

Commonwealth Women's Forum

Delivering a Common Future:
Transforming for Gender Equality

Rwanda, 20–21 June 2022



The Commonwealth

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Preamble

The Commonwealth Women's Forum (CWF) was held in Kigali, Rwanda, from 20 to 21 June 2022, drawing together 500 delegates from around the Commonwealth. The ambition was to explore the critical challenges and opportunities in advancing gender equality in the Commonwealth today around the theme '**Delivering a Common Future: Transforming for Gender Equality**'.

The CWF congratulated the Government of Rwanda for successfully hosting the third Commonwealth Women's Forum. In the words of the First Lady of Rwanda:

'Through the Commonwealth Women's Forum – we must say yes to women in leadership; women's economic empowerment; mitigate climate change; and we must win against violence.'

Record of Proceedings

The CWF recognised that while much progress had been made, persistent challenges to achieving gender equality remained for all Commonwealth nations. Women and girls continued to have limited access to education, digital technology, land ownership, capital, training and opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, and other needs that would raise their standards of living and those of the communities and countries they lived in. They remained underrepresented in leadership positions in both the private and public sectors. Women and girls across the Commonwealth continued to experience high levels of violence in their homes, workplaces, public spaces and online. The impacts of climate change were widely acknowledged to be gendered, with women and girls bearing the brunt. The CWF recognised that women were instrumental in the solutions to address this.

The CWF also recognised that women faced bias on multiple dimensions including race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and age, among others, and that efforts to counter inequality must focus on those facing multiple disadvantages.

The global COVID-19 pandemic threatened the gains Commonwealth nations had made over the past decades. Two years on from its start, evidence was emerging that the fallout from COVID-19 had the potential to entrench and intensify gender inequality, with increased levels of violence against women and girls, and a disproportionate burden of the economic downturn being borne by women and girls.

Against this background, delegates from across the Commonwealth met in Kigali. This Outcome Statement sets out the key messages and recommendations from their discussions.

Women in leadership

The CWF sought to develop a deeper understanding of the diverse and positive impact of women's leadership in the Commonwealth, and to consider what was meant by meaningful leadership when considering more inclusive leadership in theory and practice.

Panellists explored the key drivers of change to deliver more women in positions of power and appreciated how times of crisis and emergency had highlighted the importance of a diversity of perspective in leadership. To achieve such diversity and inclusion, it was important to provide 12 years of quality education to all girls, including girls and women of all ages. They reflected on the importance of enabling more women, especially young women to gain political leadership at all levels of government at this critical time. Panellists also looked to challenge preconceptions inherent in the debate around equal representation and diversity versus merit. The importance of data collection, enabling legislation, promotion of women's emancipation, financial freedom and economic empowerment were also highlighted.

Removing barriers to women's effective participation in decision-making roles and ensuring the full autonomy of women and girls – many women and girls were unable to make decisions that directly affected their bodies – remained crucial.

Women's economic empowerment

Women's economic empowerment in a time when the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, global events and the energy crisis was continuing to emerge was a key concern for the CWF. The

session reflected a strong commitment to entrepreneurship and gender-responsive trade as a means of increasing and embedding economic empowerment, and recognised the vital role small businesses played in creating job growth in existing and emerging sectors (for example, FinTech) in member countries.

The role of high-quality education, financial freedom – especially for women entrepreneurs in the informal economy – and equal distribution of care and housework between men and women of all ages were also highlighted as enablers of women’s economic empowerment.

Furthermore, addressing violence against women and girls was identified as a key precondition to women’s economic empowerment.

Ending violence against women and girls

When COVID-19 swept across the world, governments brought in measures that, while necessary from the point of view of the management and mitigation of risks related to the coronavirus, also gave rise to concerns over the safety of women and girls. Lockdowns – through a twin burden of an increase in incidence rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG) combined with reduction of prevention and protection efforts – were predicted to cut global progress towards ending VAWG within this decade by at least one-third. Against this backdrop, the CWF considered ways in which member countries were engaging men and boys, and the innovative use of data in addressing VAWG, which in turn helped improve health outcomes for women and girls and reduced harm to communities and societies at large.

