

# Summary

This report documents progress made by the Commonwealth's 53 member countries in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. In doing so, it records Commonwealth countries' performances on available indicators covering the four themes adopted as priorities for Gender Equality 2017–2020 and beyond, endorsed by the 11th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers at their 2016 meeting hosted by the Government of Samoa. These themes are:

- 1 Women in leadership
- 2 Women's economic empowerment
- 3 Ending violence against women and girls
- 4 Gender and climate change

The report is structured around these four themes, and examines the extent to which Commonwealth countries are progressing on achieving the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These include SDG 5 ('Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'); and also, via the strong association this goal has with many of the other SDGs, how women and girls fare under several other SDGs. By assessing women and girls' health and well-being (SDG 3), their access to and use of educational opportunities (SDG 4), their country's record on clean energy (SDG 7), their capacity to participate in the labour force (SDG 8), their experiences of inequalities (SDG 10), their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change (SDGs 11, 13, 14 and 15) and their participation in decisions affecting their lives (SDG 16), and particularly decisions made concerning conflict, the report inevitably deals with many SDGs.

As of 2018, data collection and reporting on the SDGs is still at a nascent stage, with continuing work at the international level, to establish methodologies and standards. The SDG indicators are classified by tier, with the following definitions:

**Tier 1:** indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, and data are regularly produced by countries for at least 50 per cent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant.

**Tier 2:** Indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries.

**Tier 3:** No internationally established methodology or standards are yet available for the indicator, but are being, or will be developed or tested.

The tiers are updated on a regular basis, as methodologies are developed and data availability increases. However, it is expected that indicators remaining at the Tier 3 classification in 2020 will be removed from the SDG monitoring list. This will have an implication for measuring gender equality through the SDGs, since of the current list of 232 SDG indicators, 53 are gender related, and of the 53, only nine are currently classified as Tier 1.

To address the challenges of assessing progress on gender equality in a context of low data availability, this report takes a broad approach in its first iteration, seeking to gather available data and analysis through a desk review, supplemented by primary research and case studies. It is anticipated that future iterations of this report will focus on thematic areas, with the broader report updated as data becomes available.

The available data on the status of gender equality indicates uneven progress across all four of the priority themes in the Commonwealth, and brief summaries of the findings are set out below.

## 1. Women in leadership

Three dimensions of women's leadership are examined in the report. These include women's leadership at the parliamentary, corporate and local community – including local government – levels. Progress in each of these dimensions varies by region and by country, with no single trend across the Commonwealth. It is notable that progress in parliamentary representation, and women's leadership in the corporate sector seem to be benefiting from the presence of positive action and quotas, both voluntary and legislated.

### Women's leadership at the parliamentary level

Women's representation in lower houses of parliament, in cabinet positions and their occupancy of executive leadership positions were reviewed for all 53 Commonwealth countries. The report found that during the last 20 years (1997 to 2017), women's lower house representation in Africa has improved markedly, with the exception – barring Cameroon – of West Africa. However, on the election of women to cabinet, although progress has been reasonable in South Africa and Rwanda in Africa, Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean, and of course in Canada, with its 50 per cent representation of women in cabinet, progress has been disappointingly slow.

Women have also often been underrepresented in the roles of prime minister, president and parliamentary speaker or parliamentary president. Bangladesh, India and Pakistan lead the World Economic Forum's (WEF's) 2017 political empowerment index (WEF 2017), measuring the amount of time women have occupied executive roles in government over the last 50 years. In contrast to the South Asia subregion's poor performance in other levels of representation, women from Bangladesh, India and to a lesser extent Pakistan, have led the Commonwealth in their occupancy of prime minister and president positions, due to the presence of family dynasties ushering women into these roles.

The progress that has been made concerning women's increasing parliamentary presence is due to the implementation of policy advances and positive action, including legislated or voluntary quotas and reserved seats, increases in educational opportunities and the advocacy undertaken by women's movements.

### Women's leadership at the local level

This advocacy often begins at the local level, and can be seen in women's active engagement in civil society discourse throughout most Commonwealth countries – with most regions registering increasing levels of participation by women in civil society. The exception to this is in Asia, where women's participation at this level, aside from in Sri Lanka, has been in notable deficit. In the Pacific, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji Islands also have lower rates of civil society participation by women. This result in parts of Asia and the Pacific may be attributable to increasing government restrictions on civil society freedoms has been suggested elsewhere (Roth 2016), but is beyond the scope of this report to investigate.

