education, affirmative action policies, the family's economic situation and health status, and traditional attitudes. HIV/AIDS has also led to setbacks for socio-economic indicators in high-prevalence countries.

More women are using ICTs



Poverty among women, and domestic and other gender-based violence feature high on the priority concerns of most Commonwealth countries.

Commonwealth regional priorities for BPfA critical areas of concern are outlined in Table 1.1 (pages 8–9).

Emerging Issues

The country profiles and regional reports in this Reference Book provide the context for understanding the current and emerging challenges facing Commonwealth member countries and regions in achieving gender equality. The third Commonwealth PoA for Gender Equality 2005–2015 was developed through regional and pan-Commonwealth consultative processes that have critically assessed progress in achieving gender equality since the 1995 BPfA and the Commonwealth PoA of the same year, the lessons learned, the obstacles and challenges that persist, and new and emerging issues in the post-Beijing +10 decade.

The 2005–2015 PoA views issues of socio-economic development, democracy and peace as inextricably linked to gender equality. Thus, gender equality is viewed not only as a goal in its own right but also as a key factor in contributing to democracy and peace, eradicating poverty and hunger, ensuring education for all, improving maternal health, reducing infant and child mortality and combating HIV/AIDS. Advancing gender

Table 1.1: Beijing Critical Areas of Concern: Commonwealth Regional Priorities

1. Women and Poverty

In the 2003/04 Commonwealth survey, poverty among women was identified as a top concern throughout the Commonwealth with 49% of member countries placing it in their top three priority areas of concern and 71.6% among the top five. Poverty among women was of particular concern in Africa and the Caribbean.

Table 1.1.1: Women and Poverty: Priority by Region

Region/No. of countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	72.2%	88.8%
Asia (8)	12.5%	75%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	61.5%	66.6%
Europe (3)	33.3%	33.3%
Pacific (11)	18%	27.3%

2. Education and Training of Women

Of equal importance to the issue of women and poverty was education and training of women, reported by 49% of countries as among their top three concerns and by 69.8% among the top five.

Table 1.1.2: Education and Training of Women: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	38.8%	83.3%
Asia (8)	62.5%	62.5%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	61.5%	84.6%
Europe (3)	0%	0%
Pacific (11)	54.5%	63.6%

3. Women and Health

Among member countries, 35.8% ranked women and health among their top three priority concerns and 69.8% among the top five.

Table 1.1.3: Women and Health: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	33.3%	77.7%
Asia (8)	50%	87.5%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	38.4%	62.2%
Europe (3)	0%	0%
Pacific (11)	36.6%	63.6%

4. Violence Against Women

About 50% of countries in all Commonwealth regions (except the Pacific) reported Violence against Women among their top three concerns, with 79.2% placing it among their top five. Every member country in the Caribbean and Americas region and Europe placed this issue among the top five concerns, as did 12 out of 18 African, 6 out of 8 Asian and 8 out of 11 Pacific member countries.

Table 1.1.4: Violence Against Women: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	50%	66.6%
Asia (8)	62.5%	90%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	76.9%	100%
Europe (3)	66.6%	100%
Pacific (11)	36.3%	72.7%

5. Women and Armed Conflict

Only four Commonwealth members reported women and armed conflict as being among their top three priority concern areas – Lesotho, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Solomon Islands.

Table 1.1.5: Women and Armed Conflict: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Reported as Among Top 3 Concerns	Reported as Among Top 3 Concerns
Africa (18)	16.6%	22.2%
Asia (8)	0%	0%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	0%	0%
Europe (3)	0%	0%
Pacific (11)	10%	10%

6. Women and the Economy

All three European member countries placed women and the economy among their top concerns, followed by the Pacific (81.8% of the top five concerns) and Africa (61.1%).

