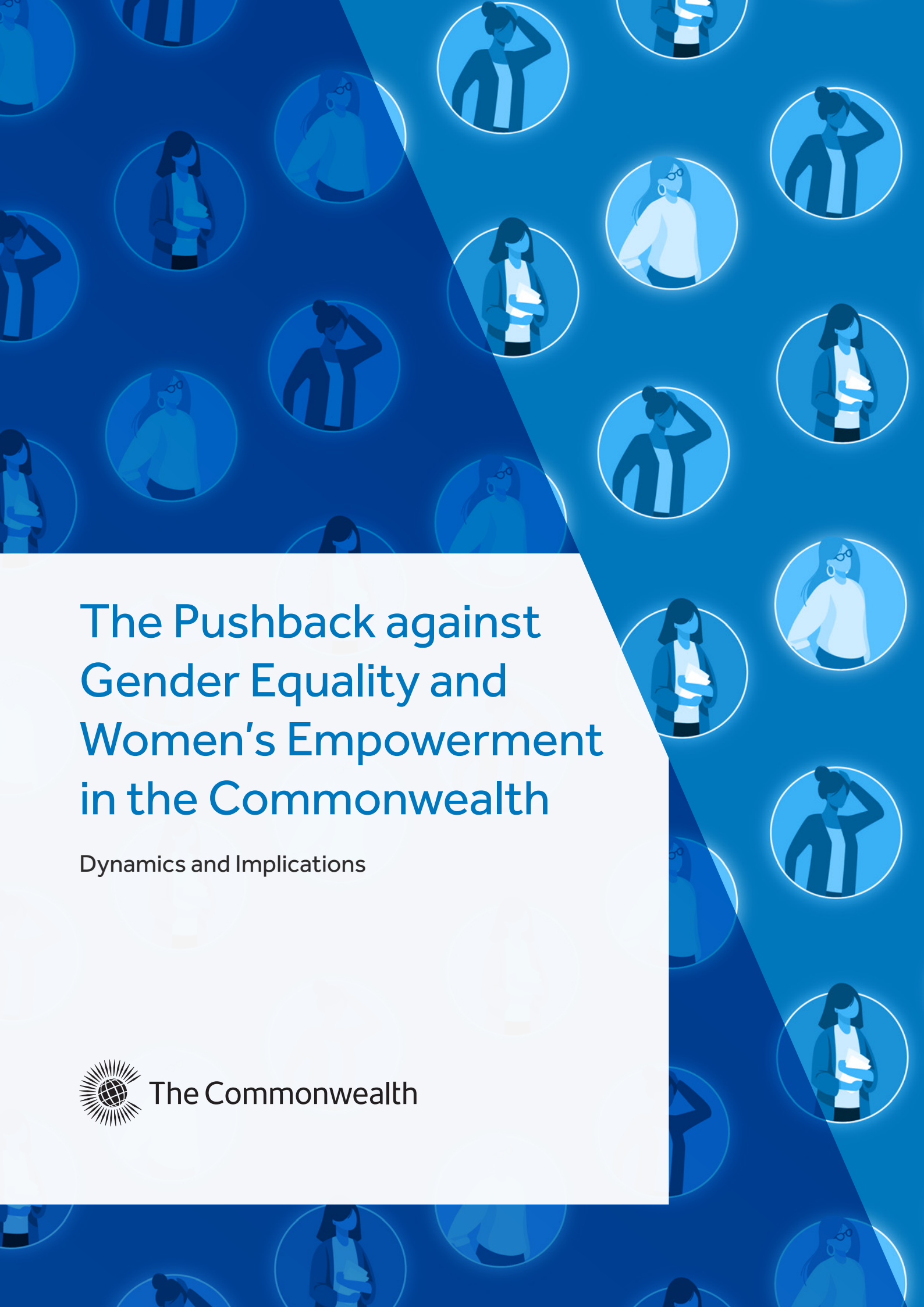


The Pushback against Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Commonwealth

Dynamics and Implications

The Commonwealth

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Acronyms

AI	artificial intelligence
CBWN	Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
CLGF	Commonwealth Local Government Forum
CPA	Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
GBV	gender-based violence
GDP	gross domestic product
ICT	information and communication technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and other gender identities
NWM	national women's machineries
ODA	official development assistance
SIDS	small island developing states
TFGBV	technology-facilitated gender-based violence
VAWG	violence against women and girls

Introduction

'Persistent gender inequality limits the ability of Commonwealth societies and economies to realise the potential of all.'

The Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2025–2030

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are foundational principles of the Commonwealth Charter. Article 12 of the Commonwealth Charter recognises gender equality and women's empowerment as basic human rights and essential components of human development. Over successive Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs), member countries have reaffirmed their commitment to advancing gender equality across social, economic and political life, including through ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 5. At the 2022 CHOGM, Heads adopted the *Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women* (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022a), renewing these commitments within the Commonwealth's broader tradition of consensus building and co-operation in pursuit of resilient, inclusive societies.

These commitments are being implemented under intensifying pressure. In addition to existing and long-standing forms of opposition against women's empowerment, new forms of strategic, organised opposition are weakening institutional commitments, eroding agreed language and creating emerging barriers to implementation. Evidence from international human rights institutions shows stalled progress and, in some settings, regression. Intersecting crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, armed conflict, climate change and reductions in official development assistance (ODA), are compounding these pressures.

This report provides a concise, evidence-based analysis of pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment across the Commonwealth's five priority areas: women in leadership; women's economic empowerment; ending violence against women and girls; gender and climate change; and accountability for gender equality. It approaches opposition to gender equality and women's empowerment as a systemic and institutional challenge rather than an isolated or episodic phenomenon. Recognising pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment as a cross-cutting governance issue allows member countries to explore shared risks and identify opportunities for co-ordinated response through dialogue, partnership and multilateral co-operation. This report is intended as a practical resource to support member countries in identifying shared risks, strengthening resilience and sustaining momentum towards agreed commitments. It is an accompanying report to *Progress towards Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in the Commonwealth 2026* (Commonwealth Secretariat 2026a).