Concerning women's participation in local government throughout the Commonwealth, this has varied markedly, ranging from less than 7 per cent representation in six small Pacific island states, up to 49 per cent in Lesotho. Several other Commonwealth states in Africa also achieve a 40 per cent or more representation of women at this level, including Namibia (44%), South Africa (42.1%) and Rwanda (40%), with Rwanda and Lesotho having adopted a 30% reserved seat allocation. Africa's results, with the exception of Ghana (6.7%), Zambia (8.2%) and Nigeria (9.8%), lead the Commonwealth regions, while Antigua and Barbuda (45.4%), India (37.2%) and New Zealand (32.5%) lead their respective regions. However, these results indicate that, as with national-level representation, similar attitudinal and policy challenges confront women in striving for representational parity at the local government level.

### Women's leadership in the corporate sector

Women's progress in moving into management positions in the business sector has also been incremental, with the most promising advances taking place in Europe, where many countries have a quota system in place. However, this is not the case in the United Kingdom (UK), which has voluntary adoption of boardroom diversity principles and, in doing so, has achieved an increase from 14 per cent of women in boardroom in 2003 to 27.2 per cent in 2017. While not as high as some of its European Union (EU) neighbours, the result is nevertheless encouraging. Africa has also been a world leader in gender diversity at the corporate board and chief executive officer (CEO) levels, with African women holding 23 per cent of positions in executive committees in 2016, compared with a global average of 20 per cent. At the CEO level, women occupied 5 per cent of positions, compared with a global average of 4 per cent that same year.

## 2. Women's economic empowerment

This section is concerned with factors preventing and facilitating women's entry into the labour market, together with factors assisting them in staying there. It also reviews women's ownership of companies and agricultural holdings and the extent to which they are overcoming barriers to ownership such as inheritance.

### **Basic human rights deficits preventing women's economic empowerment**

A number of barriers preventing women's economic empowerment are covered here, including their experience of forced labour and restrictions in their domestic movement. Commonwealth countries in which women are most subjected to these practices include eSwatini, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Tanzania.

eSwatini also ranks among the lowest in the world concerning women's lack of domestic movement, while India and Pakistan, although both limiting women's freedom of domestic movement, have recently improved on this measure. Further, in Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, wives are legally required to obey their husbands, while in six Commonwealth countries, spouses do not jointly share legal responsibility for maintaining their families, creating potential restrictions on women's capacities to be self-determining as economic agents.

### **Basic services supporting women's labour market participation**

Young women's secondary school completion rates yielded quite varied results across the Commonwealth. Australia (78.7%) and South Africa (78%) led these outcomes, closely followed by Tonga (74.9%), Fiji (74.2%) and Trinidad and Tobago (71.7%). A number of countries were clustered at the opposite end of the spectrum, registering exceedingly low rates. These were The Gambia, with only 3 per cent of girls completing secondary school, followed closely by Mozambique (4.4%), Uganda (4.7%), Tanzania (6.2%) and PNG (8.9%).

Those Commonwealth countries that were unable to adequately support girls in completing their secondary education also struggled to provide women with adequate access to modern family planning options. Cameroon, Botswana, Ghana and Nigeria also fell short in terms of adequate family planning availability, as did the Pacific island countries, with the exceptions of Australia, New Zealand and Fiji.

### **Women's experience of violence and access to justice**

A number of African countries, including Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia, together with Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the UK and the Pacific island countries, confront serious challenges in eliminating intimate partner violence. This is at the same time a severe challenge to women entering or maintaining a productive place in the workforce. For those countries where women also have poor access to justice, such as Kenya, Zambia, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and PNG, these

challenges are likely to severely compromise their capacity to maintain a job and reach their productive potential.

### **Women's labour force participation and key factors facilitating this**

In many cases, Commonwealth countries have seen progress in women's increasing participation in the labour market. Mozambique, Rwanda and Sierra Leone have 100 per cent of women, or very close to this figure, engaged in the labour market's formal or informal sectors. However, several countries have very poor female labour market participation rates. These include Bangladesh, Pakistan, Belize, Guyana, Malta, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, while others have seen decreases in women's labour force participation between 1990 and 2016; most notably Vanuatu, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, India, Tanzania, Lesotho and Malawi.

Women's access to credit in Africa and Asia is poor, with women tending to borrow money from sources other than financial institutions, and lower proportions of women borrowing to establish, operate or expand a business or farm. Sri Lanka is the only exception to this, comprising one of the few developing countries in the Commonwealth to exceed the global average in women's accessing credit from a financial institution to establish, operate or expand a business or farm. All other Commonwealth countries exceeding the global average were high-income countries where women's access to credit is strongly marketed.