Table 1.1.6: Women and the Economy: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	50%	61.1%
Asia (8)	12.5%	25%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	7.7%	15.4%
Europe (3)	100%	100%
Pacific (11)	63.6%	81.8%

7. Women in Power and Decision-making

Europe, the Pacific and Africa placed getting more women in power and decision-making positions among their top concerns. Among all Commonwealth members, 35.8% placed this issue among their top three concerns and 52.8% among their top five.

Table 1.1.7: Women in Power and Decision-making: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	44.4%	61.1%
Asia (8)	12.5%	12.5%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	23.1%	54.5%
Europe (3)	66.6%	100%
Pacific (11)	45.4%	63.6%

8. Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women

Among Commonwealth member countries, 33.9% placed improvement of institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women among their top three concerns, and 41.5% among their top five. All three European member countries placed it among their top five concerns, followed by Asia (50%) and the Pacific (45.4%).

Table 1.1.8: Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	22.2%	27.7%
Asia (8)	50%	50%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	30.7%	38.5%
Europe (3)	33.3%	100%
Pacific (11)	45.4%	45.4%

9. Human Rights of Women

Half of the member countries in Africa and Asia reported women's human rights issues among their top priority concerns. Among all member countries, 32% placed it among their top three concerns and 43.3% among their top five.

Table 1.1.9: Human Rights of Women: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	50%	50%
Asia (8)	50%	50%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	7.7%	30.7%
Europe (3)	33.3%	33.3%
Pacific (11)	18.1%	45.4%

10. Women and the Media

Only two Commonwealth countries placed women and the media among their priority concerns – Mozambique, which placed it second, and Singapore which said it placed equal priority on all the BPfA concerns (except for Women and Armed Conflict which was not applicable).

Table 1.1.10: Women and the Media: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	5.5%	5.5%
Asia (8)	12.5%	12.5%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	0%	0%
Europe (3)	0%	0%
Pacific (11)	0%	0%

11. Women and the Environment

Only two Commonwealth countries placed women and environment among their top five priority concerns – Nauru and Mozambique.

Table 1.1.11: Women and the Environment: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	0%	5.5%
Asia (8)	0%	0%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	0%	0%
Europe (3)	0%	0%
Pacific (11)	0%	9.1%

12. The Girl-child

Six Commonwealth countries – half of them in Asia – reported the girl-child as among their top three priority concerns. The three in Asia were Brunei Darussalam, India and Singapore (which had ranked all the areas of concern equally, except for Women in Armed Conflict which was not applicable). Dominica (Caribbean), Mauritius (Africa) and Vanuatu (Pacific) were the other three. Nine other countries reported it among their top five concerns, eight in Africa and one in Asia.

Table 1.1.12: The Girl-child: Priority by Region

Region/No. of Countries	Among Top 3 Concerns	Among Top 5 Concerns
Africa (18)	5.5%	50%
Asia (8)	37.5%	50%
Caribbean and Americas (13)	7.7%	7.7%
Europe (3)	0%	0%
Pacific (11)	9.1%	9.1%

equality across the Commonwealth will contribute to development, democracy and peace.

The Commonwealth recognises the need to work towards gender equality in partnership with men and boys, and also recognises the emerging male gender issues. These include boys' underachievement in education, male health issues, the pivotal role of men in preventing and combating HIV/AIDS, and the issue of child soldiers and young men in armed conflicts. Men are both perpetrators and victims of gender-based violence in armed and other forms of conflict.

As traditionally male-dominated industries collapse or are reorganised in the global economy, men frequently face unemployment. The Commonwealth appreciates that there is a diversity of regional and national experience in this respect, which needs to be addressed appropriately.

Also, recognising that over half of Commonwealth citizens are young persons under 30 years of age and that by 2015 the proportion is likely to increase to 60–70% in many member countries, the Commonwealth promotes the inclusion of young persons in all programmes designed to achieve gender equality.