The work on ending VAWG was seen to begin with addressing harmful patriarchal norms, and dismantling gender stereotypes through education and awareness-raising campaigns. It also involved embracing feminist and intersectional approaches to development and service provision, particularly for women with disabilities who face extremely high risk of violence.

Sustainable, dedicated funding to those working on preventing and ending VAWG, including to women’s grassroots organisations, was recognised as fundamental to achieving gender empowerment and equality. Engaging men and boys in addressing this challenge begins

with reflecting on power and privilege and listening to the voices of survivors; for initiatives engaging men and boys to be effective, they must be accountable to those survivors.

Another key consideration was the availability of good quality, comparable and disaggregated data. Initiatives such as the economic costing of VAWG had helped governments and other key stakeholders understand the cost of inaction on VAWG. Sound data would also help with designing, implementing and monitoring initiatives to end VAWG.

Intergenerational celebration

The CWF considered the critical issue of intergenerational dialogue, recognising and celebrating the contributions and diversity of women and girls of all ages, including older women. It recognised that women across their life course could experience multiple and intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination on the basis of their gender, age, sexual identity or disability, and that these could accumulate and be exacerbated in later life. In a context where across the Commonwealth, the absolute number of older people was due to increase by more than 100 per cent in the next 25 years, this session provided a clear recognition that older women must be recognised as equal members of society, requiring equal access to appropriate healthcare, economic opportunities, social protection and income support, and the means to participate fully in community life. Panellists emphasised that the Commonwealth must integrate an understanding of the needs and rights of older women and men across its work and its institutions.

Dignity and respect for older people should not only be promoted but ensured through the provision of quality healthcare and palliative care for older people and support to carers of the aged. The financial inclusion of women throughout their lives, including those in the informal sector, must also be secured to tackle poverty in old age, along with their access to justice.

Work with governments, businesses and traditional leaders should focus on addressing discrimination against older women, and on the provision of a platform for intergenerational dialogue, not only to recognise the role older people play in our societies, but also to enable transfer of skills between the younger and older women.

Gender and climate change

The CWF explored the intersection of climate change and gender, highlighting the need to include and promote women as vital changemakers and ensure their seat at the policy and decision-making table. It highlighted the fact that climate change disproportionately affected women and girls. The urban poor were particularly vulnerable and political leaders needed to listen to local communities and ensure that they were involved in adaptation and mitigation and not further marginalised. Panellists emphasised the importance of gender-responsive funding when looking at the intersection of gender and climate change, and discussed the specific effects that could be achieved by including and promoting more women's voices at the policy-making table when working on disaster risk management and resilience.

The CWF noted the importance of committing to innovation, invention and modernisation at all levels, and encouraged attending legislators and policy-makers to identify and eradicate discriminatory laws.

Recognising that women and girls are not only particularly affected by climate change, but also experts and agents of change, there is a need to garner commitments for gender-responsive solutions and to provide sustainable gender-responsive funding, especially to grassroots organisations that increased the resilience of women and girls and other vulnerable groups.

Climate change is a human rights, justice and health issue. It is therefore important to ensure provision of climate change-resilient health systems, including provision of sexual health services. For climate change initiatives to be transformative, they had to recognise the specific needs of girls and women through their life course.

Accountability for gender equality

Delegates at the CWF examined the progress made in establishing accountability mechanisms for gender equality in all spheres of government, including the executive, legislature and the judiciary. They also examined ways in which national human rights institutions, human rights defenders and multilateral institutions could assist governments in ensuring they met their international and regional human rights goals.

Delegates noted the barriers to holding governments accountable for their gender equality goals, specifically the persistent gaps in credible and accurate disaggregated data in relation to women's empowerment in all spheres.

Delegates highlighted the need for an inclusive and intersectional approach to gender accountability mechanisms, considering disability, age, sexual orientation and gender identity.

While there had been notable developments in certain sectors, women's economic empowerment appeared to have declined. Many countries had experienced similar challenges and the forum observed that these examples should be shared across the Commonwealth. Government, civil society organisations, parliaments and multilateral organisations should work more collaboratively for the creation of a credible disaggregated dataset for women's empowerment and gender equality.

There is also a need to use existing accountability mechanisms (including those of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], the Universal Periodic Review [UPR] and the Generation Equality Forums [GEF]) more efficiently, and to feed the outcome of these processes into a central Commonwealth database.

