



The Commonwealth

13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (13WAMM)

Atlantis, Paradise Island, The Bahamas, 21-23 August 2023

SECRETARY-GENERAL'S OPENING CEREMONY REMARKS

Prime Minister Davis and your esteemed first lady Mrs Davis, my dear friends

Honourable Ministers

Excellencies

Esteemed Guests, Partners, Friends and Colleagues

Firstly, congratulate yourself for making the journey, I know that you may never leave as well.

For me, it is a great joy to be back in The Bahamas, just a month on from my last visit to join the celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of your independence. Someone noted I was back quite soon, and I feel like I have never left.

It is, as always, a pleasure and a privilege to be with you.

It is impossible not to be moved by the awe and wonder of the 200-million-year-old islands which make up this proud nation.

The thousands of years of human history, tradition and inheritance;

And the immutable spirit of friendship, openness and generosity - even when faced with hardship.

I held my breath when your minister named all the hurricanes that came to the Bahamas, came and left, and left a people with resilience, fortitude and drive.

From the first settling of the Lukku Caira people, right up to today, the story of the Bahamas is one of steadfast resilience.

And of generous gifts to the world - in politics, in culture, sport, music and so much more. When you think about all the Bahamian community has offered the world, I go back to the likes of Fontaine that are an epitome of that Bahamian spirit.

We come from far and wide to marvel at The Bahamas' attractions. And you will all be coming back, with your families and friends.

But we leave with a wholeness, and a deeper appreciation of the beauty and meaning life can offer.

And as we gather here for this vital Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting, we do so with gratitude for the wonderful warm welcome you have given us, and with gratitude for the extensive work you have undertaken to ensure we are fully prepared.

We are here, we are ready, and I know all Honourable Ministers - indeed everyone here - will share that gratitude.

The Commonwealth is a special family. A vibrant and important Family.

We are one third of the world's population: 56 nations stretched across five continents and six oceans, but bound by a unique blend of values, interests and practical advantages.

This indispensable combination, together with our capacity to tackle challenges and navigate change in an action-orientated way, gives us enormous **potential** as a force for good in the world.

And we **are** a force for good in the world - when we come together with purpose, and boldness.

Our Ministerial Meetings are an essential part of what we do.

Throughout our 70-year history, creating the space for Ministers and Decision-Makers to share knowledge, perspectives and experiences has helped to drive action in our member countries on the most pressing issues of our times - and has helped to set bold agendas for change and progress across the Commonwealth and the wider world.

So, to echo the call from my fellow Minister, this is our time, this is our moment, 13 may be unlucky for some but for us, it is the time for good luck.

So, this meeting of Women's Affairs Ministers - the 13th since 1985 - is our opportunity to write another chapter in the rich Commonwealth story of shared commitment, and common action.

And it comes at the most vital time.

Our world faces serious challenges:

The long political, social and economic shadow of COVID-19.

Crippling debt, rising inflation and high interest rates.

Spiralling costs for food and energy.

The tremors and torment of instability and conflict.

And the increasingly harsh and dangerous impacts of climate change. I know some islands including Grand Baham still face Terrors caused by Hurricane Dorian.

Each of these challenges can be characterised as a grave and serious crisis.

But they interconnect, entwine and worsen one another.

In each of them, the impact on women and girls is disproportionate.

And overall, they threaten the advances on women's empowerment and gender equality which we have worked so hard to achieve.

Our agenda for this vital WAMM will allow us to examine the immediate challenges threatening the safety, equality, empowerment and economic advancement of women across our Commonwealth.

And beyond the challenges of today, it will enable to us pool our collective experience and ingenuity to identify how we can put women and girls at the heart of a better tomorrow, by seizing the opportunities before us - especially in digitalisation, innovation and the technological revolution.

Since I became Secretary-General, gender equality has been mainstreamed across all of our work.

We have forged new partnerships, and the Commonwealth's programme of support and assistance is more comprehensive than it has ever been.

So, I promise you that, as we dig deep to rise to our challenges and seize our opportunities, your collective determination will be matched by the extensive support the Secretariat will make available to you.

Your resolutions and conclusions will shape the strategic priorities of our Commonwealth Secretariat, and they will shape the global agenda - especially for our Heads of Government when they meet at CHOGM in Samoa next year.

That timeless Commonwealth spirit of unity, purpose and ambition has always served us well.

It will serve us well again this week.

So, let us resolve now that the chapter we will write together here in The Bahamas will lead us to a safer, more peaceful, more sustainable, more equal and more prosperous future for all the women and girls - and indeed, all 2.5 billion people - of our Commonwealth family.

As we know, The Bahamas has done it before.

If, in The Bahamas, we, the Commonwealth, came together and were able to free Nelson Mandela.

Isn't it time now we free the women of the world?

As Nelson Mandela once said: 'It always seems impossible until it's done'.

So, let's do it.

Thank you.