The Commonwealth recognises that gender differences do not exist in a vacuum but intersect with a number of other factors of diversity, such as class/caste, race/ethnicity, age, religion, ability/disability and sexual orientation. Diversity is intrinsic to the Commonwealth, which derives strength from its member countries' mix of peoples, geographical environments and levels of economic development. It uses the principle of common values in diversity to share experiences and resources and develop consultative and collaborative processes.

The following is a discussion of emerging issues in the four critical areas for action in the new Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015.²

Gender, Democracy, Peace and Conflict

Many Commonwealth countries have embraced democratic systems of government, introduced accountability measures, and increased women's participation and representation through adoption and implementation of quotas and affirmative action measures. For example, Uganda has revised its constitution to provide for one woman Member of Parliament per district and one-third of local council positions for women. Similarly, India's 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments reserved one-third of all local government seats for women, which has resulted in over 500,000 women being elected to the Panchayat Raj throughout the country. Following the first post-conflict national elections in Sierra Leone in 2002, the percentage of women in parliament increased from 8% to 15%.

However, many governments remain fragile and lack the institutional frameworks to sustain democracy, such as Ombudspersons, electoral commissions, parliamentary oversight, an impartial judiciary to uphold the rule of law and human rights, and adequately trained civil servants, including women. Even where democratic institutions are firmly established, citizens, particularly women, continue to be marginalised and have little access or capacity to influence national policies, plans and programmes.

In the Commonwealth and globally, armed conflicts within and between states, sharpened by growing terrorism and assisted by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, are on the increase. Unequal power relations, lack of access to resources, intolerance and lack of respect for individual rights and freedoms fuel armed and other forms of conflict.

Statistics show that civilian populations are increasingly the targets of a myriad of human rights violations such as trafficking in persons, rape with impunity used as a weapon of war, abduction of girls, recruitment of child soldiers and other crimes against humanity. These actions and crimes, committed by both state and non-state actors, violate conventions and

treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the four Geneva Conventions, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with their various Optional Protocols. The differential impacts of conflicts on women, men and children, and the challenges they create, have profound democratic and developmental implications for all humanity.

The challenge now is to push beyond numbers and demonstrate the impact of women's contribution to democracy, peace and conflict in member countries; promote accountability for international legal frameworks that governments have ratified; domesticate international standards in national constitutions and legislations as tools for promoting *de facto* equality; encourage political parties to adopt the 30% Commonwealth target for women candidates; and ensure women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction processes. In line with the Commonwealth's comparative advantage, there is need to develop peace education curricula and promote a culture of peace, geared particularly towards young people, to ensure sustainability.

The Focus

Consequently, Commonwealth activities in this critical area will focus on:

- Strengthening democratic political systems through achievement of the Commonwealth target of at least 30% of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors;
- Mainstreaming gender equality into early warning mechanisms, conflict prevention and resolution, peace agreements, peace-building, reconciliation, post-conflict reconstruction, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes;
- Ensuring the collection of sex-disaggregated data and integrating gender analysis into policy-making,



Gender equality is essential to poverty eradication and sustainable development

- planning and programme implementation in conflict and post-conflict situations; and
- Documenting and disseminating good practice in gender-sensitive initiatives in the area of democracy, peace and conflict.

Gender, Human Rights and Law

Although 50 Commonwealth countries have ratified CEDAW and 16 have ratified its Optional Protocol, there are still significant gaps in implementation (see Annex VI). Many countries have ratified with reservations. The lack of a gender perspective in the administration of the law has stymied gains made in international and regional treaties and conventions.

Even where sound legislation exists, application and interpretation of these laws are inadequate for many reasons: lack of political will, lack of trained judiciaries, lack of enforcement capacity, traditional or customary systems of law that discriminate against women, women's inadequate awareness or legal literacy concerning their rights and recourse to justice, limited human and financial resources for gender-sensitive monitoring and enforcement at national, local and community levels, and inadequate evidence-based data collection. It is in this context that the human rights of women and girls continue to be widely violated.