'Anti-gender' and 'pro-family'

This report uses the term 'anti-gender' to refer to contemporary actors and political projects working to dismantle decades of progress made towards advancing gender equality. It is important to note that these actors typically use the term 'pro-family' as a label to describe themselves, and to present exclusionary agendas in a positive frame.

Gender equality in a shifting context: anti-gender opposition and multiple crises

Commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment are unfolding in an increasingly complex and shifting global context. Evidence from international institutions indicates growing concern about stalled progress and, in some settings, regression in gender equality outcomes. A 2025 UN Women report (UNRISD and UN Women 2025) noted that nearly a quarter of governments worldwide reported the rise of co-ordinated opposition against gender equality imperatives.

'Women and girls are not victims of change: they are leaders of it.'

The Hon Shirley Botchwey, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, International Women's Day 2026

Manifestations of this opposition documented by UN Women and others have included legislative rollbacks, the weakening of institutional mechanisms for gender equality, and the creation of global and regional policy frameworks that undermine gender quality, women's rights and bodily autonomy (Narayanaswamy and Hersi 2025). Research shows that actors working to block and erode initiatives to empower women and girls are well-funded, transnationally networked and strategically co-ordinated (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023; McEwen 2026). Recent findings show that between 2009 and 2023, anti-gender organisations based in the United States and Europe have channelled approximately US$1.88 billion into movement-building and advocacy agendas that undermine gender equality and women's empowerment (Datta 2025, 8).

These actors and associated movements frame hierarchical gender relations as 'natural', 'biological' and 'universal', masking the histories through which rigid ideas around 'gender' and the heteronormative nuclear family served as instruments of governance and social control within processes of European colonisation. As several historians have shown, colonial rule did not merely exploit existing gender hierarchies; it reconfigured social organisation by imposing European patriarchal norms onto diverse Indigenous systems of kinship, authority and social belonging (Oyěwùmí 1997; Kitch 2009; Mignolo 2011).

One of the primary effects of present-day attacks on 'gender' is thus the reactivation and repurposing of these colonial logics. Under the guise of protecting tradition, culture or sovereignty, anti-gender actors seek to portray these ideas as authentic, timeless and Indigenous (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023). In so doing, they not only distort historical memory but also legitimise renewed forms of exclusion, surveillance and control over bodies, identities and family life.

Understanding and defining pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of the Commonwealth

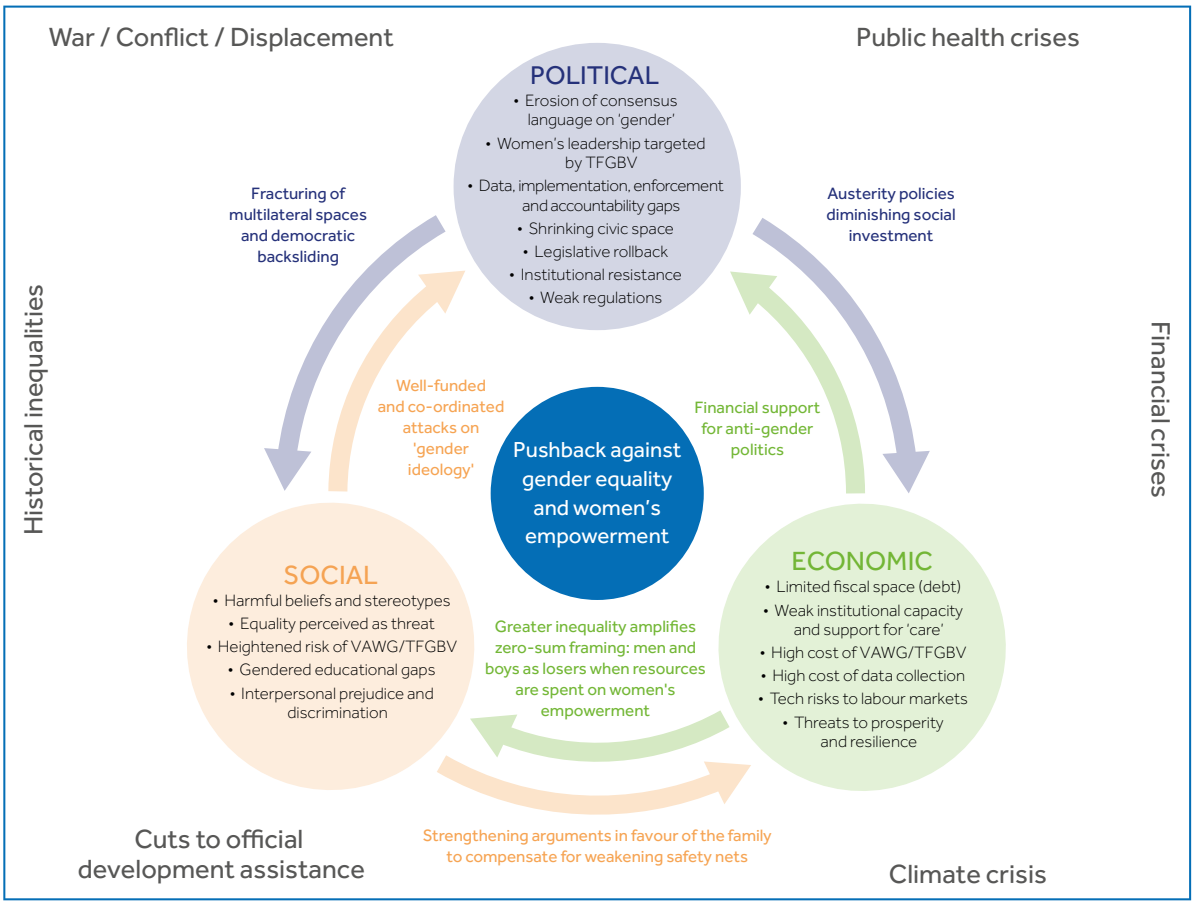
Evidence from the Commonwealth and beyond points to an increasingly challenging policy and discursive environment in which gender equality commitments are becoming more difficult to sustain and implement. Intergovernmental outcome texts, such as the 2022 CHOGM Communiqué (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022b) and the 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting Outcomes Statement (Commonwealth Secretariat 2023) invoke terms such as such as 'setbacks', 'reversing gains', 'persistent discrimination', 'uneven progress', 'risks' and 'challenges' to implementation to describe the current context in which they are working to implement programming for gender equality.

