

# 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting

Nassau, The Bahamas  
21–23 August 2023



The Commonwealth



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PROCEEDINGS OF THE

# 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting

Nassau, The Bahamas  
21–23 August 2023



The Commonwealth



13WAMM  
THE BAHAMAS  
COMMONWEALTH  
WOMEN'S AFFAIRS  
MINISTERS MEETING

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>CCFAH</b>	Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub
<b>CDPF</b>	Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum
<b>CHOGM</b>	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
<b>COP</b>	Conference of the Parties
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organisation
<b>CWAMAG</b>	Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministerial Action Group
<b>CWF</b>	Commonwealth Women's Forum
<b>GBV</b>	gender-based violence
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>ITC</b>	International Trade Centre
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SOM</b>	Senior Officials Meeting
<b>WAMM</b>	Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence against Women and Girls



# 13WAMM Outcomes Statement



1. The 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (13WAMM) was held in Nassau, The Bahamas, from 21 to 23 August 2023. Delegations from 26 member countries attended the Meeting. The Prime Minister of The Bahamas, the Hon. Philip Davis, KC, addressed the opening ceremony.
2. The Meeting was chaired by the Hon. Obediah Wilchcombe MP, Minister of Social Services and Urban Development, The Bahamas, under the theme 'Equality Toward a Common Future'. The first session was addressed by the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland, KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth and the Hon. Aisha Jumwa, Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action, Kenya as the outgoing Chair of WAMM.
3. The 13th WAMM took place four years after the 12th Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (12WAMM) in 2019 in Nairobi, Kenya. During this time, the world has been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the accelerating impact of climate change, economic turmoil and political polarisation. These events have had a major impact on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls globally. Ministers reflected on these developments and shared progress and initiatives from their countries designed to strengthen gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.
4. Ministers welcomed and endorsed the Report from Senior Officials on 21 August 2023 and the recommendations in the Report of the Civil Society Roundtable Critical Conversation held virtually on 1 August 2023.
5. Ministers welcomed the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Communiqué adopting the Commonwealth Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment submitted by the 12WAMM. Ministers also noted with appreciation that Heads renewed their commitment to the Commonwealth's fundamental political values of democracy, gender equality and inclusive development as set out in the Commonwealth Charter.
6. Ministers reviewed the progress of gender equality and women's empowerment in the Commonwealth and endorsed the approach set out in the Roadmap in support of the Commonwealth Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2022–2030. The Roadmap shapes the Commonwealth's

biannual reporting on gender equality and women's empowerment to Heads of Government and the process by which member countries would review and provide input into its development.

7. Ministers also discussed the Commonwealth priorities for gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment in the context of gender and climate change, women's economic empowerment, women in leadership, and ending violence against women and girls. Ministers noted the importance of gender equality and the inclusion of persons with disabilities.
8. Climate change is key among the challenges of our times, with many Commonwealth countries experiencing its impacts in the form of frequent droughts, heatwaves, floodings, hurricanes, extreme rainfall and sea level rise. Evidence collated by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has shown that the impacts of climate change are amplified by other factors, including gender inequalities, to disproportionately disadvantage women and girls. Studies have highlighted how climate related hazards often lead to negative impacts for women and girls, particularly those in vulnerable situations. Cognisant of these challenges, Ministers discussed the urgent need for gender responsive climate action and to invest more in women and girls as agents of transformative action on climate change.
9. Ministers committed to a collaborative Commonwealth community effort around gender responsive climate action. They recognised the urgent need for gender-responsive policies, capacity building, collection of disaggregated data, financing, knowledge sharing and peer learning. Ministers appreciated the continuing efforts of the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub in mobilising finance for gender mainstreaming. Ministers noted the need to work together with the global community on climate action to address increased vulnerabilities of women and girls, including women and girls with disabilities, from climate change. They requested the Secretariat to support gender mainstreaming towards an inclusive Loss and Damage Fund through engagement at COP28.
10. Over 1.3 billion people, nearly 16 per cent of the global population, experience a significant disability, and this number is increasing. Not only are women and girls disproportionately represented, with a disability prevalence rate of approximately 19 per cent vs 12 per cent for men but they also face multiple barriers that may result in a lower economic and social status; increased risk of gender-based violence and abuse, including sexual violence; gender-based discriminatory practices; and limited access to education, health services including sexual and reproductive health services information, services, justice, as well as civic and political participation. Ministers acknowledged that these are barriers to the full realisation of the rights of all women and girls with disabilities. Ministers welcomed the recommendations made for gender equality and inclusion of persons with disabilities, highlighting the importance of the collection of disaggregated disability data and the adoption of a disability mainstreaming approach. Ministers appreciated the valuable work of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum. Ministers also noted the importance of access to health services, education, skills development, vocational training and meaningful participation in political decision-making processes for persons with disabilities.
11. Ministers noted that women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises account for 35 per cent of global GDP. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), only 15 per cent of women-owned businesses participate

in international trade, and in 2022 women were able to access 2 per cent of the venture capital funds available globally. A study conducted by ITC SheTrades on the gender responsiveness of trade agreements in the Commonwealth countries shows that only 35 per cent of them have gender-implicit provisions and about 40 per cent make no explicit reference to gender. Furthermore, only 1 per cent of the USD 11 trillion spent annually on public procurement is awarded to women-owned businesses. Yet, women's full inclusion in the workforce is predicted to add USD 28 trillion to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2025.

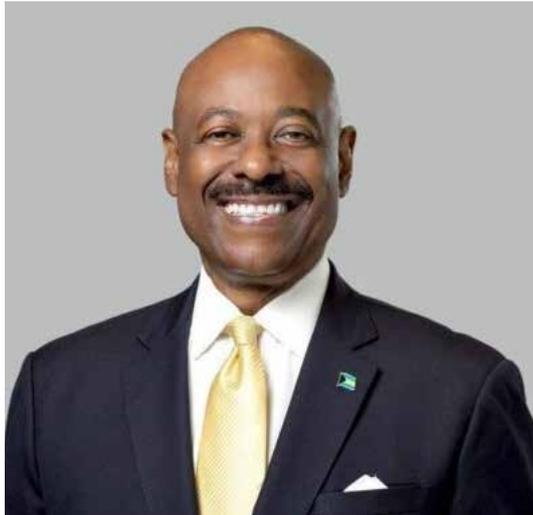
12. Ministers acknowledged the challenges faced by women-owned small and medium sized enterprises and the need to enhance their participation in international trade and trade negotiations as a means to redistribute opportunities for economic growth in member countries. Ministers also emphasised the need to collect sex-disaggregated data to develop gender-responsive trade policies. Ministers committed to strengthening women's economic empowerment by enabling gender responsive public procurement as a tool to promote gender equality. Ministers further committed to removing barriers women to enable their effective participation in the global economy.
13. Ministers noted that women's decision-making in the political, public and private sectors is essential to achieving gender equality and therefore critical for realising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has at its heart the 17 SDGs. Ministers further noted the need to increase the number of women in leadership, particularly at senior levels across the Commonwealth. In addition, Ministers acknowledged that enhancing women's capacity and removing barriers will create opportunities for them to formulate and implement gender-responsive policies, programmes, services and other measures geared towards the advancement of gender equality which benefits the whole of society. Furthermore, Ministers underscored the need for sharing best practices to help increase women's representation and build systems of inclusion and gender mainstreaming.
14. Ministers recognised that, despite high-level political support and concerted efforts to eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), rates of VAWG remain persistently high. Levels of sexual and/or physical VAWG remains at about one in three women, this affects 736 million women worldwide. In just one year, 45,000 women and girls lost their lives at the hands of their partners and family members. Commonwealth research has found that inadequate action on prevention and ending of VAWG can cost between 4.6 per cent and 5.5 per cent of national GDP, with the global cost of VAWG estimated to be USD 1.5 trillion. Ministers highlighted the impact of VAWG on victims/survivors, families, households, communities and economies, and the need for a harmonised, comprehensive and whole-of-society approach to eliminate VAWG.
15. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to end all forms of VAWG, including child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, human trafficking, and to support women and girls who have been affected. Ministers committed to strengthening legal frameworks and discussed the development and utilisation of digital tools to end VAWG. Ministers emphasised the need to include men and boys in the prevention and elimination of VAWG, and also welcomed the launch of the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland, KC, For the Women in my Life campaign to promote men and boys' engagement