Customary laws, practices and traditions often have greater significance and value for people in their daily lives than the established statutory and constitutional laws in a country. In addressing gender equality and human rights issues, it is critical to recognise the complex ways in which identities, values and behaviour are formed and regulated

at household and community levels, often being shaped by elders, traditional leaders or religious institutions.

Universal human rights and specific cultural values and traditions have largely been viewed as opposed rather than complementary, and would benefit from greater dialogue about how they might relate to each other. It is now important to focus attention on the opportunities for changing gender relations in communities by working in partnership with traditional, cultural and religious institutions and leaders.

In the area of customary and traditional laws and practice, it is urgent that harmful practices that violate the rights of women and girls such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, 'honour killings' and widow inheritance are eliminated. Where multiple legal systems exist, whether statutory or customary, protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls should be paramount.

The rapid growth of trafficking in persons is causing greater global concern. Many of those most exploited and subjected to slavery-like situations are women and girls. It is widely acknowledged that the root causes of this trafficking lie in issues of migration and labour market failings, in which gender inequality and women's poverty are significant elements. However, it is important to recognise clearly the distinctions between trafficking,

smuggling and regular and irregular migration, and to ensure that solutions and strategies appropriate to each context are found. Anti-trafficking legislation must embrace a human rights approach and protect the rights of those most vulnerable to abuse.

Indigenous peoples, particularly women, continue to be marginalised and disadvantaged in comparison to other groups in society, and face significantly greater poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. Despite acknowledgement of the history of colonialism and its role in the marginalisation of indigenous peoples in the Commonwealth's Lusaka Declaration of 1979, there has been a lack of recognition of their rights in many countries.

The Focus

Consequently, Commonwealth activities in this critical area will focus on:

- Legislative and constitutional reform, judicial capacity building and strengthening of mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and accountability;
- Culture, the law and human rights, including rights regarding access to and ownership of land and property;
- Gender-based violence, integrated with work on trafficking in persons (especially women and girls), conflict resolution and peace-building;
- Indigenous peoples' rights, with a focus

on indigenous women and girls; and

- Gender and human rights throughout the life cycle, addressing discrimination and opportunities at all stages of life and ensuring the maintenance of rights from one stage to another, linked with the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and poverty reduction strategies (PRSPs).

Gender, Poverty Eradication and Economic Empowerment

The Commonwealth contains one-third of the world's estimated 1.2 billion poor. It is now universally accepted that poverty is not only based on lack of income but is also intrinsically linked to lack of access to political, economic, social, natural and cultural resources. This results in the lack of entitlements and opportunities, and social exclusion that can be based on gender, class, caste or other forms of marginalisation. Gender inequality causes and exacerbates the impact of poverty on women, who globally account for some 70% of the poor.

While globalisation and trade liberalisation offer new opportunities for economic growth and poverty eradication, they also pose critical challenges related to loss of livelihoods and employment for both women and men, with women generally being more severely affected. Economic restructuring and high levels of debt, conflict, HIV/AIDS

Women have their say – more women are coming forward to elect political representatives and stand for election as well



and environmental degradation also constrain the ability of many countries to meet the challenges of poverty reduction.

Macroeconomic policies do not take into account the unpaid work that women contribute to the care economy or the unequal recognition and valuation of the contribution of women and men to production and social reproduction. They also focus predominantly on the formal economy, whereas women constitute the majority of workers in the informal economy, estimated to represent 45%–80% of all non-agricultural employment. Legal and regulatory frameworks have insufficiently taken into account women's rights. Lack of access to power and decision-making, education and training, and economic resources, especially land and credit, and the absence of social protection increase women's vulnerability.

The prevalent market-access focus of trade policies and liberalisation, and assumptions regarding the 'gender neutral' character of the processes of globalisation and trade liberalisation agreements, have often obscured their impacts on gender relations, poverty reduction and human development. Since women shoulder the primary responsibility for household and community management, their paid and unpaid work, their overall time burden and even their health are directly affected by trade policies.