Figure A maps out the distinct ways in which pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment negatively impacts social, economic and political dynamics, ultimately threatening progress towards Commonwealth priority areas.

What the figure highlights forcefully is also what Commonwealth Heads of Government have already acknowledged: existing and persistent structural challenges are likely to be further exacerbated, and progress eroded, amid increasing pushback from a range of actors. These concerns arise within a global context in which the terms 'gender' and 'gender ideology' are increasingly mobilised to disfigure and discredit efforts to redress structural inequalities that have historically and systematically disadvantaged women, young people, gender-diverse people and sexual minorities across and beyond the Commonwealth.

Against this backdrop, focusing on pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment is timely and necessary. Doing so allows member countries to examine the various pressures affecting implementation of policies to promote gender equality and tackle violence, to identify shared risks, and to explore strategies for strengthening resilience and progress in multilateral spaces towards agreed goals.

Figure A. Mapping how pushback slows progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment



Approach and methodology

This report draws on a research design comprising three data sources. First, a review of texts produced by the Commonwealth Secretariat, including reports and communiqués.[1] Second, a series of individual and group consultations in the first quarter of 2026 with national women's machineries (NWM) representatives, senior officials and Commonwealth Secretariat staff. These included an internal interdisciplinary consultation with eight technical experts from the Commonwealth Secretariat across human rights, economics, climate change and youth development. Third, a survey, 'Safeguarding and Advancing Gender Equality in the Commonwealth', was distributed to NWMs and senior officials in February 2026 to examine how respondents are experiencing opposition to gender equality implementation in their respective contexts. A total of 24 responses were received. Initial findings from these three data sources were presented at the Annual NWM Consultation in New York in March 2026 to delegates, who comprised senior officials, ministerial staff and civil society representatives. During the presentation, delegates provided feedback and further insights through the online survey tool Mentimeter, as well as through interventions from the floor.

In the following sections, this report discusses the dynamics and implications of this recent pushback against gender equality and women's empowerment in five key areas:

- women in leadership
- women's economic empowerment
- ending violence against women and girls
- gender and climate change
- accountability for gender equality.

Recommendations drawn from the research findings are consolidated under the three pillars of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan for 2025–2030: democratic, economic and environmental resilience.

1. Women in Leadership

'A systemic issue requires a systemic response..'

Interview with civil society-based respondent who works with women in business, April 2026

Women's representation in local government was trending upward in 2024, but since then there has been no substantial change in women's leadership in the public and private sectors. The 2024 and 2026 *Gender Equality* reports (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b, 2026a) show greater public acceptance of women in leadership since 2020, with more women visible in managerial and decision-making roles.

1.1 Understanding existing challenges to women's leadership

Harmful beliefs and stereotypes

Stereotypes about men as natural leaders and expectations that women must choose between caregiving and professional ambition persist, even where national policies formally support equality.

Interpersonal prejudice and discrimination

Consultations also revealed that much of the opposition affecting women's leadership is informal. It is exceedingly rare for someone in an institution to openly declare opposition to gender equality. Instead, respondents indicated that opposition to women's leadership can often be expressed as matters of personal belief, culture or opinion. These sentiments are echoed in a recent report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which found that:

> *'Women parliamentarians and parliamentary staff who have experienced acts of violence often do not report them, especially when they involve sexist remarks and behaviour and incidences of sexual harassment.'*
>
> Filion 2025, 3

Consultations also documented the real psychological costs of these behaviours to women in leadership, who navigate discriminatory institutional environments daily. Critically, these dynamics are not adequately captured by quantitative data systems, making them harder to identify and address.

Tokenism

Within institutions, consultations revealed that tokenistic approaches to addressing gender discrimination, such as placing women in visible roles without integrating their perspectives into actual decisions, allow compliance to be demonstrated while unequal power structures and informal resistance remain in place. Consultations with NWMs and senior officials also revealed that increased visibility of women in leadership has not translated into substantive institutional power. Women frequently manage institutions or businesses without holding ownership or control over assets. These findings suggest that gains recorded in representation data are not producing structural shifts in who holds authority.

Limited fiscal space and weakened institutional capacity

Enduring structural barriers, if left unaddressed, serve the interests of those opposed to gender equality and women's empowerment. Mechanisms designed to advance women's leadership are being hollowed out. Consultations documented post-pandemic budget reallocations, the restructuring of gender ministries and the absorption of gender portfolios into broader social policy departments as key drivers of weakened institutional capacity. The weakening of institutional capacity through decreasing budget allocation and the shrinking and removal of gender portfolios has short-term and long-term effects on the ability of governments and the private sector to support and advance women in leadership.