in building gender equity. Furthermore, Ministers also emphasised the need to promote and enhance partnerships with community leaders to address social, religious and cultural norms that hinder progress.

16. Ministers noted with appreciation the information reports and recommendations provided on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and Cervical Cancer in the Commonwealth; Artificial Intelligence and Women's Empowerment; and A Gender Perspective on the Commonwealth Guiding Framework for Addressing the Rising Burden of Noncommunicable Diseases.
17. The Host Government highlighted the progress of women in The Bahamas in the 50 years since independence and 60 years since women in The Bahamas voted for the first time. Eminent speakers reflected on the journey The Bahamas has taken in the last half century, its accomplishments and continuing efforts to address the challenges of gender inequality. Ministers made note of these achievements and congratulated The Bahamas on its efforts.
18. Ministers thanked the Government of The Bahamas for successfully hosting 13WAMM and congratulated the Chair for his stewardship of the Meeting. Ministers also thanked the Commonwealth Secretariat for its collaborative and substantive work, particularly noting the quality of the Meeting papers and technical sessions.
19. The host of the 14th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting will be determined following consultation with the regional grouping.
20. Ministers agreed to support the continuation of the Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Action Group (CWAMAG) to help maintain the momentum.

23 August 2023

Nassau, The Bahamas



## **Tribute to the Honourable Obediah Hercules Wilchcombe, Minister of Social Services, Information and Broadcasting (formerly Minister of Social Services and Urban Development) of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas**

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The Commonwealth Secretariat, on behalf of the 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (13WAMM), takes this opportunity to express our deepest condolences to the Government and people of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas and to the family of the Honourable Obediah Hercules Wilchcombe on his passing on 25 September 2023.

Minister Wilchcombe, who served as Chair of 13WAMM, was a beacon of dedication and patriotism representing his country exceptionally well. He guided discussions diplomatically for the duration of the sessions, ensuring a welcoming environment and balanced discussions that resulted in a successful Meeting and positive strategies for the advancement of women and girls throughout the Commonwealth.

Minister Wilchcombe demonstrated a sincere commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls of The Bahamas and encouraged partnerships for the development of robust actionable strategies in this regard. He called for the engagement of men and boys in the advancements of women, including in leadership, and stressed the importance of having all hands on deck for true partnerships in the sustainable development of The Bahamas.

The Commonwealth Secretariat honours the life of Minister Wilchcombe and sincerely appreciated working with him in preparation for, during and in follow-up to 13WAMM.

# Background



The Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (WAMM) is a consensus-building platform for Ministers responsible for gender and development and for women's rights and empowerment of the Commonwealth to debate critical policy and programmatic issues to advance gender equality in the Commonwealth. The Meetings provide a platform for the Ministers to strategise on priority/critical issues, share experiences and lessons, and forge common positions on topical issues on gender equality.

WAMMs have been held triennially since 1985. They provide strategic opportunities for Ministers, Senior Officials, civil society organisations (CSOs) and partner agencies to discuss critical issues in advancing women's empowerment and gender equality, and to contribute to Commonwealth and global agenda-setting processes. WAMMs are held in regionally rotating venues following consensus.

During the 12th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (12WAMM) held in Nairobi, Kenya, from 18 to 20 September 2019 under the theme 'From Commitment to Action: Accelerating

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Development', the Government of The Bahamas offered to host 13WAMM and the decision was adopted by the Meeting.

The priorities of the 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (13WAMM) were in line with the Commonwealth's, which are women in leadership; women's economic empowerment; ending violence against women and girls (VAWG); and gender and climate change. The Meeting aimed to share an update on the Commonwealth Priorities for Gender Equality. It was also an opportunity to share on the progress of the Commonwealth Gender Declaration, including presentation of the draft Roadmap to 2030 to Senior Officials and Ministers, for their review and consideration, as a valuable tool for progress reporting and information. The Meeting also facilitated discussion on emerging issues and strengthened the focus on gender and climate change as well as the need for better disability inclusion.

This report outlines the key issues and recommendations of 13WAMM.

# The Opening Ceremony



The official opening ceremony of 13WAMM took place on 21 August 2023. Remarks were delivered by the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth; the Hon. Philip E.B. Davis, Prime Minister of The Bahamas; Ms Veronica M. Nduva, Principal Secretary of the State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action in the Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action of Kenya; and the Hon. Obediah Wilchcombe, Minister of Social Services and Urban Development of The Bahamas. With a series of vibrant cultural displays of Bahamian culture, it was attended by more than 80 Ministers and Senior Officials from across the Commonwealth's five regions.

In her opening remarks, Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland – the first woman to hold the post – told officials that she had mainstreamed gender across all areas of the Secretariat's work to help member countries achieve their development goals more equitably.

The Secretary-General said. *'As we meet today, our world faces serious challenges: the long shadow of COVID-19; crippling debt, rising inflation and high interest rates ... and the increasingly harsh impacts of climate change. In each of them, the impact on women and girls is disproportionate. But together, we are more than equal to the challenges we face.'*

*'This is our time,'* the Secretary-General told the representatives from across the Commonwealth. *'Let us resolve that the chapter we will write together here in The Bahamas will lead us to a safer, more sustainable, more equal and more prosperous future for all... 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.'*

*'It's time to demolish the walls of the old boys club,'* said Prime Minister Philip Davis in his keynote address. *'Only when opportunities are opened up more widely, will we truly be making the most of the talent and ingenuity of all of humanity.'*

The Prime Minister described WAMM as *'an ideal platform,'* adding that, *'The discussions and resolutions that emerge will pave the path for the agenda for the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa. Your work can be the catalyst for much-needed momentum toward a better, more just world for everyone.'*

Principal Secretary Veronica M. Nduva reminded the audience that Kenya had had the opportunity to serve as WAMM Chair twice, once in 1985 and in its recent chairmanship from 2019 to 2023, which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared

that Kenya had enjoyed the support of member countries and the Commonwealth Secretariat in discharging its role. As 12WAMM Chair, Kenya had made great strides with regard to gender equality and women's empowerment. Principal Secretary Nduva urged the incoming Chair to engage in peer global learning by listening to those who had '*walked the journey and will walk the journey*' and to '*hold hands*' in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat, which has a wealth of knowledge in these matters.

