

**First Meeting of the Commonwealth Gender PoA Monitoring Group
New York, 25 February 2006**

**Panel: "Developing a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for
the Commonwealth Plan of Action"**

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**Moderator,
Fellow panelists,
Participants**

I am very happy to participate in this panel on developing a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Commonwealth Plan of Action, particularly since I participated in the Seventh Meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's / Gender Affairs, in Fiji in 2004, at which the Plan of Action was adopted.

The Plan of Action is based on the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. It covers all Critical Areas of Concern and the priority areas identified in the outcome of the review and appraisal in 2000, and provides important recommendations for gender equality in relation to all the Millennium Development Goals. It identifies critical areas for further action to secure the full and accelerated implementation called for in the Declaration adopted during the ten-year review of implementation of the Platform for Action at the 49th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Of particular importance is the recognition in the Plan of Action that gender mainstreaming remains a major strategy for gender equality, alongside activities targeted to address specific gaps and challenges. Gender mainstreaming was also recently endorsed in the United Nations context in the outcome of the 2005 World Summit. The Plan of Action also identified critical actions in relation to institutional arrangements in support of gender equality and empowerment of women. The need for improved monitoring and accountability mechanisms is recognized.

The Commonwealth Plan of Action was developed in a consultative process and it is encouraging that the process of further developing a monitoring and evaluation framework is also being undertaken in the same spirit.

In my presentation I am going to talk briefly about the monitoring of progress in implementation of the global policy framework in the *Platform for Action*, as well as the normative framework contained in the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. The synergies between these two instruments were recognized by the Commission on the Status of Women in its 49th session and are regularly highlighted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against

Women. The complementary nature of the two instruments is one of the major achievements of the Commission on the Status of Women, during its 60 year history.

A major challenge for the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women is ensuring accountability for implementation of these existing policy recommendations and human rights standards at national level. The Division for the Advancement of Women is closely involved in this work as the substantive secretariat for the Commission on the Status of Women and the technical and substantive secretariat for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has been ratified or acceded to by 181 countries. In addition, 76 countries have ratified the Optional Protocol.

When countries ratify the Convention, they assume specific obligations. States parties are expected to include the principle of equality of women and men in their constitutions, and to realize this principle in practice through laws and other means. States parties are required to pursue an active policy of eliminating discrimination against women, whether committed by public authorities or by private persons or organizations, and in all spheres: civil, political, economic, social and cultural. It obliges States to remove both de jure, as well as de facto discrimination. This is important in countries where the laws may be very good, but where practice leaves much to be desired.

A major strength of the Convention is the fact that States Parties are required to report on a regular basis (within a year of ratification and then every four years). The reporting requirements are established in the treaty itself. States parties should also meet with the Committee, an independent group of experts which monitors implementation, for a constructive dialogue on progress in implementing the Convention at national level. These discussions are usually very frank, and – based on review of the report submitted, the constructive dialogue and consultation with NGOs - the Committee prepares a set of recommendations (concluding comments) on action needed to improve the implementation of the Convention.

This set of recommendations, specifically tailored for the individual States parties, is a very unique "instrument" that could be used more systematically and effectively at national level by governments, parliaments, civil society and by the United Nations and bilateral donors.

The CEDAW Committee normally meets twice a year and covers 8 States parties per session, thus considering 16 reports per year. On an exceptional basis the Committee will meet three times a year in 2006 and 2007, and will also utilize parallel chambers in some of the sessions in 2006 and 2007, in order to catch up on the backlog of reports

awaiting consideration. This will allow the Committee to consider 67 reports over the two years as opposed to 32 in the past biennium.

Constraints to the full and effective implementation of the Convention exist - some States Parties have never submitted a report; others are significantly behind in reporting; the Committee experiences difficulties in considering the many reports it does receive in a timely manner; and gaps exist in relation to the effective use of the concluding comments by States Parties, the United Nations and civil society. Nevertheless the Convention and the Committee have gained in credibility over the past decade and the Committee is working effectively to address the identified constraints.