1.2 How do 'pushback' dynamics exacerbate existing challenges?

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)

TFGBV refers to any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms (UN Women 2025c). Examples include hate speech, disinformation, image-based abuse or unwanted disclosure of personal data (doxing) online (UN Women 2025c). Pushback dynamics, which exacerbate and are exacerbated by the spread of online disinformation, aim to create panic and alarm about gender equality and women's empowerment advocacy, and further fuel TFGBV against women, girls, sexual and gender minorities, as well as advocates of progressive policy change and human rights. TFGBV is increasingly utilised to target women in leadership positions (ibid.). The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) is clear that 'harassment can be experienced online through the internet, emails and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It can also be experienced remotely through text and calls' (Dibateza 2020, 4). As one respondent suggested, TFGBV 'fuels and funnels the backlash'.[2] Figure A clearly identifies the increased risks of well-funded and co-ordinated actors utilising technology to attack 'gender ideology', thereby entrenching harmful stereotypes about the unsuitability of women for leadership positions.

Increased risk of legislative rollback threatening gender equality and women's empowerment

The rollback of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and an increase in (TF)GBV fall within a wider concern of how violence affects the capacity of women to undertake positions of leadership in both the public and private sectors. UN Secretary-General António Guterres set out clearly at the 70th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) that 'the pushback on women's rights is in overdrive', where 'hard-won legal protections are being eroded' and 'sexual and reproductive health and rights are being undermined' (Guterres 2026). These hard-won protections include visible gains, with, for instance, more than 1,583 legislative measures across 193 countries targeting gender-based violence (UN Women 2024a). Unfortunately, implementation, enforcement and accountability gaps persist (see Sneyd 2024) and will only widen as pushback dynamics accelerate.

Equality perceived as threat

There is a recurring pattern of reframing women's leadership and gender equality as ideologically driven, externally imposed or not in line with local cultural priorities. In some contexts, survey and consultation respondents suggested that gender equality is being characterised as a 'Western' agenda or ideology detached from community concerns, a framing that diminishes demands arising from within communities and further enables the deprioritisation of institutions and initiatives that promote equality and rights.

At times, women's leadership and gender equality are expressed as zero-sum framings about the costs of women's advancement being at the expense of men and boys, or suggestions that gender mainstreaming has gone too far, allowing

'... [N]o one's aware of what to do [about technology-facilitated violence against women in politics]... a lot of people [are] just not able to report it because they just don't know who's behind it or who to report it to and also if it will be taken seriously. There is the view as well that I've been informed of that people feel like because you are a woman in politics, it's a part of the job, deal with it... you are a public-facing person, it comes with the territory. So, you can't really complain...'

Interview with civil society-based respondent who works with women in politics, April 2026

the exclusion or omission of women and girls to be presented as a matter of fairness rather than obstruction. Consultations confirmed that these shifts narrow the operational space for gender-transformative programming, even where formal political commitments exist.

Diminishing investments in supporting pathways to women's leadership

Survey respondents further confirmed that seismic shifts in ODA are compounding trends already underway due to COVID-19 austerity. The withdrawal of ODA has removed a key driver of change where support for women's leadership had depended on external funding. Consultations revealed that the pipeline for future women leaders is at risk: girls' completion of secondary schooling remains a challenge, with youth and especially girls' access to education in digital technology, artificial intelligence (AI) literacy, climate and disaster risk management, and data collection on these issues frequently deprioritised. Research respondents described how unpaid care responsibilities and political violence restrict women's sustained leadership participation across regions.

Democratic backsliding

Taken together, pushback dynamics risk the health of democracy itself. Rooted in colonial histories and religious justifications, anti-gender actors oppose gender equality and women's empowerment as threats to 'traditional values and moral codes' (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023, 13). As Figure A illustrates clearly, these trends are self-reinforcing, potentially accelerating the weakening of democratic systems. In such circumstances, gender equality is too often the first priority to be dismissed (Dibateza 2026). What is clear is that 'while women in politics and LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and other gender identities) people have long faced barriers to their participation in public life rooted in unequal gender norms, the scale and spread of TFGBV poses a significant threat to democracies worldwide because of its silencing and chilling effects' (Michalko 2026).

2. Women's Economic Empowerment

'Achieving equality could inject an additional US$12 trillion into the global economy. Ending the digital gender divide could provide over US$500 billion. Closing gaps in skills could add US$10 trillion more.'

UN Women 2024c

Women's economic empowerment sits at the centre of the Commonwealth's gender equality agenda, and the latest figures confirm both why it matters and the scale of current shortfalls.[3] Research and consultations make clear that these shortfalls are not only the product of longstanding structural barriers, but are being actively reinforced by forms of opposition and institutional resistance that formal economic frameworks are not designed to detect or address.

2.1 Understanding existing challenges to women's economic empowerment

Weak institutional support for 'care'

Across every region, the unpaid care burden was the most consistently identified structural barrier to women's economic participation. Consultations revealed that care inequities are not a policy oversight, but instead reflect a deeper institutional resistance to treating care-responsive design as a non-negotiable feature of economic empowerment programming.

Institutional resistance and tokenism

One of the most significant findings from this research is the extent to which internal resistance is hollowing out women's economic empowerment programming from within the institutions tasked with its implementation. Formal political commitments consistently fail to translate into operational delivery: gender considerations are added as afterthoughts rather than embedded objectives and gender expertise, while formally required to satisfy donor conditions, is systematically devalued in practice through contract non-renewal, excessive review requirements and the appointment of under-qualified practitioners.

Gendered educational gaps and the pipeline under pressure

Consultations confirmed that secondary school completion for girls is a prerequisite for any sustainable women's economic empowerment pipeline, but that access to education is not sufficient without attention to the curricula that education delivers. Research reveals that as labour markets are rapidly reshaped by digital transformation and AI, curricula are not adequately equipping girls with the relevant technical competencies (Catterson et al. 2026). While the *Gender Equality* report 2026 signals an overall modest upward trajectory in the share of women graduating from ICT programmes, the regional data offer a more mixed picture, signalling the risk that talent pipelines are static or even narrowing at precisely the point where investment is most needed (Commonwealth Secretariat 2026a). These findings point to the need for curriculum reform that can empower girls and women to access opportunities for economic empowerment and therefore should be treated as an economic policy imperative. Women's and girls' access to educational opportunities should therefore be integrated into member countries' broader strategies for growth and workforce development, rather than deferred as a matter for education ministries alone.