The Hon. Obediah Wilchcombe, Minister of Social Services and Urban Development of The Bahamas, in his capacity as 13WAMM Chair, said, "*This is our time. Our people expect – and will want from us – exceptional leadership. Leadership that can make change happen ... We have done it here in The Bahamas before. It was 1985 when the Commonwealth met in The Bahamas and made great strides and a big step toward the release of Nelson Mandela.*" Minister Wilchcombe continued, '*And six years later, he walked a free man, free of the chains and the shackles. It is now our time to unchain and remove the shackles from the women. We have the opportunity [and] the strengths of the Commonwealth to collectively make this change happen.*'

# Meeting of Senior Officials



The Commonwealth Secretariat convened the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) on 21 August 2023. The SOM was attended by representatives of 23 countries and one observer. Mr Joel Lewis, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, The Bahamas, chaired the Meeting, supported by Ms Jennifer Namgyal, Head of the Gender Section and 13WAMM Deputy Conference Secretary from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The Chair's opening remarks began with the commitment of The Bahamas to work diligently during its chairmanship of 13WAMM. The Chair observed that, as Senior Officials in the represented countries, delegates intimately understood the barriers impeding the progress of women and knew exactly what was needed to bring success to collective efforts. The sessions of 13WAMM would serve as a stage on which to work together to benefit women and girls and to work towards making the necessary adjustments. He noted that the Commonwealth priority areas were timely. Recalling that climate change was a significant concern for The Bahamas, the Chair reminded delegates of the devastation of Hurricane Dorian, which had crippled the country in 2019. He implored delegates to look critically at barriers preventing the achievement of gender equality, to identify ways to increase the number of women in leadership positions, to end VAWG, to strengthen disability-inclusive gender equality work and to ensure that

women and girls could play a vital role in tackling climate change. These issues affect all women and girls throughout the Commonwealth. While the Commonwealth has accomplished much, member countries must do more to improve the status of women and girls.

## Adoption of the agenda

The Chair then called for Senior Officials to review and adopt the agenda for the Meeting, which was conducted with no objections.

## Remarks from the outgoing Chair

Ms Veronica M. Nduva, Principal Secretary of the State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action in the Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action of Kenya, provided an update on efforts following 12WAMM. In her remarks, Principal Secretary Nduva applauded the Government of The Bahamas for taking up the chairmanship of 13WAMM. She recalled Kenya's commitment as Chair of 12WAMM and noted that dedicated efforts had been undertaken to implement the outcomes of the session, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kenya's tenure as Chair involved leading four priority meetings, which helped strengthen relationships between the Commonwealth nations.

Principal Secretary Nduva called for member countries to support The Bahamas just as Kenya had been supported during its tenure.

### Presentation by the Commonwealth Secretariat

Ms Jennifer Namgyal, Head of the Gender Section and 13WAMM Deputy Conference Secretary, Commonwealth Secretariat, introduced the presentation by the Secretariat on the progress of work. Referring to the papers to be presented to Ministers, she noted the adoption by Heads of Government of the Commonwealth Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment by 12WAMM. Implementation of the Declaration was delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but it was endorsed during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2022, which took place from 20 to 25 June in Kigali, Rwanda.

One of the next steps would be to set out the Roadmap in support of the Commonwealth Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2022–2030.

The second primary outcome was to continue the work of the Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Action Group (CWAMAG). This group has met twice, in May 2021 and April 2022.

The third commitment was to enhance knowledge-sharing among member countries, which has been accomplished through the Commonwealth Women's Forum (CWF), which has produced a robust set of recommendations, and the annual Consultation with National Women's Machineryes.

The fourth commitment was to strengthen gender mainstreaming in Commonwealth activities, which is currently underway. An example of these efforts is the release of an online course on gender mainstreaming available for member countries to utilise.

### Plenary discussion

It was noted that, while e-learning for gender training is a good resource for member countries, when applying inclusive gender mainstreaming to sector-specific work, such knowledge is often deficient at national level. The e-learning platform

was applauded and member countries highlighted its usefulness, particularly as regards shared practical experiences.

### Report from the Commonwealth Civil Society Roundtable

The SOM received a report from Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO, Director-General of the Commonwealth Foundation, on the Civil Society Roundtable held virtually on 1 August 2023 to develop gender-responsive recommendations to address health inequality and climate change.<sup>1</sup> The event was hosted by the Commonwealth Foundation, which is the intergovernmental arm established to advance the interests of the 2.5 billion people of the Commonwealth. Through the event, the Foundation brought together members of civil society on the question of how the world can do better for women and girls.

Over 400 gender equality and climate experts along with civil society leaders from across the Commonwealth gathered online to reflect on progress and barriers to climate action and health equity, using a gender lens. A set of 10 recommendations was developed through the Roundtable, post-event working sessions and the participant survey. In addition to being shared at 13WAMM, the recommendations will influence the 2024 CHOGM in Samoa. Civil society put forth recommendations as follows:

1. Acknowledge that the impacts of the climate crisis are not gender neutral.
2. Recognise that empowering women through gender-responsive climate policies and actions will lead to better environmental outcomes.
3. Improve access to education and training for women and girls.
4. Increase climate finance.
5. Bring women forward as leaders and participants in policy formation and decision-making.
6. Value and promote women and girls as adaptation educators and agents of change.
7. Measure better to target better.

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1 *Gender, Climate Change and health: How Can We Do Better for Women and Girls?*

8. Promote gender equality in access to healthcare.
9. Act to reduce all forms of gender-based violence (GBV).
10. Enhance women's economic empowerment.

## Plenary discussions

The Chair opened the floor for discussion, inviting delegates to share comments and observations in response to the recommendations and to confirm if the Secretariat should continue with the four Commonwealth priority areas for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Delegations applauded the work of the 12WAMM Chair and expressed appreciation for the importance placed on gender equality and women's rights issues. Several delegations indicated support for the efforts of the Secretariat. In reference to the recommendations, delegations shared challenges in obtaining sex- and gender-disaggregated data. They stressed the relevance of disaggregated data as it relates to gender assessment tools, which has impacts on efforts to help women and girls. It was stated that, by emphasising co-ordination and closer collaboration between interlocutors at the national level, countries are more likely to achieve actions recommended by civil society. More robust data collection systems are essential in such efforts. Delegations drew attention to the need for gender mainstreaming, which is vital to the collection and sharing of disaggregated data, to the implementation of capacity-building initiatives and to efforts to move forward with the outcomes of such meetings.

Delegations acknowledged Recommendation 10, which showcases how greater financial power can protect women from climate change. It was also considered important to examine how countries were progressing in implementing the recommendations and the extent to which they included women's voices, especially those from rural areas and those particularly affected by climate change. It was acknowledged that recommendations must be implemented at the grassroots level to effect change. Delegations further indicated that the intersections of gender and climate change must be better understood at national level and that platforms such as

WAMM were useful in this regard as they serve to encourage and assist with awareness-raising and programming.