Policies regarding exports and imports affect women as producers and consumers in different ways than men. Increased cutbacks by governments lead to reduced investment and expenditure in the social sectors, resulting in reduced access to basic services and social protection and causing food insecurity.

It is therefore important not only to enhance the negotiating capacity of Commonwealth developing countries so that they can play a key role in setting the agenda and can benefit from trade negotiations, but also to ensure that gender analysis becomes part of the process of developing trade policies and negotiations. In view of gender-differentiated access to resources and the gendered division of labour, the differential impacts on women and men



of measures undertaken must be taken into account. In this context, it is important not only that gender perspectives are mainstreamed into trade agreements but also that women participate meaningfully in the negotiations towards just and fair trading agreements and systems.

In order to effectively address the processes of the feminisation of both labour and poverty, the Commonwealth will broaden its approach to gender and economic empowerment to encompass the macro-, meso- and micro-levels as a continuum.

At the macroeconomic level, this means building on and institutionalising initiatives to mainstream gender-sensitive approaches across critical areas related to the formulation of fiscal and trade policies and policies related to enterprise and agricultural development.

At the meso-level, the main thrust of Commonwealth activity will relate to the creation of an enabling environment for women workers, both self-employed and wage-employed, in the agricultural and non-agricultural areas, and influencing poverty eradication strategies and programmes.

At the micro-level there needs to be focused attention on increasing access to resources of all kinds for women: natural, material, financial and technological. These would result in enhanced well-being and economic empowerment and would be manifested in food security, sustainable livelihoods, social protection and more and better employment opportunities.

An enabling environment includes the establishment of appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure workers' rights and adherence to core labour standards, and the adoption of appropriate social protection measures to mitigate the risks and vulnerability faced by women workers, including migrants. Women whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, forestry or fisheries need to be equipped with appropriate technical skills and backward and forward linkages.

Other key factors to enable women to respond to the world economy as workers and entrepreneurs include increased access to social, economic and natural productive resources, including land and capital; appropriate skills development; and access to markets and to knowledge and information, including ICTs.

Facilitating the organisation and networking of women can play a key role in their ability to make their voices heard at local, national, regional and international levels. Statistical and data collection systems need to enhance the visibility and valuation of women's paid and unpaid work.

The Focus

Consequently, Commonwealth activities in this critical area will focus on:

- Influencing trade, financial and labour policies for the implementation of Gender-responsive Budgets (GRBs), the engendering of multilateral trade processes and the improvement of women workers' conditions and rights; and influencing sectoral policies in areas that would enhance women's livelihoods, such as agriculture, fisheries and forestry by improving women's access to productive resources, markets, skills and extension services;
- Facilitating the process of creating an enabling environment for women workers, including by establishing frameworks for core labour standards, social protection, the identification and development of appropriate skills, and promoting women's organisations and networking; and
- Mainstreaming gender equality in programmes and processes related to poverty eradication, the MDGs, PRSPs, Sector-wide Approaches to Poverty (SWAPs), etc., and working to enhance women's access to and control over productive and natural resources.

Gender and HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS has reached crisis proportions in Sub-Saharan Africa, is increasing dramatically in the Caribbean and Asia, and has enormous implications for small states. At their Abuja meeting in 2003, Commonwealth Heads of Government highlighted its devastating impact. They recognised the fundamental importance of confronting the pandemic. Two-thirds of the five million people who became infected with HIV in 2003 were Commonwealth citizens. HIV/AIDS affects primarily people of working age, and in the

most severely affected countries it is decimating the human resources necessary to sustain social and economic growth.