'People don't understand what being discriminated does to someone… I feel the freedom and liberated [on] my own because this is where I grew up… For days, this situation kept replaying in my mind. Like, I felt crippled… it was emotional, it was psychological… how difficult it is. I mean, I'm just being me. You know, I'm just being a Black woman. I can't be anything else. So what are you going to? Not do business with me because you probably don't like that I'm a woman… or you don't like my complexion or the texture of my hair?… It really played on my mind and it was it was difficult. Um, so those encounters really hurt me. You know… as a woman, entrepreneur.'

Interview with Commonwealth-based female entrepreneur, March 2026

Interpersonal discrimination and barriers that data cannot see

Formal indicators of women's economic empowerment do not capture the everyday psychosocial dimensions of the barriers women face that cut across not just gender, but also race and class. As the words of one respondent highlighted here emphasise, discrimination in the private sector carries real economic consequences: women entrepreneurs encounter prejudice within their supply chains, experience exclusion from networks, and are subjected to persistent gendered assumptions about competence and authority that do not appear in existing datasets.

Survey respondents cited the importance of practical support networks, mentorship and granular guidance on navigating real-world systems, bureaucracy and discrimination. Research further indicates that the weakening of population data infrastructure in some member countries removes the evidence base needed to design and target economic programming effectively. This confirms that data are not only a monitoring tool but a political and diplomatic resource whose absence constitutes a structural disadvantage for historically marginalised groups, including and beyond women and girls, whose challenges and barriers remain unknown and unaddressed without adequate evidence and data.

2.2 How do 'pushback' dynamics exacerbate existing challenges?

Limited fiscal space and austerity

The negative reinforcement cycles outlined above will be further reinforced and accelerated by fiscal pressure and a shifting geopolitical landscape. Post-COVID austerity, reductions in ODA and the restructuring of gender ministries are weakening NWMs. As traditional development partners whose financing has historically been conditioned on human rights and gender equality commitments reduce ODA, they are being replaced by sources of financing that carry no such conditions. The Commonwealth Secretariat is well-placed to support member countries to build the domestic normative and institutional foundations for women's economic empowerment that can survive these shifts.

Pro-family social norms

As Figure A highlights, limited fiscal space too often leads to austerity, which characterises the diminishing social protection investment observable since the financial crash in 2007–2008 (Ortiz and Cummins 2022). The weakening of safety nets as a result of debt and austerity in turn leads to an over-reliance on women's and girls' unpaid labour (Narayanaswamy and Hersi 2025). The cost of compensating for weak social safety nets is already high, as 'each day, women contribute an estimated 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work, adding at least US$10.8 trillion in value to the global economy' annually (Taneja et al. 2025, 10). Advocacy by anti-gender actors for 'pro-family social norms' has accelerated since the 2007–08

financial crash as the most 'common sense' response to limited fiscal space and diminishing social investment (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023, 8), dynamics that, if they take hold, will increase the burden on women and girls still further.

Heightened risks from TFGBV

As the global economy is increasingly reliant on digital technologies, TFGBV places women and girls at heightened personal and professional risk. The barriers that women and girls face to gain ICT skills and training exacerbate their vulnerability to online abuse (UN Women 2020), while TFGBV has been noted as an increasingly consequential barrier to women entering politics, public life and digital knowledge economies (UN Women 2025c).

3. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls

'Because no woman is safe until all women are safe. And that safety begins where fear ends – in our homes, neighbourhoods, communities and countries.'

The Hon Shirley Botchwey, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women 2025

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations (Catterson et al. 2026), including across the Commonwealth. It is a public welfare issue with far-reaching consequences not only for women's and girls' health, well-being and freedoms, but for their families, communities and overall economies (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022c).

3.1 Understanding existing challenges of ending violence against women and girls

High cost of VAWG

The Commonwealth Secretariat has designed a way to measure the economic cost of VAWG: the EconVAWG Framework (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022c). It identifies the exponential costs of VAWG, as its negative effects move from an embodied human rights violation to a society-wide cost that can be measured in lost gross domestic product (GDP) (see Figure 3.1).

Case studies the Secretariat has undertaken place the cost of VAWG at between 4.5 and 5.5 per cent of GDP. This echoes work undertaken by UN Women in 2025, which estimated that 'governments can lose up to 4 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) due to violence against women, with violence against children costing up to 5 per cent of GDP' (UN Women 2025b).

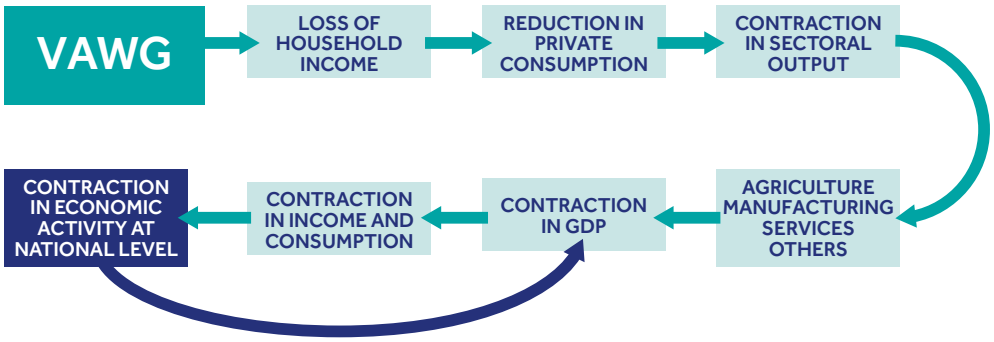
The costs of VAWG

UN Women estimates that the equivalent of US$1.5 trillion is lost globally every year due to the consequences of violence against women and girls.[4]