There was a call for the Commonwealth to assist member countries in addressing GBV at the local level. With respect to the Roadmap, it was suggested that recommendations arising from 13WAMM be added to the document, if possible.

## Review and consideration of the 13WAMM provisional agenda

The proposed agenda and programme for 13WAMM were presented to the SOM and a brief was provided by the Secretariat. The SOM endorsed the provisional agenda with no amendments and presented the same for adoption by Ministers during the Ministers Meetings.

## 13WAMM Drafting Committee

Ms Monika Pindel, Gender Adviser, Commonwealth Secretariat, provided an update on the 13WAMM Drafting Committee Meeting. She noted that the committee had met virtually to consider drafts and recommendations, with written comments submitted. It was to meet on Monday, 21 August 2023 at 1pm to address the draft Outcomes Statement to be presented to Ministers on Wednesday 23 August 2023, which would serve as a record of consensus reached at the Meeting and an outline of the decisions of the Ministers. The Secretariat further explained that the Outcomes Statement was envisaged as a brief, action-oriented document, to be accompanied by a record of the proceedings, which would be the 13WAMM report. The Secretariat stated that the 13WAMM Drafting Committee should comprise 10 members drawn from the five regions of the Commonwealth. For those regions not represented or underrepresented, the Chair requested members to caucus and select representatives. Confirmed members of the committee were as follows:

- Africa: Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius
- Asia: Brunei Darussalam
- Americas/Caribbean: The Bahamas
- Europe: United Kingdom
- Pacific: Samoa

## 13WAMM Outcomes Statement

The SOM agreed that the Drafting Committee would work on the draft Outcomes Statement for consideration and adoption by Ministers on Wednesday 23 August 2023.

### Side event on 'Transformative Leadership for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment'

Ms Marisa Mason-Smith, on behalf of the side event organising committee, briefed the SOM on a high-level side event held on the same day in the afternoon, titled '*Transformative Leadership for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*'. The side event was hosted by Mrs Ann Marie Davis, Spouse of the Prime Minister of The Bahamas. Bringing together several technical experts within The Bahamas, the objective of the side event was to raise awareness on human rights, mental health and poverty eradication and to seek solutions to end GBV. The moderators for the event were the President of the Senate of The Bahamas, Ms Lashell Adderley, and senior broadcast journalist Mr Jerome Sawyer. The event opened with keynote remarks by

Mrs Davis and the Secretary-General. The following panel of technical experts<sup>2</sup> then addressed the audience of several hundred persons:

- Mrs Loretta Butler-Turner, first female Leader of the Opposition and former Minister for Social Services;
- Ms Marion Bethel, Attorney and Member of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women;
- Ms Gaynel Curry, Independent Expert Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on People of African Descent and Former Director of Gender and Family Affairs;
- Dr Barrington Brennen, Marriage/Family Therapist and Counselling Psychologist;
- Dr Maria Woodside-Oriakhi, President of Academic Affairs at the University of The Bahamas;
- Ms Cleopatra Christie, former Magistrate and Representative of the Bahamas Crisis Centre;
- Dr Sean L. Knowles, Physician and Psychiatric Medical Officer; and
- Dr Theresa Moxey-Adderley, Professor of Nursing at the University of The Bahamas.

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<sup>2</sup> Darville, F. (2023) 'Face to Face: Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting – Planning for the Advancement of Women'. *The Tribune*, 22 August.

# Meeting of Ministers: Day 1



## Item 1: Opening Plenary

### i. Election of the Chair

In her opening remarks, the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland, KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, thanked the Kenyan delegation for the work they did during their tenure as 12WAMM Chair. Noting the unequal burdens facing women and girls as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, she reminded delegates that, in the face of extraordinary challenges, member countries of the Commonwealth could marshal great strength to act and make a practical difference for its 2.5 billion people through reach, ingenuity and experience.

The first order of business was the endorsement of the proposal for the appointment of the host country, represented by Minister of Social Services and Urban Development, the Hon. Obediah Wilchcombe, as the Chair and host of 13WAMM. All delegates endorsed and accepted the proposal. Accepting the endorsement as Chair, Minister Wilchcombe expressed gratitude to Kenya and the Commonwealth Secretariat, in particular the Secretary-General, for their support. He promised to build on the work done by Kenya. The Chair then reiterated his appreciation for the presence of the delegates in The Bahamas.

### Update on 12WAMM recommendations (remarks from the outgoing Chair)

The Hon. Aisha Jumwa, MP, Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action of Kenya, provided virtual remarks in her capacity as outgoing Chair of 12WAMM. After a brief review of Kenya's tenure as Chair, which included the establishment of the CWAMAG, she spoke on the country's subsequent acceleration in matters relating to women's rights, in keeping with the Commonwealth's four priority areas in gender. Reaffirming Kenya's commitment to the advancement of women and girls, she urged member countries to support the 13WAMM Chair.

### ii. Adoption of the provisional agenda

The Chair opened the floor to consideration of the provisional agenda by Ministers and proposed to adopt the agenda. Ms Deborah Jamieson, Chief of Staff and Senior Director to the Secretary-General, serving as Conference Secretary, was invited to provide an overview of the agenda. She briefed member countries on the agenda for 13WAMM and reminded delegates that a Drafting Committee Meeting was scheduled later in the day. With no objections, the agenda was declared adopted by the Chair.

### iii. Report of the Senior Officials Meeting

Mr Joel Lewis, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development and Chair of the SOM, was invited to present the SOM Report for consideration by members.

Permanent Secretary Lewis shared that 23 member countries were represented at the SOM and provided an overview of the SOM Report, which addressed several agenda items. The document listed recommendations that Senior Officials wished to see addressed during the Ministers Meetings, which included continued sharing of information, mainstreaming of gender in all programmes and operations as well as the future of the CWAMAG and consideration of the recommendations contained in the Report from the Civil Society Roundtable.

The Chair made note of the SOM Report and opened the floor for comments. As there were none, he thanked the SOM Chair for the Report. The Chair then asked members if there were any objections to the Report; there were none. The SOM Report was then adopted and seconded by member countries.

### iv. Report of the Commonwealth Civil Society Roundtable Critical Conversation

The Chair invited Dr Anne T. Gallagher AO, Director General of the Commonwealth Foundation, to present the Report of the Roundtable, held virtually on 1 August 2023. Dr Gallagher reviewed the Foundation's purpose and work in support of the vision of the Commonwealth. The Roundtable focused on climate change from the perspectives of gender and health, goals prioritised by 13WAMM. Over 1,400 applications were received and just over 400 persons were selected to participate, including academics, CEOs, regional advisers, scientists, journalists, activists and researchers. The approach was to invite the voices of persons working in the health and climate fields and those working on the human rights of women and girls. Moderated by Ms Allison Kentish, journalist, the event included debates, the development of recommendations and practical steps that the Commonwealth could implement for women and girls. The event was outcome-oriented, resulting in the publication *Gender, Climate Change and Health: How Can We Do Better for Women and Girls?*, which features 10 recommendations. Dr Gallagher asked the Ministers to reflect on the recommendations.

