

Messages from Leaders on Commonwealth Day

14 March 2011

Statements by Commonwealth Heads of Government on the occasion of Commonwealth Day, Monday, 14 March 2011

Canada

Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued the following statement today to mark Commonwealth Day:

"Today, Canada celebrates a long and rewarding history with our Commonwealth partners around the world. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada – the head of the Organization – remains a symbol of the free association of independent countries. Together, we share mutual goals in the areas of democracy, development, conflict prevention and commerce, as well as a strong record of collaborating to find solutions to global challenges.

"More than 60 years after the rise of the modern Commonwealth, the relationship among its members remains strong. Canada is contributing in various ways – sending observers to partner countries to help monitor democratic elections; sponsoring training to support conflict management, and media access and transparency in hostile environments; and providing leadership at Commonwealth summits aimed at developing a mutual understanding of international issues.

"Our historic links and close Commonwealth ties will again be evident during the upcoming tour of His Royal Highness Prince William and Miss Catherine Middleton in July, and during celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of the accession of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, in 2012. These tours and celebrations highlight the important legacy of the Commonwealth to Canada and Canadians – providing inspiration to continue a strong role in this valued relationship."

<http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=4035>

Jamaica

Message from the Hon Bruce Golding, Prime Minister of Jamaica on Commonwealth Day, March 14, 2011

The theme for this year's Commonwealth Day, "Women as agents of change" reinforces the critical and fundamental role that women and girls - who make up more than half of the world's population - play in societies. It is also an acknowledgement of the importance of women to nation-building. Women who are supported and empowered not only improve the well-being of their own families, but, also the stability of their communities and countries.

It is fitting that the Commonwealth - the only international organization outside of the United Nations with the global reach to tackle socio-economic development issues – should seek to highlight the positive contribution of women in all aspects of national life. Tremendous gains have been made under the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 which seeks to reinforce the important relationship between gender and issues such as poverty eradication, economic empowerment, human rights and democracy. The Plan is an important testimony to the commitment of the Organisation to advancing equality within the decade.

Despite the challenges that persist, women have been able to make significant strides in the economic, social and political fields. We in Jamaica can be justifiably proud of the advances and achievement of women. Jamaican women are to be found in every sphere of the economic, social and political life of the country.

Women represent over sixty percent of those employed in the public sector and are the majority of those employed as professional, senior officials and technicians. Several women currently occupy influential positions in the public service, including the posts of Chief Personnel Officer, Accountant General, Auditor General, Administrator General and Chief Medical Officer. Statistics reveal that at the primary and secondary levels, girls graduate at approximately the same levels as boys. At the tertiary level, Jamaican women matriculate and graduate at higher rates than men. Women are free to secure vocational training in fields they choose.

The achievements realised to date offer no room for complacency. Women remain vulnerable to exploitation, violence and stereotyping.

In this context, I wish to stress the Government's commitment to supporting women as change agents. Through national frameworks such as Vision 2030 and the recently launched National Policy on Gender Equality, the Government is determined to fulfil its obligations in promoting and advancing the rights of women. I take this opportunity to commend the Bureau of Women's Affairs and the countless women's non-governmental organisations for their support in this regard.

I call on all of us to commit to promoting gender equality and to promoting the rights and dignity of women so that they can continue to realize their full potential.

www.jis.gov.jm/news/hl.s1/27072

South Africa

Message from President Jacob Zuma on the occasion of Commonwealth Day, Monday, 14 March

South Africa is pleased to join this important annual event in celebration of Commonwealth Day. As members of the Commonwealth, we gather each year to promote a specific global thematic issue of importance to our organisation, collectively and predicated on our vision for universal justice.

This year we agreed to focus on the critical issue of "Women as Agents of Change". The cardinal role that women in all countries and from all walks of life play in their societies can no longer be underestimated and reduced to the traditional, predominant stereotypes which tended to perpetuate gender discrimination and limit women's role and capabilities to certain inferior positions in society, and in particular at the workplace.

We in South Africa are acutely aware of the multiple and aggravated forms of discrimination which our women suffered over centuries. In our struggle for human dignity and human equality, we placed women at the centre of our struggle for freedom and social transformation. Today, it is a well-known fact that South African women led the campaign for social change and played their role as agents for change in our country heroically. They led from the front in several seminal and landmark campaigns in which they demonstrated their ability as leaders and resolved to ensure change in our country.

Women have made giant strides since the advent of South Africa's democracy in 1994 in both the public and private sectors. An increased presence at all levels in institutional hierarchies and greater participation in the decision-making process are two direct indications that women's empowerment and gender equality are well underway.

The question for us now is how to improve our internal conditions to ensure that women are at the centre and are beneficiaries of the dividends that our democracy has come to offer. These include the critical need for the right to education for the girl child, the practical empowerment of rural women who also play an important role in society as care-givers as well as the appointment of women in key leadership and management positions in the public and private sectors.

We are working hard to ensure that the corporate sector becomes an important partner in our initiatives towards the empowerment of women.

The special situation of rural women is of particular importance to us in South Africa. As a silent majority, these women play a significant role in economic subsistence, the survival of the family, the provision of food and shelter, to name but a few responsibilities they must, of necessity, undertake.

In a development-based environment, the fundamental premise for the entry onto the economy, even at subsistence level, is equal access to enabling resources. Women and especially rural women, if they are to survive, must have equal access to land, water, credit, technology, education and health services. But more importantly they must play an active role in the decision-making processes that set economic activity in motion.

In the past decade the number of people living in poverty has increased. But it has increased disproportionately for women, particularly in the developing countries, and that includes South Africa.

The feminization of poverty is a global phenomenon because, despite the real strides that have been made by women, there is an overarching failure to mainstream a gender perspective into all political, economic and social transformation processes.

The achievement of true empowerment for women across all race and class barriers, and most particularly for black women, remains a national priority and lies at the very centre of South African policy formulation

Women's access to political influence and to decision-making in both the public and private sectors has improved significantly since the country's first democratic elections in 1994. Successive leaders in the African National Congress have recognised that the liberation of our country will remain incomplete until women participate fully and on an equal footing at all levels of society.

Equality for women is not a narrow interest-it's critically important for both women and men and it is essential to the long term development of our country.

Women with political influence are increasingly bringing the plight of women, especially rural women, to the fore and vigorously campaigning against the violence, patriarchy and discrimination to which they are still subjected to. The increased presence of influential and decision-making women in the legislatures, the executive branches and other structures of government has made it possible for women politicians and senior civil servants to promote women's interests through legislature as well as through an increasingly strong lobby to transform male-dominated institutional norms, values and cultures. Men and male-dominated institutions need to be empowered so that needs of women are placed on everyone's agenda, not just women lawmakers.

While our Constitution is regarded as one of the most progressive in the world, our challenge is to realise the rights it envisages. We know that the majority of women continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in their homes, workplaces and communities. We will only succeed in our task if we manage to close the gap between ambitious legislative measures and tangible implementation and delivery on the ground. It requires giving effect to substantive equality and equality we can all be proud of.

Government alone does not have the resources to fully address the myriad challenges that face us. Co-operation with the private sector in a number of areas is therefore essential if women are to be fully empowered in all sectors, whether economic or political.

We therefore urge all South Africans today to increase their awareness of the role that all women play as agents of change, no matter what their social, economic or political standing.

www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=3663&t=79