


# WOMEN AGENTS OF CHANGE



**Commonwealth Day 14 March 2011**

## **A message from the Chair-in-Office Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago**

It is my particular privilege this year as Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth to share my perspectives and expectations of Women as Agents of Change, the theme of this year's Commonwealth Day celebrations.

It is truly a fitting theme as we embark on a new decade of this millennium, where we have three women at the apex of this august organisation – Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, as Head of the Commonwealth, myself as Chairperson of the Commonwealth and the incoming Chairperson, the Honourable Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia.

Great societal change, it is said, is often the culmination of the small yet powerful actions of one person and history has shown that change in the social, economic and political status of women throughout our world has predominantly been the result of many dedicated sisters, daughters, mothers and grandmothers of every little community in every country in our world.

Those were the women, who knew that by investing in women and girls, we can accelerate social, economic and political progress. It is in tribute to the efforts of these women who over the many centuries gave so much of their time, energy, ideas and commitment to changing the social, economic and political reality of women without any expectation of rewards – that I proudly say the time has come for us as global citizens to continue their efforts in a serious, policy driven manner.

The time has come for us to implement more initiatives that help provide adequate financial and technical support for the development of women entrepreneurs throughout the Commonwealth. Hand in hand with this are the efforts we must make to focus on gender responsive budgets – and reshape our national budgets to reflect and cater to the gender specific needs of women, girls, boys and men.

We must also look at revising our health care programs to cater for the varying needs of women, as with men, to ensure that all are treated fairly and that women and girls have the same access and legal entitlement to education, other life changing opportunities and protection as men and boys. Women in many instances are denied access to prevention, treatment and care in health services, and the time has come for this to come to an end. Women should and must be empowered, and men made more able to shift from negative cultural and social norms which can impact adversely on healthy lifestyles.

I wish to stress that greater emphasis is very much needed throughout the world on the issue of including women and girls at all levels of decision making. This is a crucial step if we are to ensure to that the needs of women and girls are properly met, and it is also an important step in helping to empower women young and old.



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I acknowledge the growing recognition of women's participation in leadership across the Commonwealth, yet representation of women must go beyond the numbers to include factors of qualitative leadership and effective representation of women's concerns and gender responsive commitments.

Training of women leaders should produce women leaders who will be able to develop accountability measures such as gender audits to monitor and evaluate efforts taken to increase women's empowerment.

Indeed, Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma stressed the need for such fundamental improvement in social policies for women when, in announcing the theme for Commonwealth Day, he said: *"Women and girls hold the key to sustained development and improving the lives of others. To change a woman's life for the better is to unlock the potential to change and lift a whole society."*

Mr Sharma has also said: *"Every day staff across all our Commonwealth societies and organisations meet women working to improve the lives of others in our member states."*

These are the women who, as I have previously noted, are my greatest inspiration – the women of so many societies and communities throughout the globe who work all day to ensure that there is food on their family's table; and the women in developing countries who brave and defy tradition to campaign for political, social and economic rights, and push through vital reforms in the public service.

Commonwealth Day 2011 is historic as it finds in office, the first woman Chair of the Commonwealth. It is truly a happy coincidence, as is the fact that the same year that International Women's Day celebrates its centenary, the Commonwealth will celebrate and highlight those women who are making a difference, from around the world, to the lives of others, as well as highlight the areas that are preventing women and girls from reaching their goals and fulfilling their potential.

It is my firm belief that together, the people, societies and organisations of the Commonwealth – the world's oldest political association of sovereign states with 54 independent member states – can change the fortunes of women for the benefit of all. To achieve this, I am of the view that we should use this historic event as an occasion for us to consider the review of the Commonwealth Plan of Action 2005-2015 for Gender Equality and the recommendations of the Monitoring group to refocus on new areas of concern, such as climate change, trafficking of women, food security and the impact of the global financial crisis on women.

The report also stressed the need for greater harmonisation and improved partnerships between civil society and government, and the need to address capacity issues, which I fully endorse and I also support the proposal for strategic regional monitoring and implementation of the Plan of Action. The time has come for us to acknowledge the growing recognition and importance of women's participation in leadership across the Commonwealth.

Together the people, societies and organisations of the Commonwealth, the world's oldest political association of sovereign states, with 54 independent member states, can change the fortunes of women for the benefit of all.