### Plenary discussion

The Secretary-General commended the Foundation for its work and noted that the Commonwealth Secretariat was integrating almost all of the civil society recommendations. Delegates commended the Foundation for the report and welcomed the contributions from CSOs, highlighting their important work towards the promotion of gender equality, women's empowerment and combating GBV. It was proposed that the Commonwealth encourage civil society to work together with governments on these issues. In this regard, delegations highlighted the importance of information-sharing with respect to reports, data collection and statistics and reiterated the usefulness of evidence-based research, policy-making, planning and action. Delegations further acknowledged that Recommendation 7 was very instructive in the collection of data and in ensuring the effectiveness of interventions, plans and actions. Delegations inquired whether the Secretariat would consider providing additional support to strengthen CSOs in the Commonwealth where they exist and, where they do not, to advocate for their establishment to support gender equality and women's empowerment as well as the recommendations on GBV.

## Item 2: Gender Equality in the Commonwealth – Progress and Ambition to 2030

### Policy dialogue on gender equality in the Commonwealth including the outcomes from CHOGM 2022, and progress on the Commonwealth Gender Declaration, reporting to CHOGM 2024

Chair Wilchcombe invited Ms Jennifer Namgyal, Adviser and Head, Gender Section, Commonwealth Secretariat and Deputy Conference Secretary of 13WAMM to speak on the Item.

Ms Namgyal presented on the Action Items from 12WAMM, which included:

- Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2022–2030;
- Establishing a Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Action Group (CWAMAG);
- Commitment to knowledge-sharing;

- Re-establishment of the Annual Consultation with National Women's Machineries;
- Delivery of the Commonwealth Women's Forum (CWF) 2022;
- Spotighting key leaders to advocate for gender equality;
- Strengthening gender mainstreaming in Commonwealth activities;
- Mainstreaming guidelines for Ministerial Meetings;
- E-Learning Course on Gender Mainstreaming;
- Continued partnerships across the Secretariat to strengthen mainstreaming.

She spoke on the Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2022–2030, prepared by 12WAMM in September 2019 and endorsed by Heads of Government at CHOGM 2022. The Commonwealth Women's Forum 2022 Outcomes Document was prepared by the CWF Taskforce ahead of the Forum and provided a summary of proceedings with a set of recommendations.

Speaking on the Draft Roadmap, Ms Namgyal indicated that the document provided a framework for reporting to Heads of Government on gender equality and women's empowerment in the Commonwealth to 2030. The Draft Roadmap draws out priority themes from the Gender Declaration and the CWF 2022 Outcomes. Its entry points include '*Women in leadership*,' '*Women's economic empowerment*,' '*Ending violence against women and girls*,' '*Gender and climate change*' and '*Accountability for gender equality*'. Under each entry point, there is a series of commitments listed in the Declaration with corresponding indicators of progress. The Draft Roadmap also draws on existing member country reporting and takes a collaborative approach. The outline of the Draft Roadmap was developed in November 2022 through internal consultations with the Commonwealth Secretariat. The outline was shared with National Women's Machineries in March 2023 and presented to 13WAMM in August 2023. The Draft Report to Heads of Government is to be shared with National Women's Machineries in March 2024 with the first Report to be delivered at CHOGM in October 2024.

## Plenary discussion

One Pacific region delegation recalled their commitment to the Commonwealth Priorities on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2017–2020 and Beyond, as well as to the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and other regional and global gender equality frameworks and plans.

Delegates expressed support for the work of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the implementation of the Roadmap and its indicators, which can turn the goals into tangible outcomes. Delegations commended the document on gender mainstreaming as a very important tool for countries. Others expressed support for evidence-based policy initiatives as well as for the prioritisation of mainstreaming gender in budgeting. Data collection was recommended as a means to underpin evidence-based policy-making and the need to be intentional in sharing National Development Plans to support tracking progress was noted.

Calling for further legislation and sustainability policies, delegations expressed concerns regarding financial constraints and the impact on their ability to implement programmes. The Commonwealth Secretariat was urged to put programmes in place for least developed countries to assist in the provision of resources for capacity-building and implementation of projects and programmes. In this connection, delegations requested further assistance including as regards the Commonwealth's E-Learning platforms.

Delegations highlighted the need to consider the gender digital divide across the digital and financial mediums in the form of access to devices, which affects women's economic empowerment. The need to align Commonwealth efforts with those of the various UN Women's Forums was also noted.

One delegation emphasised the importance of partnering with non-governmental organisations and involving them in policy-making while progressing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Delegates noted that the assistance of religious leaders, teachers and parents could help in the promotion of gender equality. The importance of sharing best practices for the benefit of all countries was also noted as delegates welcomed the recommendations from civil society.

Several delegations reinforced the importance of identifying males who can act as champions to the cause of gender equality, particularly through their promotion of women's rights issues. In this context, delegations shared their national efforts to involve men in the cause. The value of having more women represented in decision-making positions was highlighted by delegations, who also stressed the need for interventions on gender equality and women's empowerment in line with various global and regional commitments. There is a need for member countries to use innovative ways to put in place a whole-of-society approach towards gender equality. Similarly, delegations emphasised that the mainstreaming of issues relating to women with disabilities and their access to healthcare, including maternal health, was also important.

The significance of discussing technology, access to resources and funding in the broader context of women's economic empowerment was stressed. Lack of resources was considered a major impediment to women in advancing their economic situation and in dealing with challenges caused by climate change. While affirming their commitment to ending VAWG, some delegations stated that they required assistance and urged the Secretariat to consider helping with resources to support existing national programmes and to address the gaps identified in the fight to end VAWG.

Delegations noted the importance of data in underpinning evidence-based policy-making and requested that data collected be shared among member countries. Further, it was suggested that the sharing of reports be more intentional and that gender-specific budgeting be prioritised.

### Item 3: Climate Change and Gender Equality – Commonwealth Efforts to Strengthen Gender-responsive Climate Action

#### Gender inclusion in Commonwealth Nationally Determined Contributions; strengthening gender responsive access to climate finance

Mr Unnikrishnan Nair, Head of the Climate Change Section in the Commonwealth Secretariat, and Ms Uzoamaka Nwamara, Climate Change Adviser, presented on *Accelerating Gender-responsive Climate Action for a Resilient Commonwealth:*

*Experiences from the Commonwealth Climate Change Programme.* Speaking on the topic, the Secretariat shared that the Programme had strengthened the resilience of member countries to climate change's negative impacts. Its implementation has been through the flagship Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH). The goals are to address data, financing, capacity, knowledge and collaboration gaps as well as to introduce a Geospatial Information Programme and Project Development and Resource Mobilisation Support. The way forward relies heavily on development partners and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

#### Plenary discussion

The Secretary-General noted that several member countries had highlighted the challenge of limited resources, which the Secretariat also experiences. Funds that have been made available through various sources from other organisations can be used; these funds have excellent advisers who have peer-reviewed requests made by member countries. In this regard, the Secretariat has built capacity among member countries and hopes to continue to do so. Another way to build commitment is to establish a 'lens' on gender and youth. Everything arising in this Meeting could be taken to upcoming meetings, especially those on climate change.