Data, implementation, enforcement and accountability gaps

Significant data gaps and measurement challenges persist, with the 2024 and 2026 editions of the *Gender Equality* report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b, 2026a) raising particular concerns regarding the availability and quality of geographically consistent information, and where a data paucity exists for every indicator except maternal mortality rates (WHO 2025). Survey respondents from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa consistently described situations in which legislation addressing gender-based violence has been strengthened or introduced since 2020, while enforcement, survivor support and the social norms that enable violence have not shifted at a comparable pace. Child marriage offers a sharp illustration: while now prohibited in law across a growing number of member countries, consultations revealed that what happens in rural and remote communities remains largely unknown and unacknowledged. Consultations further revealed that prevention is most effective when community and religious leaders are engaged through values-based approaches grounded in shared commitment to well-being, rather than through framings perceived to criminalise tradition and custom.

Figure 3.1. The multiplier effect of VAWG on the economy



Source: Commonwealth Secretariat 2022c

Conflict, displacement and intersecting crises

Consultations and survey findings confirm that conflict and displacement are significant and under-addressed drivers of VAWG. In contexts of active conflict, displacement dramatically increases vulnerability to violence, forced marriage and sexual exploitation, yet existing VAWG frameworks do not adequately capture the realities of women living through conflict. These dynamics frequently intersect with climate-related displacement, generating compounding patterns of vulnerability that current frameworks treat in isolation. Integrating conflict and displacement as intersecting crises within Commonwealth VAWG frameworks is both an analytical and a programming gap that requires urgent attention.

3.2 How do 'pushback' dynamics exacerbate existing challenges?

Survey findings confirm that the nature of the challenge has shifted from securing legislative recognition to defending existing protections against erosion, closing the gap between law and practice, and responding to emerging forms of violence, including TFGBV, that existing frameworks do not yet address.

Organised opposition and the weaponisation of language

Consultations revealed that one of the most consequential forms of pushback affecting VAWG work is the systematic erosion of the language and frameworks through which violence against women is named and addressed. This has involved shifts from rights-based language towards the language of 'vulnerable groups', and from specific protections for women towards gender-neutral framings. Consultations indicated that these reframings make it more difficult to defend the legal and policy architecture for addressing harm perpetrated on the basis of gender. This reframing often takes place through procedural processes that appear neutral. Consultations also revealed that in many member countries, the language of women's and children's protection is being used to advance anti-LGBTQI+ legislation, which frames sexuality and gender-based discrimination as safeguarding. This has produced a chilling effect in which officials who might otherwise support protective VAWG legislation become reluctant to engage with rights-based language they perceive as politically contentious.

Emerging and evolving forms of violence

NWMs report VAWG as the priority area where they face the greatest overall challenge. Survey findings also confirm that the nature of that challenge has shifted from securing legislative recognition to defending existing protections against erosion, closing the gap between law and practice, and responding to emerging forms of violence, including TFGBV, that existing frameworks do not yet address. This confirms that legal frameworks are not keeping pace with the evolution of violence itself. TFGBV is a rapidly growing concern, with existing research (UN Women 2025c) and survey respondents identifying disinformation and social media as the increasingly preferred tools to voice opposition to gender equality and women's empowerment. Research conducted jointly by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union documents co-ordinated

online attacks on women politicians traced to organised extremist networks, confirming that these are not isolated incidents but manifestations of a sophisticated opposition to women's political participation that existing VAWG frameworks are not equipped to address (Filion 2025). One respondent also shared their concern about how women who 'come into positions of leadership' become 'victims of online harassment' consisting of being 'trolled and even worse in some cases'. They reiterated the importance of recognising how women's leadership is affected by VAWG, and in particular TFGBV, suggesting that 'it's not just parliamentarians, it's the impact on... women in business as well', requiring policy responses that make a link between 'the economic costs of violence against women' and the 'impact on the [leadership] pipeline'.[5] While legal protections on VAWG now exist in most member countries – as noted earlier, 1,583 legislative measures across 193 countries targeting gender-based violence have been put in place – research and consultations confirm that prevalence is not falling at the anticipated rate. This is not simply an implementation failure, but in part the product of organised and diffuse opposition actively undermining existing protections.

Heightened risks of violence through normalisation

Compounding the harm is an institutional culture that normalises this violence. Consultations revealed that women politicians are frequently told that online abuse is simply part of the job, positioning misogynistic violence as an occupational hazard rather than a human rights violation and discouraging reporting. One respondent also suggested a need for more context-specific nuance in how to address VAWG reporting. They provided the example of 'violence against women in politics', where depending on the Commonwealth context, well-established complaint mechanisms may exist, but for female parliamentarians in small-island developing states (SIDS), making such a complaint is more complex because the 'Clerk of Parliament ... is probably my neighbour or a friend of a friend'. There is a need, they argued, to account for 'resources' and 'capacity'.[6] Other practical barriers to redress are also significant, including limited responsiveness from technology platforms and insufficient institutional capacity within parliaments, particularly in smaller member countries.

4. Gender and Climate Change

'The evidence is clear: when finance reaches those most affected, when gender data inform policy, when women are at the decision-making table, climate action is stronger, fairer and more effective.'

The Hon. Shirley Botchwey, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, International Women's Day 2026

As the 2024 and 2026 editions of the *Gender Equality* report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b, 2026a) make clear, women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change and climate disasters, yet women and girls are often left out of decision-making spaces on issues of climate change. Progress on gender–climate integration across the Commonwealth remains slow and uneven.[7]

4.1 Understanding existing challenges of gender and climate change

Limited fiscal space, weak institutional capacity and women's participation

Pre-existing inequalities leave women disproportionately exposed to climate-related risks, including food, water and fuel insecurity, while simultaneously limiting their participation in the decision-making spaces where responses to those risks are determined. The survey distributed to NWMs asked participants to rate, on a spectrum, how easy or difficult they found it to advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment across different policy domains. Of the priority areas covered in the survey, 'gender and climate change' received the widest range of responses. This indicates that this priority area is where the gap between the best and worst performing contexts is growing rather than closing. Climate finance has created genuine structural opportunities for advancing gender integration, and there is meaningful progress to report in several member country contexts. However, survey and consultation findings consistently indicate that this progress is driven by the need to meet compliance requirements rather than by a change in attitudes, while also being conditioned by external requirements rather than grounded in domestic institutional commitment. Thus, these findings indicate that progress made is fragile.