Poverty and gender inequalities are driving factors in the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS. Women's inferior political and legal status perpetuates poverty, discrimination and lack of opportunity in social, economic and cultural spheres of activity, including access to and ownership of land and property, inheritance rights and decent work opportunities. In this context, women and girls, faced with the need to support their families, often feel they have little choice but to engage in sex work or in transactional sex (sex for food, rent, bus fare, clothing), which makes them even more vulnerable to HIV infection.

Women also bear the brunt of the social and economic impact of HIV/AIDS. Women of all ages, especially older women, very young women and adolescent girls, bear unsustainable burdens of care for the sick and dying in their homes, face additional health-care costs for HIV-affected family members, and in many cases cope with extra dependants such as orphans. Research has shown that up to 90% of HIV care is provided in the home. In some cases, over 43% of total household labour is lost to AIDS-affected households because of care responsibilities.

In a number of countries, there are growing numbers of child/orphan-headed households containing children with few prospects for education, socialisation or economic opportunities as they grow up. At the end of 2001, 11 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 15 had lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS. It is expected that by 2010, there will be 20 million AIDS orphans in this age group.

Women and girls are more susceptible to contracting HIV not only for biological reasons but because they lack the power to negotiate safe sex or refuse unwanted sex. Gender-based violence, particularly rape, is both a cause and consequence of HIV transmission. The high incidence of violence and forced sex experience by women, as well as their abandonment or eviction from their homes and communities when they are HIV positive, create enormous difficulties for women

who lack economic means or alternatives.

Illiteracy, lack of information or educational opportunities and inappropriate prevention messages further exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls to infection. It is critical to increase opportunities and create an enabling environment for women and girls to be empowered to make choices and informed decisions over their lives and relationships in the home, workplace and community.

Further, in over-crowded urban as well as rural areas, basic health and social services are grossly inadequate, especially in terms of treatment of opportunistic infections, voluntary testing and counselling facilities, anti-retroviral treatment and social and family service support. Even where support exists, many women and men are not aware of the services available to them at local and community levels.

Lack of availability and access to female-controlled prevention methods are a critical factor in the increasing infection rate among women and girls. Women are twice as likely as men to contract HIV from a single act of unprotected sex, but they remain dependent on male co-operation to protect themselves from infection. Greater attention needs to be paid to research and investment in microbicides, improving the female condom, and exploring other forms of female-controlled prevention.

Women constitute the majority of workers in the informal economy



While many policies and commitments made by governments and international organisations make the connection between gender and HIV/AIDS explicit, these commitments are not always implemented. Some examples of good practice are emerging, but there is often a big gap between policy and practice because of insufficient resources, training and capacity, especially where public sectors and basic service provision have been cut back. There is a need for greater attention to be paid to the implementation of policies and commitments, and for increased monitoring of and accountability for service delivery on the part of multilateral institutions, governments and civil society organisations.

The Focus

Consequently, Commonwealth activities in this critical area will focus on:

- Mainstreaming gender equality into multi-sectoral, national, regional and international programmes on HIV/AIDS prevention;
- Promoting partnerships between women and men to reduce the prevalence and impact of HIV/AIDS;
- Strengthening institutional partnerships to support the implementation of effective strategies to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS and address the social and economic impact of the pandemic, in particular on women and girls;
- Preventing new HIV infections among young people, particularly girls and young women, through support and promotion of the Youth Ambassadors for Positive Living Initiative.

Partnerships

The Commonwealth seeks to promote strong and dynamic partnerships in order to accelerate the achievement of gender equality through advocacy, brokering, consensus-building and sharing of knowledge, information and good practice. Partners include Commonwealth governments, the body of Commonwealth institutions, the United Nations and its agencies, international financial institutions, other multilateral and bilateral agencies, regional groupings, regional initiatives such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), civil society organisations and the private sector.

End Notes

1 In ranking BPfA priority concerns, some countries placed equal priority on some concerns. A few chose to forward national priority areas which did not necessarily coincide with the 12 BPfA areas of critical concern.

2 This section is based on the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015.