Human capital development

The lessons learned across the Commonwealth from the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of women to work, progress in their careers, and to access education and coping mechanisms were a focus as the CWF discussed how digital technology continued to impact human capital development. Lessons in remote working and supportive employer practices, access to education and the impact on the careers of women needed to be shared and used to improve institutional and national practices. The barriers to human capital development in a digital world could be addressed through inclusive and collaborative approaches, and the CWF considered a wide range of perspectives during this session.

Information and communications technology (ICT) could complement and enhance education and facilitate effective professional collaboration. However, to ensure that women and girls could

benefit from opportunities afforded by ICT, there was a need for comprehensive education in both formal and informal settings. Private–public co-operation was necessary – not only to tackle online harassment and cyberbullying directed at women and girls, but also to increase technological literacy and affordable internet access and ICT equipment. Gender stereotypes that prevent women and girls from utilising ICT should be addressed.

Peace in the Commonwealth

Inclusive and gender-sensitive conflict prevention and peacebuilding were reported to be critical to sustainable development, and women’s meaningful participation in peace and security processes was imperative to create lasting peace. This included the elevation of women in civil society, peacekeeping, business and diplomacy, and as human rights defenders and peacebuilders. Women’s effective participation should include in all aspects of programme design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

The CWF noted that the women, peace and security agenda had received increased attention since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and progress was being made – but more remained to be done.

Women remained chronically underrepresented in conflict prevention and preventative diplomacy and in funding and decision-making relating to security, conflict resolution and peacebuilding because of violence, intimidation and other systemic barriers. Women and girls were also at increased risk from global emergencies such as climate change, conflict and extremism.

Conquering cervical cancer

Cervical cancer elimination was stated to be a health equity and social justice concern that transcended gender and was reflective of a system’s preparedness to deliver care to its most disenfranchised. Cervical cancer elimination had been put on the agenda by Commonwealth health ministers from 2017 and a taskforce had been established to help the Commonwealth attain its targets. While cervical cancer was one of the only cancers with proven elimination strategies, namely the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine and effective

screening tools for pre-cancerous lesions, significant obstacles to eradicate the disease remained. These obstacles included a lack of access to medical countermeasures, particularly in many low- and middle-income countries, and associated stigma and misconceptions about the disease at the community level. Clearing the path to cervical cancer elimination required bold strategic actions that were designed to improve community awareness, strengthen health systems, lower the price of life-saving products and accelerate the introduction of affordable technology into screening and treatment algorithms.

Eliminating cervical cancer was not just a health, but a social justice issue. To ensure that women did not die needlessly from cervical cancer, delegates observed the need to provide education and dispel myths and misconceptions about cervical cancer. There was also a need to engage civil society, train health workers, and provide affordable early detection screening kits and other cervical cancer lifesaving tools, including HPV vaccines and medicines. The Commonwealth Secretariat launched a global taskforce in 2021 and works with the World Health Organization (WHO) for joint cervical cancer elimination.

Recommendations

The following recommendations to Heads of Government express the wishes of the participants of the Commonwealth Women's Forum, who convened in Kigali, Rwanda, from 20 to 21 June 2022. These mainly focus on the most critical elements necessary for successful transformation for gender equality and 'Delivering a Common Future'.

1. Drawing from Commonwealth best practice and examples, reform and introduce new legislation and strategies aimed at increasing meaningful leadership opportunities for women in both the public and private spheres. Such efforts should focus on arenas where women are most underrepresented, such as healthcare, manufacturing, engineering, construction, ICT, the creative industries and finance/business, as well as the parliamentary and local government levels.
2. Champion efforts to broaden the diversity of political leadership across the Commonwealth and identify strategies to encourage, enable and sustain more young women in political leadership. This includes provision of high-quality education and capacity building including mentorship, promotion of women's empowerment and financial inclusion, and enabling legislation.
3. Utilise gender impact assessments in decisions about trade to mainstream gender and prioritise and leverage government and private procurement to increase contracts awarded to women-owned businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
4. Target 'aid for trade' to increase women's economic empowerment and adopt the International Trade Centre's (ITC's) 10 policy recommendations (2020) for mainstreaming gender in free trade agreements, with model clauses and focus on trade-related capacity building.
5. Support programmes that accelerate women's entrepreneurship-leveraging initiatives, such as the Commonwealth Digital Connectivity Agenda.