Women's access to paid parental leave followed a similar pattern, with high-income countries such as Canada and the UK leading Commonwealth countries in the number of paid parental days women benefit from. This Commonwealth average was also exceeded by, among others, Bangladesh, Belize, Cameroon, The Gambia, India, Kenya, Mauritius and Seychelles, indicating that political will rather than national wealth is the most important factor in determining the availability of paid parental leave. This is exemplified by The Gambia, which has the third highest ranking in the Commonwealth, more than double the Commonwealth average.

### **Women's agricultural land holdings, their ownership and management of businesses**

Women's positions in the agriculture sector show, as noted in the final section on gender and climate change, that very small minorities of women have control over the land that they cultivate or where they run livestock.

The country with the highest proportion of women controlling the land they work on is Botswana with 34.7 per cent, contrasting with the majority of Commonwealth countries, where less than 25 per cent of agricultural holdings are managed by women.

This pattern is repeated concerning women's majority ownership and occupancy of positions as top managers of companies. South Asian countries are considerably below the world average concerning women's majority ownership of companies, with Bangladesh occupying the lowest ranking (1.7% of companies with majority female ownership). The highest ranking country is Cameroon, with 31 per cent of its companies controlled by women, followed by Lesotho with 25 per cent. This is still far from parity. Almost identical patterns reflect women in top management positions, with East Asia and Pacific region countries substantially ahead of their South Asia and Africa counterparts, but falling considerably short of parity. This reflects a similar phenomenon concerning women in leadership positions in company boardrooms, reported in Section 1 of this report.

### 3. Ending violence against women and girls

The report examines available data on forms of violence against women and girls, including female genital mutilation or cutting, violent discipline against girls, girls' experience of child marriage and forced sex, as well as intimate partner violence. The section concludes with a review of attitudes towards intimate partner violence. In addition, the report examines the importance of promoting women's roles as peacemakers in preventing conflict or engagement in national negotiations to manage such conflict.

#### Violence against girls

Female genital mutilation or cutting is not only evident in many African countries, but is also practiced in Asian countries including Brunei Darussalam, India, Malaysia and Singapore. Further, the practice is known to take place – although on a much smaller scale – in a number of countries hosting immigrants from practising countries, as well as refugees and asylum seekers migrating to Europe, Australasia and North America.

In Commonwealth countries, the practice is most widespread among girls aged 0 to 14 in The Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania. For older girls and women exposed to the practice, Sierra Leone should be added to this group. In Asia and elsewhere, comparative data have not been collected, flagging a gap that policy-makers need to address before effective solutions can be found to eliminate the problem globally.

Child marriage is another practice depriving girls of the right to good health and self-determination, subjecting them to risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives. Commonwealth countries practising the tradition in Africa include Nigeria, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya. The practice is widespread in Bangladesh and evident, although decreasing, for younger girls in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Likewise, in the Caribbean, Guyana and Belize record very high proportions of girls affected by child marriage – well above the global average of 21 per cent. The practice is also evident in all other Caribbean countries for which data are available. In the Pacific, the prevalence is quite high in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru, PNG, Samoa, Tuvalu and Tonga. In Europe, the problem is evident among practising groups migrating to European host countries as part of immigrant, refugee or asylum seeker movements.

Two additional forms of violence against girls present in all Commonwealth countries are violent discipline by caregivers and girls experiencing forced sex before the age of 18. Although data are unavailable for some Commonwealth countries, violent discipline affects more than nine in every ten girls in Ghana, The Gambia and Nigeria, and more than eight in every ten girls in Bangladesh, Jamaica, eSwatini, Sierra Leone and Vanuatu. The highest prevalence of forced sex experienced by girls in the Commonwealth is in Cameroon and Bangladesh, where more than one in every five girls is affected. In Uganda and Ghana, Rwanda and Malawi, the practice is only slightly less common.

#### Intimate partner violence

The prevalence of violence perpetrated by intimate partners – whether physical, sexual or psychological – remains a widespread problem throughout the Commonwealth. Six out of every ten women in Namibia reported intimate partner violence occurring in the last 12 months, while

the figure was more than four out of every ten women in Vanuatu, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Tanzania. Similar proportions of women to those cited above are affected in Kenya, Bangladesh, Mozambique and Ghana.

Data were also presented on the extent to which women and men either approved or disapproved of intimate partner violence under circumstances such as when a female partner burns the food, argues with her husband/partner, goes out without telling him, neglects the children or refuses sexual relations. A pattern emerging throughout Commonwealth countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific is that the majority of girls and women indicated that intimate partner violence was justified and were more in favour of the violence than men.

These attitudes are not unique to the Commonwealth. In cultures where intimate partner violence is condoned, the same cultures prescribe a woman's role as one that obeys the male-determined household rules. In these cases, intimate partner violence is going to seem normal and is therefore often supported by the whole community, including women and girls themselves. This highlights the need for interventions to including public education programmes seeking to change attitudes that target women and girls' attitudes as much as those of boys and men.