The structural exposure of women to climate risk

Consultations were unambiguous on the gendered dimensions of climate vulnerability. Across the Caribbean and SIDS, women's heightened exposure to climate-related risks is rooted not only in economic or political marginalisation but in the unpaid care responsibilities that structure their daily lives. When flooding strikes or displacement occurs, women leave employment to care for children and elderly relatives, bearing the greatest share of the adaptive burden with the fewest resources to draw on. Women farmers are adapting individually to shifting agricultural conditions without policy support, while women entrepreneurs are already pioneering green economy approaches in isolation, without systematic government backing. Consultations posed a direct challenge to member country governments: if a disaster happens, what is your organisation doing to prepare women for the risks it brings?

Tokenism and compliance-driven action

Consultation findings indicate that a meaningful share of recorded progress on gender–climate integration is compliance driven rather than substantive. Formal political endorsement consistently fails to translate into technical implementation, and survey respondents from the Caribbean and the Pacific confirmed that gender integration in their contexts remains externally driven, limited to tokenistic participation numbers rather than policy design and dependent on development partner support that would not otherwise exist. Research findings confirm that conditionality is creating opportunities that are not yet translating into durable change.

4.2 How do 'pushback' dynamics exacerbate existing challenges?

Resistance to the gender–climate framing

Consultations and survey findings reveal active resistance to framing climate change as a gendered issue across several member country contexts. This investigation has indicated that the dominant barrier is not a lack of knowledge or skill, but the deliberate positioning of climate change as a purely technical or economic domain in which gender considerations are treated as peripheral rather than policy relevant. This mirrors the broader pattern identified across all priority areas, in which gender equality is incorporated ad hoc, or reframed as an external ideological imposition rather than a substantive policy necessity. Consultations further revealed that anti-rights narratives are appearing in the climate finance space: one participant described being asked explicitly whether LGBTQI+ issues are part of gender in a climate finance context, illustrating how the conflation of gender and sexuality documented in relation to VAWG programming is also impacting other policy arenas. This creates avenues for those opposed to progressive policy change to impede and block gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives.

Data, displacement and the less visible crisis

Consultations identified the absence of geo-referenced, gender-disaggregated population data as a critical constraint on gender–climate planning, limiting the ability to target climate adaptation investment to the most vulnerable communities. Geographic Information System (GIS)-based population mapping was identified as an essential and currently underutilised tool for making women's climate vulnerability visible to the institutions responsible for responding to it. Consultations further revealed that climate-driven displacement compounds gender-based vulnerability in ways that current frameworks do not capture: when communities are displaced, girls face heightened risks of gender-based violence, livelihoods are disrupted and care burdens intensify. Gender–climate frameworks must explicitly incorporate displacement, insecurity and livelihoods impacts to reflect the realities that women and girls in climate-affected communities are navigating.

5. Accountability for Gender Equality

'The data is unequivocal: failure to achieve gender equality and fulfill the rights and empowerment of women and girls is an unsurmountable barrier to the entire 2030 Agenda. The consequences affect everyone... [I]t is crucial that our commitments translate into concrete actions firmly rooted in gender equality and women's rights. This requires measurable actions and results, backed by effective global cooperation.'

Sima Bahous, Executive Director, UN Women (in Gitonga et al. 2024)

In adopting the *Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2022–2030* (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022a), Heads of Government committed to ensuring the widespread collection and reporting of good quality, comparable and disaggregated gender data. The 2024 and 2026 editions of the *Gender Equality* report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b, 2026a) make clear that this commitment is far from being met. Significant gaps in gender- and sex-disaggregated data constrained the analysis of every priority area in this report, and research and consultations reveal an accountability landscape that is fragile, uneven and under growing pressure. Accountability for gender equality is the infrastructure on which all other priorities depend: without it, commitments remain aspirational, progress cannot be verified, and opposition to gender equality goes undocumented and therefore unchallenged.

5.1 Understanding existing challenges around accountability for gender equality

The data deficit and its consequences

The 2024 and 2026 editions of the *Gender Equality* report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b, 2026a) identified data gaps as a binding constraint across every priority area. Data on women in leadership beyond parliamentary representation, on unpaid care and on the gendered impacts of climate change are sparse or methodologically inconsistent, with only 15 per cent of Commonwealth Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) reporting plans to collect gender-disaggregated climate data as of 2024. Regular and reliable data on VAWG remain absent in many contexts, undermining the ability to monitor prevalence and make the case for sustained investment in prevention. Consultations further revealed that the weakening of population data infrastructure in several member countries is a direct barrier to gender-responsive programming: in one African member country, a national census has not been conducted for more than two decades. This is not an isolated case: geo-referenced, gender-disaggregated population data, which are essential for both climate adaptation planning and economic empowerment programming, are currently unavailable across several member countries.

What data systems cannot see

The indicators currently used to track gender equality systematically fail to capture the dynamics most consequential for progress. Representation metrics record the presence of women in formal roles but not whether they hold substantive authority. Legal frameworks are tracked as present or absent, but enforcement, community awareness and survivor access remain unmeasured. Progress on gender–climate integration is recorded without distinguishing between whether it is spurred by compliance demands or whether normative or attitudinal change has occurred. In each case, the formal architecture of accountability is maintained while its substance remains unknown. Equally invisible are the interpersonal, psychological and institutional dimensions of opposition:

the informal resistance women in leadership navigate daily, the discriminatory assumptions that shape appointment decisions and the procedural obstructions that stall implementation. Consultations were clear that these dynamics are not peripheral to the challenge of advancing gender equality but central to it, and that an accountability framework that cannot see such dynamics cannot address them.