States parties take reporting obligations seriously and increasingly bring strong delegations with representatives from different line ministries for the one-day long constructive dialogue with the Committee on progress on gender equality at national level. The fact that the reports of States parties and the concluding comments of the Committee are available on the DAW website, that the constructive dialogue with States parties are open meetings (with significant levels of attendance), and that the Committee also meets with non-governmental organizations and United Nations entities on the situation in the countries reporting, and receives shadow reports, makes the Convention a powerful accountability mechanism, complementing the Platform for Action in a very positive and constructive manner.

The reporting procedure should be seen as an important opportunity, both as an awareness raising mechanism and tool for promoting gender mainstreaming (by securing involvement across all line ministries in the production of the report) and for developing a systematic monitoring system at national level. The concluding comments provide an important accountability mechanism, since the Committee focuses in particular on the extent to which concluding comments from previous sessions have been implemented when States parties come before the Committee.

The Platform for Action

The Platform for Action was developed during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and consolidated the consensus and commitments achieved through the earlier conferences and the work of the Commission on the Status of Women. The world conferences set in motion an important and continuing cycle of research and analysis; goal-setting; progress review to identify achievements as well as gaps and obstacles; and renewing and expanding commitments.

The Commission on the Status of Women is charged with follow-up and monitoring of implementation of the Platform for Action. Reporting is not required in the same manner as for the Convention. Monitoring has been achieved in different ways through the annual sessions of the Commission, as well as through specific five- and ten-year reviews carried out in 2000 and 2005.

At the annual sessions of the Commission, there are no formal reporting requirements. The Commission has developed working methods to encourage sharing of national-level experiences and good practices to simulate increased implementation, including through interactive expert panels on the themes under consideration and roundtables for high level representatives attending the annual sessions. Involvement in these interactive events is voluntary but there is considerable interest in participation. The Commission normally attracts high levels of participation (including more than 80 Ministers at the 49th session). In the General Discussion, Member States are also provided the opportunity to make brief national presentations on progress made, and are encouraged to highlight achievement and good practice as well as gaps and challenges.

More formal reporting has been required less often. In preparation for the five-year review in 2000, a questionnaire was sent to all Member States on progress in relation to all 12 critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action. The response was very good (133 Member States submitted responses) and the findings were included in a report of the Secretary-General. National action plans were also submitted by 116 Member States and 2 Observer States. Separate regional progress reports were prepared on the basis of separate questionnaires sent by the United Nations regional commissions.

For the 2005 ten-year review process, a questionnaire was prepared jointly with the United Nations regional commissions for submission to Member States and the responses were utilized for both the global and regional reports. This was part of an effort to reduce the reporting burden on Member States. The response was again excellent – 134 Member States and 1 Observer State responded to the questionnaire. The findings were contained in a report of the Secretary-General to the Commission on the Status of Women. Although Member States were not requested to update the national action plans, the review revealed that an increasing number of countries have developed gender equality policies, strategies and action plans.

In terms of recommendations for harmonizing the monitoring of the implementation of the Commonwealth Plan of Action with the monitoring of progress in relation to the Platform for Action and CEDAW, I would like to make two suggestions for discussion.

The Commonwealth might wish to bring the Commonwealth Plan of Action to the attention of the CEDAW Committee so that the Committee could use it as relevant in reviewing progress and in the constructive dialogue with States parties. The Commonwealth could also utilize the reports submitted to the CEDAW Committee and the concluding comments adopted by the Committee in its review processes. All reports and concluding comments are available on the DAW website.

In relation to possible further formal review of implementation of the Platform for Action in the Commission on the Status of Women, no decisions on any further reviews have been made. In the reform processes underway within the United Nations there is a strong focus on harmonization, including in follow-up to the global conferences and summits of the 1990s. If a specific review, similar to those undertaken after five years in 2000 and after ten years in 2005, were to take place in the future, the Commonwealth

could consider utilizing the questionnaire prepared by United Nations for both global and regional reporting.

In conclusion, I want to again commend the Commonwealth on the adoption of the Plan of Action on Gender Equality. The renewed and expanded commitment to the goals of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action brings an important positive message, in line with the outcome of the ten-year review of the implementation of the Platform for Action which called for full and accelerated implementation.

The Plan of Action highlights the importance of partnerships. The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women looks forward to continuing collaboration with the Commonwealth, and to supporting in any way possible the full implementation of the Plan of Action.

Thank you.