Several delegations shared their national approaches to the substance of the Item. In this context, the climate initiatives by the Secretariat were welcomed. The Report was considered sobering as it underscored existing gaps as well as limited information and capacity. It was noted with regret that women in leadership were still an anomaly. Member countries were called upon to level the playing field in this regard. Reference was made to the Bridgetown Initiative, which addresses the current climate crisis and intersections between women's issues, financing and climate change. Women suffer more from loss and damage but how to offer women resources, such as national insurance, remains a concern. Undoubtedly, women, girls, persons with disabilities, minorities and vulnerable persons are disadvantaged as a result of climate change. Women and children are 14 times more likely than men to die in a disaster.

One delegation appealed to the Secretary-General to encourage the inclusion of women in delegations to meetings of the Commonwealth, similar to what is done by other international organisations, to ensure gender equity and inclusion.

A member of civil society shared the results of a national study that identified the most exposed groups in society in the aftermath of a hurricane, which included women, low-income families and persons with disabilities. Requests ranged from land and capital funding to training and capacity development to support appropriate responses to climate change and disasters. Of those polled, 60 per cent indicated that they were willing to share information. Ninety-nine per cent agreed that they needed a haven from the effects of climate change and admitted that they were still traumatised from recent natural disasters. Ninety per cent of migrants shared that they felt discriminated against, which was a particular concern during disasters, when safety must be paramount.

Another member of civil society echoed sentiments that men needed to speak on issues related to gender equality and women's rights. Civil society is working with the Commonwealth Foundation to ensure policies are developed to support equality. Accredited organisations are a way to make an impact.

## Item 4: Gender Equality and Disability Inclusion

Dr Shavana Haythornthwaite, Head of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Human Rights Unit, presented on '*Gender Equality and Disability Inclusion*.' She highlighted the barriers facing women and girls with disabilities, including physical, institutional, informational and attitudinal barriers. Dr Haythornthwaite discussed the international human rights framework that governs the rights of persons with disabilities, areas in which collective action can be taken, such as employability, data collection, etc. In addition, she offered various recommendations that the Commonwealth Secretariat could undertake to address the issues facing women and girls with disabilities.

Dr Sruti Mohapatra, Vice-President of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum, and Dr Kerryann Ifill, President of the Barbados Council for the Disabled, referred to the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF), which was created

in 2019 and is involved in organising persons with disabilities from 49 out of the 56 Commonwealth member countries, including youth and women with disabilities. The Forum conducted disability equality training during COVID-19 and ensured that regional virtual meetings were held regularly.

Dr Mohapatra highlighted the attributes of and challenges experienced by persons with disabilities, including barriers such as poverty, discrimination and invisibility, as well as the lack of access to basic human rights and services such as clean water, employment, education and health services, including for the prevention of teen pregnancies and to promote other sexual and reproductive health and rights. The need for disability inclusion protocols, including as regards disasters and climate change as well as political participation, was stressed. Commonwealth governments were encouraged to prioritise persons with disabilities and locate appropriate funding to enhance their situations and rights.

Ms Nalini Bethel, Chair of The Bahamas National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, presented on the work of the Commission, which she noted was made up of 15 members with a mission to ensure access for persons with disabilities. She reminded delegates that, '*Access today means inclusion tomorrow*.' Ms Bethel noted that The Bahamas offered special needs classrooms and adaptive learning devices for special needs children and that registration of persons with disabilities was ongoing in an attempt to adapt to all levels of inclusion. Moving to the intersection of disability and climate change, she noted that vulnerability increased with disasters. Reviewing a series of initiatives designed to assist persons with disabilities in The Bahamas, Ms Bethel said that 13WAMM served as a platform to learn best practices from member countries.

## Plenary discussions

Several delegations affirmed support for the Policy Paper on Gender Equality and Disability Inclusion and its recommendations and some further expressed interest in joining the CDPF.

Gender-disaggregated data for persons with disabilities was said to be essential by a number of delegations. In this regard, it was noted that treating persons with disabilities as one homogenous group was not very useful and did not allow for specific concerns to be addressed. Delegations welcomed

the recommendations for skills development for persons with disabilities and several considered that member countries must do more by formulating strong policies and practical actions to ensure skills can be further developed and utilised. The employment of persons with disabilities in the highest offices of a country can demonstrate their importance.

Another delegation stated that women and girls with disabilities were often more vulnerable during and in the aftermath of natural disasters as they lack access to proper resources. Governments must be committed to implementing robust policies and legislation to protect the rights of women and girls with disabilities, ensure access to services and provide adequate resources, especially in preparation for and immediately after disasters.

Civil society contributed to the discourse on mental health and pointed to the stress levels that can result from disasters. Such stress primarily impacts women and children, who may feel more vulnerable during disasters. A needs assessment after the passage of a hurricane showed that women often took the lead in putting their communities back together.

# Meeting of Ministers: Day 2



## Item 5: Commonwealth Priorities for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – Women in Leadership

Hon. Dr Zainab Gimba, Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Network and Member of the Nigerian National Assembly, noted that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association offered the opportunity to collaborate on issues and share good practices on governance. The Commonwealth has a 30 per cent target of women in leadership, but a number of issues and concerns continue to affect this. These may include challenges to women in making their own spaces for growth and development in the leadership track. It was noted that women ministers often served longer in positions before rising among the ranks. Violence and harassment facing women in parliament and other leadership roles discourage the participation of newcomers. Member countries must encourage a gender sensitive parliament and promote gender neutrality.

Ms Charlene Paul, Caribbean Women in Leadership Network, spoke on the need to retrain and re-educate men. Men and women must be encouraged to work together as partners in the development process. When women are not properly represented at the table, their priorities

are less often considered. Both men and women need a paradigm shift to see the benefit of women in leadership.

Ms Keithtarror Young-Munroe, Deputy Chief Councillor representing the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, spoke on the entity's work towards inclusive leadership at the local government level, which is the level of government closest to the people. There is a need to shift the focus of what leadership looks like and readjust priorities accordingly. There are barriers that contribute to the decline of women in leadership despite their having many roles and responsibilities in society. It is important to normalise women in leadership in all sectors of society. The level of transition of women in local government to central government is very low and can be attributed to finances. Since women are disproportionately affected by climate change; it is imperative to have their voices at the table on these and related issues.

## Item 5 continued: Commonwealth Priorities for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – Ending Violence against Women and Girls

Ms Lavita Thurston, Survivor and Advocate, shared her tragic experience with GBV. She highlighted the importance of a collaborative approach and urged governments to partner with non-governmental organisations to promote and facilitate an end to

VAWG. She noted the vulnerability of children and expressed the need to have conversations with them so they are aware and can more easily access safe places and identify trusted persons. She highlighted the importance of listening to all victims and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and providing safe spaces for them. She concluded that this approach would go a long way in ensuring victim-centred responses.

Ms Monika Pindel, Gender Adviser, Commonwealth Secretariat, presented insights from the Meeting Paper titled *'A Future without Violence against Women and Girls – Commonwealth Good Practice and Progress [WAMM(23)5b]*'. In her presentation she highlighted the importance of the international and global frameworks on VAWG. She referred to the Commonwealth priorities on gender equality,<sup>3</sup> which include ending VAWG, and pointed out that they were aligned with Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and other international frameworks and conventions committed to ending VAWG. Further, she noted that the elimination of all forms of VAWG was seen as fundamental to fulfilling the Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment 2022–2030.<sup>4</sup>

Her presentation also highlighted the complexity and pervasiveness of VAWG, which includes sexual and physical violence as well as online violence and harassment. She expressed concern about the impact of such violence on survivors, their families and communities at large. She also pointed to the economic costs of VAWG.