6. Recognise that male violence against women and girls is the most pervasive human rights violation and a significant public health challenge that poses hefty economic costs to individuals, families and countries in the Commonwealth and beyond. Acknowledge that gender-based violence intersects with other forms of discrimination, including against women with disabilities, older women and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning) women.
7. Provide technical as well as financial resources to end VAWG, in particular to women's rights organisations. All initiatives aimed at addressing VAWG, including legal reforms, engaging men and boys, and the provision of training and capacity building for healthcare providers, should be designed and implemented in response to the lived experiences and needs of survivors.
8. Invest in training, capacity building and technological resources for VAWG data collection and analysis and encourage innovative utilisation of data, including carrying out economic costing of VAWG. Encourage data collection efforts to be conducted with strict adherence to ethical and safety guidelines and ensure that collected data is disaggregated, comparable and collected regularly – for example, during the rollout of Demographic Health Surveys.
9. Acknowledge the importance of Commonwealth member countries taking a life course approach that explicitly includes older women and men and tackles ageism. Increase investment in intergenerational activities that value older and younger women equally, thus enabling them to have an active role to play in achieving the goals and objectives of the Commonwealth.
10. Encourage recognition that older women are equal members of society and provide resources to ensure that they have equal access to appropriate healthcare, economic opportunities, social protection and income support, life-long learning, and the means for participating fully in community life.

11. Strengthen the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by age across the life course, including older age groups, to allow the diversity of women and girls' experience to become more visible.
12. Recognise the particular vulnerabilities of women and girls to the impacts of climate change, but also recognise their particular expertise and indigenous knowledge. Ensure their inclusion as agents of change in gender-responsive climate action planning and implementation as a means to accelerate actions and improve efficiency.
13. Ensure access to climate finance at the local and community levels to enable citizens to engage in the planning and implementation of climate mitigation and adaptation.
14. Allocate sufficient gender-responsive funding and establish other support mechanisms, through traditional project support, the allocation of existing funding streams or specific climate-focused gender budgeting. Funding and other support mechanisms should focus on supporting and scaling up grassroots initiatives.
15. Provide adequate ICT education, training and access for all girls and women, especially those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, to enable them to access and fully utilise online educational and professional opportunities in an increasingly fluid and dynamic educational and work environment.
16. Carry out legislative and policy reforms to ensure that women and girls are free from online violence and cyberbullying, to ensure that ICT is a tool for gender empowerment.
17. Ensure that all gender equality accountability mechanisms take an intersectional approach in their processes, so that the most vulnerable women – particularly lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex (LBTI) women – are not left behind.
18. Following on from the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), where Heads recognised the role of young people and women in preventing and countering violent extremism, recognise the diverse roles that women

- play in peace and security across the Commonwealth. Provide support and funding for more meaningful inclusion of women in established security institutions.
19. Enable women, including through the establishment of sustainable funding, to advance a 'whole of society' approach to peace and security issues, with an emphasis on civil society- and business-led approaches to peace promotion and counter-terrorism.
 20. Heads are called upon to recognise the newly accredited 'Women Mediators of the Commonwealth' in the 2022 CHOGM communiqué¹ as a resource in mediation in the Commonwealth.
 21. Recognise cervical cancer elimination as a health equity and social justice concern that transcends gender and is reflective of a system's preparedness to deliver care to its most disenfranchised. Provide support to the cervical cancer elimination agenda, including to:
 - a. ensure that women and girls have access to cervical cancer lifesaving tools including HPV vaccines, early screening tools and medicines;
 - b. ensure that, by 2025, all girls aged between 9 and 13 years in the Commonwealth have access to immunity from HPV infection through vaccination;
 - c. ensure adequate increased investment in the cervical cancer control plans, to accelerate elimination targets; and
 - d. establish a Commonwealth evidence base for cancer control that will provide faster access to the growing body of research into cancer.

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1 Commonwealth (2022). *Communiqué of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting: "Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming"*. <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/chogm-2022-communiqué-leaders-statement-and-declarations-delivering-common>