#### **Women's role as peacemakers in preventing or ending conflict and violence**

One very important strategy in changing a community's attitudes to violence against women and girls is for girls and boys to see women and men as positive role models in preventing violence or in managing it when it takes place. Involving women as leaders in not only peacebuilding at the community level, which is increasingly the case, but also as peacemakers at the national level, is an important way of changing attitudes towards violence against women and girls – which is often viewed as 'normal' behaviour.

While an increasing number of countries are recognising the importance of involving women in peace negotiations by incorporating women's participation strategies into their national action plans, progress has been slow. In the Commonwealth, Canada, the UK and Namibia have been global leaders in advocating for women's engagement at all levels of conflict prevention, peace building and peacemaking, as evidenced by Canada's National Action Plan for 2017–2022 on Women, Peace and Security.

## **4. Gender and climate change**

This section of the report covers the nexus between climate change and gender, and particularly the likely impact of climate change on women throughout the five Commonwealth regions. It begins each regional analysis by referring to the gendered impact of climate change on women in the fisheries and agriculture sectors, before examining Commonwealth countries' recent and historical exposures to disaster events linked to climate change. The report then presents data on Commonwealth countries' vulnerability to one measurable component of climate change, i.e., sea-level rise. Countries' performances on a number of energy-related measures are then presented, including their consumption of fossil fuels as a percentage of their overall energy consumption, and conversely, their uptake of renewable energy in their energy profiles. Countries' greenhouse gas emissions are also reviewed from 1990 to 2015. Lastly, the likely future uptake of renewables is reviewed; a development appearing to depend on the availability of investment capital and the policy framework that countries adopt to encourage this.

#### **The gendered impact of climate change**

A number of conclusions have emerged from the analyses conducted. Concerning the gendered impact of climate change, women and children have been displaced by a dramatically increasing number of disasters, many linked to climate change. This is particularly so in Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific, where population's livelihoods and security will continue to be threatened by storms, hurricanes, droughts and rising sea levels. Countries' national action plans, formulated to deal with such crises, do not, with the exception of Canada's, focus on women and security issues. Nor do they place women with men at the centre of decision-making about climate change prevention, adaptation and crisis management.

#### **Likely population displacement**

The largest Commonwealth populations likely to face climate-induced displacement are in India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Malaysia, the UK, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, although many small island states will confront threats to their entire existence because such large proportions of their populations will face displacement.

In 2017, Hurricane Irma required Saint Maarten and Antigua and Barbuda's whole populations to evacuate and has

left the islands uninhabitable. It is highly likely that in the Pacific, whole island populations will also face evacuation because freshwater aquifers will be overrun with salt water before the inundation of population centres takes place.

#### **Fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions trends**

When fossil fuel consumption trends are examined, only a handful of Commonwealth countries have shown decreases since 1990, and can therefore be considered models that policy-makers should consider borrowing lessons from. These countries, in order of their fossil fuel percentage reductions, are the UK, with a 10 per cent reduction, New Zealand, yielding a 7.3 per cent reduction, Zambia, showing a 6.9 per cent reduction (although only 1990 to 2000 figures are available) and Cyprus, with a 6.7 per cent fossil fuel reduction.

Six Commonwealth countries show decreases in greenhouse gas emissions, with five of these having shown substantial decreases, again justifying their status as policy and practice models. These are Guyana, registering a 63.3 per cent decrease, Papua New Guinea, producing a 62.4 per cent decrease, the UK, with a 24.6 per cent decrease and Solomon

Islands, with a 22.2 per cent decrease. Fiji has recorded a 3 per cent decrease, adding to the numbers of island states showing leadership in producing effective outcomes on this measure. To place this in context, the global average is a 40 per cent increase in post-1990 greenhouse gas emissions.

#### **Renewable energy uptake**

Lastly, in most cases, the key to the above results is natural resource protection and sustainable utilisation, as in the case of Guyana, and an uptake of renewable energy sources to replace fossil fuels. On this measure, those Commonwealth countries leading the adoption of renewables are Vanuatu, with an 11.9 per cent increase between 1990 and 2015, Cyprus, with a 9.4 per cent increase, Jamaica, recording a 9.2 per cent increase, the UK (8%), Rwanda (6.6%), Malta (5.4%) and Solomon Islands (4.3%). The challenges faced in adopting renewables on a large scale in many Commonwealth countries include the requirement for high-level capital investment to facilitate the transition to renewables on a large scale and the absence of supportive policy frameworks facilitating investment and the industry's growth.