While successive CHOGMs have considered measures to address VAWG, more is needed to, among other things, enhance enabling policy and laws, including the ratification of international and regional conventions; strengthen domestic violence legislation; build capacity through national statistics and frontline service providers; promote advocacy campaigns; and mainstream gender in programming. These are considered crucial to disrupt the persistence of VAWG, which affects more than one in three women globally – a figure that has remained largely unchanged over the past few decades.

## Item 5 continued: Commonwealth Priorities for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – Women's Economic Empowerment

Ms Opeyemi Abebe, Head of the Trade Competitiveness Section, Commonwealth Secretariat, presented on the activities of the Commonwealth in the area of trade, such as capacity-building, the E-Learning Platform, technical assistance, and trade policy and advocacy. A series of action points for enhancing the participation of women in global trade were put forth to member countries, as follows:

1. Commit to the collection of gender-disaggregated data that can help measure the disproportionate impact of trade on women and at the same time provide the foundation for negotiating or inclusivity in trade agreements.
2. Build the capacity of women ministries and women representatives in governments to effectively represent the interests of women in all matters affecting women.
3. Conduct a Gender Impact Assessment before drafting new national trade policies. All members will ensure that policy-makers have the right data and analytical information necessary to support gender considerations in policies.
4. Participate in regional efforts on trade and gender and set an example for other members. Advocate for the inclusion of gender-specific clauses in Regional Trade Agreements and indeed all trade agreements.
5. Initiate processes/channels for information-sharing with member countries, with a view to adopting successful practices on data-gathering and create a network for sharing information and good practices.
6. Advocate for the review of public procurement policies to be gender-reflective and as an affirmative tool to support women entrepreneurs.

3 The Commonwealth (2016) *The Commonwealth Priorities on Gender Equality 2017–2020 and Beyond: (i) women in leadership, (ii) women's economic empowerment, (iii) ending VAWG and (iv) gender and climate change.*

4 The Commonwealth (2022) *'The Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women'.*

7. Encourage synergies and collaboration among ministries, government agencies and other stakeholders on women's affairs.

Ms Judith Fessehaie, Head of the Women and Trade Programme, International Trade Centre (ITC), presented on supporting the government through trade and development. She detailed the activities of ITC, in particular the SheTrades Initiative, which was launched to remove barriers to women's participation in trade by working with governments, the private sector and entrepreneurs to build the business capacities of women and to create a fairer, more sustainable, global economy. This is a joint UN and World Trade Organization initiative connecting women to markets, with a global network of over 250 partner organisations from 65 countries. It provides women entrepreneurs and producers with access to key knowledge, resources and networks, supports policy-makers on inclusive policy reforms and leverages public and private partnerships to amplify the impact of the work. Mainstreaming gender in public procurement encourages more and diverse competition, promotes gender equality and economic growth and increases value for money and innovation. Gender-Responsive Public Procurement aims to bring more women-owned/led businesses into public procurement. Options for governments include targets, subcontracting, price preferences, reservations, capacity-building and targeted information campaigns.

### Plenary discussions

One delegation noted the importance of governments and stakeholders creating awareness among aspiring women leaders to build confidence in their capacity to participate. There are programmes to work with men to support women in politics and their election to leadership positions. The delegation asked the Secretariat to help improve programmes to end GBV and those that encourage women to participate in leadership and decision-making.

Highlighting the gravity of VAWG, another delegation reminded the Meeting that attention must be paid to emerging issues that may exacerbate existing issues, including the use of technology and Artificial Intelligence. Technology can improve access to education and build business but it can also expose women and girls to violence.

The importance of political will, practical solutions and allyship were underscored among measures to address VAWG while simultaneously contributing to achieving sustainable development. In this context, some delegations illustrated the linkages between the need to end VAWG and attainment of the SDGs. It was opined that redoubling efforts would help achieve SDG5 but also go towards achieving the other SDGs, given the interrelatedness of the SDGs and the mainstreaming of SDG5.

Delegations commended the work of the Secretariat in championing member countries' shared priorities, including on gender equality. It was noted that governments were keen to explore with Commonwealth partners a way to work on educating girls and empowering women and girls, taking action on climate resilience and ending VAWG. This would require policy action across a wide range of areas, including increasing participation in international trade.

It was recalled that, for some member countries the impact of patriarchal norms is evidenced in current practices, such as the payment of a dowry, inadequate resources and media portrayals that perpetuate gender stereotyping, which all contribute to gender inequality and VAWG. Member countries were urged to consider having gender ministries at the table of all high-level meetings.

The Secretary-General encouraged member countries to join the 'Commonwealth Says NO MORE' campaign and commended the work done by Commonwealth countries for women. Information on inter-Commonwealth trade by 2030 was shared: over US\$700 billion had been built up by 2019 and \$1 trillion was hoped for by 2026. The Commonwealth Women Leaders Mentorship Programme for Ocean Professionals in the Blue Charter will be launched soon, in recognition that mentorship is a great way to encourage and nurture emerging women leaders, and there is hope that every ocean country will be represented. All member countries agreed with the effort.

### Item 6: Empowering Women for a Sustainable Future (Host Government Priority Topic)

The Chair called the session to order and invited presentations on the Item.

Hon. Glenys Hanna-Martin, Minister of Education, Technical and Vocational Training of The Bahamas, spoke on '*Women in Leadership*' and the multifaceted, complex, and deeply rooted challenges of a patriarchal historical context that continues to prevail. Women's progress and status in the past 100 years or more have been the product of struggle, change and agitation. Women continue to face stubborn barriers and daunting obstacles that seem to hinder realisation of their full human potential as well as perpetuating negative, harmful stereotypes. Women are underrepresented in the political realm: their full participation is critical to effective and progressive political action. A central place for reform is a true vehicle of our political parties and platforms. Significantly more women candidates were on the slate in the last general elections. The demand for equal participation in crafting the agenda of progress and shaping policy for a decent and sustainable future is critical.

Dame Anita Allen, Law Reform Commissioner and former President of the Court of Appeal, spoke on women's suffrage in the Bahamian context. She noted the need to prepare a national strategic plan and for the state's to respond. The absence of protections and the existence of various forms of discrimination, including on the right to pass on citizenship, pose a predisposition to GBV.

Mrs Joy Jibrulu, Chief Executive Officer of the Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board and former Tourism Director-General for The Bahamas, presented on women in the tourism sector. Women comprise 54 per cent of the global tourism workforce in The Bahamas, and are key drivers of innovation and development. In the tourism field, women earn 14.7 per cent less than men (compared with 16 per cent less in the broader economy). She spoke of the Tourism Development Corporation and the Ministry of Tourism's '*Authentically Bahamian Programme*,' which improves access to tourism-related markets and assists in the advancement of women-owned businesses. As member countries strive towards greater sustainable development, Ministers need to see how they can help women and girls.

