

## Foreword

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As part of the global landscape, our achievements in the Commonwealth often mirror the trends across the international arena. The global target of 30 per cent of women in decision-making across all sectors was adopted at the Fifth Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (5WAMM) in 1996. It is encouraging to note that some Commonwealth countries have gradually been able to achieve this target in parliament and local government. In 2013, at least 11 member countries were in the top 40 countries of women in parliaments: Rwanda tops the list with 56 per cent women, closely followed by Seychelles with 43 per cent and South Africa with 42 per cent. A third of members have a minimum of 20 per cent representation of women in parliaments, and the share of women ministers averages at 20 per cent.

The presence of women at the highest level of national government is even more elusive; only 17 of 193 Heads of State and/or Government globally are women, with four from the Commonwealth. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has been represented by women governors-general across the regions of the Commonwealth in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Canada, Grenada, New Zealand and St Lucia. In addition, women leaders have served as deputy presidents and speakers of the House of Assemblies; yet there are only 16 Commonwealth women speakers out of 39 globally from 189 parliaments. At the local government level, a handful of members have reached and surpassed the global target of 30 per cent.

Women's minimal leadership role in executive and political spheres remains a serious concern. This is fuelled by entrenched unconscious biases, which hinder women's effective participation in politics and leadership roles. In response, many countries have continued to strengthen inclusive systems of government through the introduction of accountability measures. There has also been a calculated effort to increase women's representation through the adoption and implementation of quotas and other affirmative policies. However, the representation of women goes beyond numbers to include factors of effective leadership. The Commonwealth is committed to increasing support for the advancement of women's effective leadership at the national, regional and local levels to enable members reach the agreed minimum of 30 per cent. Moreover, a critical mass of women in decision-making is pertinent to achieve political transformation to ensure women's effective participation, without necessary allegiance to the political elite or traditional norms existing in particular political systems that dictate how women actively participate or get involved in politics. Political party and electoral reforms will only be

successful if aimed at strengthening women's political participation, through changing of policies and mechanisms that will guarantee the rights and entitlements of women in all public decision-making processes.

The 'cycle of political accountability' mobilises around women's agencies and interests to secure political accountability for half of the world's population to be equitably represented, and for governance initiatives to be transferred and reflect the needs and priorities of all social groups. This is achieved through legislative and policy reforms that are effectively pursued with the ultimate goal of transforming politics. Models from the Commonwealth reveal that some member countries have attained political transformation by exploring and utilising the cycle of accountability at the different levels of decision-making – national, provincial/state and local governance. This publication thus focuses on four selected countries that can serve as good practice models for the Commonwealth, namely: Bangladesh, India, New Zealand and South Africa. A common thread in these countries is the important role played by political parties to implement necessary mechanisms to bring about change for women's inclusion in decision-making and governance structures.

The Commonwealth Gender Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015 calls on governments to introduce measures to promote at least 30 per cent representation of women in parliament, government and business by 2015. Notably, a major milestone for the Commonwealth was the significance of having the first woman Chair of the Commonwealth in 2011– the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Kamla Persad-Bissessar – and she handed over to (then) Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting held in November in the same year.

The Commonwealth believes in the potential of its women to bring about real change through developing their capacity to become agents for development and democracy through its programmes. The 2011 Commonwealth Day theme celebrated 'Women as Agents of Change' in leadership across all spheres including agriculture, education, finance, health, infrastructure, media and politics, in the private and public sectors and civil society structures. The Commonwealth further championed regional colloquia and international advocacy in partnership with national governments, the Commonwealth family and strategic partners to call for an increase in women's political participation in leadership roles at all levels of decision-making, and for key actors to develop strategies and institutionalise mechanisms to systematically deal with the barriers that persistently hinder the effective participation of women in politics.

**Ms Esther Eghobamien**

Interim Director

Social Transformation Programmes Division

Commonwealth Secretariat

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## About the contributors

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**Colleen Lowe Morna** is the Founder and Executive Director of Gender Links in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was the Adviser on Gender and Institutional Development for the Commonwealth Special Assistance Programme to South Africa from 1994 to 1999. She subsequently served as the founding Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the South African Commission on Gender Equality. Ms Lowe Morna is also a gender and media consultant and has managed the work of 35 correspondents as Africa Co-ordinator, Inter Press Service (1983–1987). She is playing a leading role in the development and promotion of the Gender Protocol for the Southern Africa region.

**Mukayi Makaya-Magarangoma** is Services Manager at Gender Links in Johannesburg, South Africa. She formerly worked at the Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC).

**Margaret Wilson** served as the first woman Speaker at the New Zealand House of Representatives from 2005 to 2008, and was the first woman Law Dean and Professor of Law in New Zealand. She has received numerous awards including the Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit, Life Member, Auckland Women Lawyer Association, and Vic Taylor Distinguished Long-Term Contribution Award (awarded by the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand) in 2011. She is currently a Professor of Law and Public Policy at the University of Waikato.

**Farah Deeba Chowdhury** is Associate Professor (on leave) of Political Science at the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh and Adjunct Faculty in the Department of Global Development Studies, Queen's University, Canada. She specialises in the areas of women and Islam, women and politics, women and work, and women in law and society. She completed her PhD at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, Canada.