Dr Linda Davis, Interim President of the Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute, spoke on gender socialisation and its genesis in the past, subsequently reinforced through the selection of career paths, with limits being placed on career

choices based on gender restrictions. Linking the issue to SDG4 and SDG7, she noted the importance of speaking on cultural norms and the need to change attitudes. The Bahamas Government is committed to achieving specific outcomes to ensure equal access to quality, affordable technical and vocational tertiary education, especially for women and girls. The work of the Institute was highlighted, as well as disparities in enrolment rates, which mirror the resulting global phenomenon of gendered gaps in educational and employment opportunities. Mitigation must be customised and achievable outcomes estimated for gender equities – considerations should include not only enrolment in the technical and vocational fields but must also achieve in these fields. Gender equity should also be at the core of efforts to ensure equal access to resources and opportunities and the means of benefiting from these. People should be encouraged to follow their interests – we must be disruptors of narratives that dictate which jobs should be undertaken by women and which by men.

### Plenary discussions

The Secretary-General called attention to the role of men and the opportunity for them to champion the needs of women in the Commonwealth, which would be a tangible outcome of this Meeting in the form of an initiative called '*For the Women in My Life*.' She added that it would be ideal to launch this initiative during 13WAMM and was confident that every man would want to put their name to it.

Several delegations noted the need for women as agents of change and expressed that more women should participate in state affairs because having women in decision-making is key to achieving positive outcomes. There is a disparity between national positions and those in local government. Lack of resources is still a significant barrier to women in politics, with their economic status lower than for men vying for political leadership. Delegations shared cultural perceptions that create challenges for women considering politics and stated that there was a need to acknowledge these and to introduce special programmes to help women overcome them. Many women in high positions have been appointed by conscious men who have joined the struggle to overcome inequalities. There must be further discussions with colleague ministers to promote women in non-traditional and male-dominated areas.

It was stated that some women tended to prioritise their family, which may have impacts on their leadership roles. There must be an emphasis on positive parenting, especially from men, so that this responsibility is shared, thus providing more flexibility for women to take on leadership roles.

Referring to the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, a delegation noted that, while it is good to know the gaps that exist for women in leadership, measures must also be taken to ensure that these are filled. Men should be considered major stakeholders and should be encouraged to co-operate and collaborate in advancing gender equality and women's leadership. Their support in overcoming cultural expectations and achieving educational triumphs in this regard was underscored.

Delegations also highlighted the need for stronger co-operation between governments and CSOs in promoting women's rights and leadership. A re-examination of the relationship between governments and civil society with the view to resolving any perceived antagonism could go a long way in facilitating stronger partnerships for the advancement of women in leadership.

A common understanding and definition of the term leadership would also be useful in removing the impediments to women's leadership. Traditional leadership that has evolved over time remains at play in most countries but what is needed is adaptive leadership and a change in mindset about what is leadership and who should lead. Operationalising leadership and changing mindsets were said to be crucial to the advancement of women leaders. The Conversations on effective leadership in the workforce are also crucial; such discussion must transcend the national level to take place on the world stage. Barriers need to be removed: men don't need to make a way, they must get out of the way.

## Item 7: Way Forward to 2025/26 [closed session]

### Proposal of host for 14WAMM

After the conclusion of negotiations on the 13WAMM Document, the Chair called for consideration of offers to host 14WAMM, which will be in the Asia region. The Secretariat will continue to deliberate on this.

### Agreement on ministerial activities between WAMMs

The Chair then invited member countries to comment on activities through the CWAMAG, to take place in between WAMMs.

Delegations indicated support for the continuation of the CWAMAG as the group is integral to accomplishing the actions arising from the commitments of member countries. One delegation recommended that the structure be circulated to member countries with an outline of how other countries can be involved.

### Closing Remarks

After thanking The Bahamas as Host Country, Samoa expressed its eagerness to welcome member countries to the next CHOGM, which will be held in Apia, Samoa, beginning on 21 October 2024.

The Secretary-General commended member countries for the unity of purpose in 13WAMM and thanked all participants. She applauded The Bahamas and the Secretariat on the planning of the Meeting. The Secretary-General indicated that 13WAMM represented the collective voice and that what was done would make a difference.

Closing the meeting, the Chair offered congratulations to the Secretary-General, the Commonwealth Secretariat and member countries and thanked them all for coming to The Bahamas.

# Press Conference



Speaking after the meeting,<sup>5</sup> the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Rt Hon. Patricia Scotland, KC, said the Roadmap was 'incredibly important' because millions of women and girls 'are disproportionately impacted by injustice, climate change, violence and discrimination.' She continued, 'The outcomes of the meeting send a clear message that the Commonwealth is determined to lead by example towards ensuring women and girls are not left behind in our efforts to achieve sustainable development and climate justice. What we achieved here will enable us all to deliver today and it will help to shape a better tomorrow for the benefit of the 2.5 billion people living in our Commonwealth.'

Minster Wilchcombe expressed his appreciation for the substantive outcomes. He said, 'We have a roadmap coming out of this meeting which we [The Bahamas] and other countries will follow. Because it would not make too much sense three years from now to return saying the same old thing. What we want to do is to make a real difference. We are pleased that this meeting sets us up on a higher plane and at a faster pace to follow this roadmap.' Recognising the significance of engaging men and boys in preventing and combating gender-based violence, ministers welcomed the launch of Secretary-General Patricia Scotland's 'For the Women in My Life' campaign.

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5 <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-womens-affairs-ministers-endorse-roadmap-fast-track-gender-equality>

## Useful URLs

'Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Endorse Roadmap to Fast-Track Gender Equality'

<https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-womens-affairs-ministers-endorse-roadmap-fast-track-gender-equality>

'Powerful Panel Addresses Women's Affairs at 13WAMM Side Event'

<https://znsbahamas.com/powerful-panel-addresses-womens-affairs-at-12wamm-side-event/>

'"This Is Our Time": Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting Opens with Calls for Stronger Action on Gender Equality'

<https://thecommonwealth.org/news/our-time-commonwealth-womens-affairs-ministers-meeting-opens-calls-stronger>

'Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers to Focus on Strategies for Gender Equality'

<https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-womens-affairs-ministers-focus-strategies-gender-equality>

13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting

<https://thecommonwealth.org/events/13th-commonwealth-womens-affairs-ministers-meeting>

'Face to Face: Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting – Planning for the Advancement of Women'

<http://www.tribune242.com/news/2023/aug/22/face-face-commonwealth-womens-affairs-ministers-me/>

Social Uplifting Network 13 WAMM Sessions 1 and 2 videos <https://www.socialupliftingtv.com/video-on-demand>

Outcomes Statement

<https://production-new-commonwealth-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-08/13WAMM%20Outcomes%20Statement.pdf?VersionId=p54mmb4rm5OecBwiYSwkim2EHD6LC6M4>

<https://www.13wamm.com/>

<http://www.kenyarep-jp.com/en/kenya/ministries/>



**Commonwealth Secretariat**

Marlborough House, Pall Mall  
London SW1Y 5HX  
United Kingdom

[thecommonwealth.org](http://thecommonwealth.org)



The Commonwealth