Working in silos and the 'connective tissue' deficit

Consultations identified the fragmentation of accountability efforts across the Commonwealth ecosystem as a significant and under-addressed problem. Commonwealth-aligned organisations, including the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the Commonwealth Businesswomen's Network (CBWN) and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) are all generating data, research and evidence on gender equality that are not systematically drawn upon by member governments or the Commonwealth Secretariat. The CPA's joint research with the Inter-Parliamentary Union on violence against women in politics (Filion 2025), covering parliamentarians in the Asia–Pacific, the Americas and the Caribbean, is one example of detailed, citable evidence not yet integrated into Commonwealth monitoring frameworks. Research findings confirm that a more systematic approach to connecting and maximising the evidence generated across the Commonwealth ecosystem would significantly strengthen the accountability infrastructure without requiring member countries to build new data systems from scratch.

5.2 How do 'pushback' dynamics exacerbate existing accountability challenges?

Erosion of consensus language on 'gender'

Consultations revealed that the word 'gender' itself carries fundamentally different meanings for different actors across the Commonwealth, and that this definitional ambiguity presents an active barrier to building consensus and sustaining programming. In parliamentary contexts, research shows that the same term can refer strictly to women's rights for some members while carrying broader connotations of gender identity and sexual orientation for others. This divergence can derail legislation and fracture coalitions. Definitional ambiguity around the term 'gender' creates an entry point for contestation over existing consensus language, as occurred at CSW70, in which the United States attempted to force a vote to redefine the definition of gender in the Beijing Platform for Action (UN 2026). In this case and in others, those seeking to oppose gender equality commitments can exploit definitional disagreement to cause procedural delays.

The growing challenges of data collection

Data collection is expensive and time consuming, and where states are struggling to balance competing and urgent needs with limited fiscal space, data collection exercises are more likely to be deprioritised. What is happening simultaneously is that well-funded actors who oppose measures to promote gender equality have been professionalising their activities. These efforts include funding and publishing data via their own networks of think tanks and advocacy organisations, which are becoming increasingly adept at co-opting the language of 'rights' and 'sustainable development' in order to provide empirical support for their opposition to gender equality policies and initiatives (Narayanaswamy and McEwen 2026). It is thus harder in this information environment for countries to judge the quality or veracity of the available data as they try to address the data gaps they do not have the resources themselves to fill.

Accountability infrastructure under pressure

Research findings show that the institutional capacity to collect, analyse and use gender data is itself being eroded. Post-COVID austerity, reductions in ODA and the restructuring of gender ministries have all weakened NWMs across multiple regions, reducing their capacity to conduct and commission the research on which accountability depends. Consultations revealed that data collection is frequently deprioritised, not only because of resource constraints, but also because its outputs create political pressure that some actors prefer to avoid. Research findings confirm that the failure to collect data on women's experiences of violence, discrimination or exclusion is sometimes a matter of choice, not capacity.

Recommendations

The empirical evidence for why we should collectively pursue more equal societies is clear. However, as this report and other existing research reveals, actors who are antagonistic towards gender equality and women's empowerment are proposing an alternative path to prosperity – one in which sexed and gendered forms of inequality and exclusion are normalised as requirements for economic growth and national sovereignty. Nonetheless, as anti-colonial and civil rights movements have revealed around the world, systemic inequality is not only unsustainable, but untenable. Inequality, as economists, historians and sociologists have shown, has multiple and varied effects that not only create social conflict, but increase levels of anxiety and illness, while encouraging the excessive use of natural resources upon which the collective survival of humanity relies (see, for instance, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). The Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2025–2030 recognises that equality and inclusion must be at the centre of efforts to build resilience against all the pushback dynamics set out in Figure A. Implementing the eight recommendations below is crucial to advancing democratic, economic and environmental resilience across the Commonwealth.

Democratic resilience

1 Strengthen legal frameworks in support of gender equality and women's empowerment

Concerns around workplace safety and dignity, access to justice and digital safety all require more robust legislative frameworks to reverse democratic backsliding, which risk progress on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Workplace safety and dignity

International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190 recognises the universal right to be able to work free from violence and harassment, including in the informal sector. UN Women recommends that alongside ratification of ILO C190, civil society should be supported to work with employers to build safe workplaces alongside conducting research on gender-based violence and thus empowering workers by building their capacities to combat harm in the workplace (UN Women 2023).

Access to justice

Ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW ensures international accountability by establishing complaint and inquiry mechanisms, allowing the CEDAW Committee to hear individual petitions regarding rights violations (CBWN 2026, 2).

Digital safety

There is a need to address weak regulation, moving beyond reactive legislation to proactive digital safety standards that hold platforms accountable for TFGBV (ibid., 3), including AI-driven harms. This should include the following.

- Convening political parties to establish common rules, codes of conduct and, where appropriate, regulatory frameworks for the use of AI in political life, covering issues such as AI-generated simulations of politicians, political mis- and disinformation, TFGBV, and the use of AI in election campaigns.
- Conducting thorough, evidence-based inquiries into gender bias, diversity and equity in the development, deployment and impact of AI systems (Bereskin 2024).

Ongoing work by the Commonwealth Secretariat on AI-driven innovation (Commonwealth Secretariat 2026b) needs to be joined up with the work on gender equality and women's empowerment. As Figure A highlights, weak regulation carries outsized gendered risks in relation to labour markets. As such, these issues must be tackled with urgency to avoid unregulated technology proliferation undoing progress on gender equality and women's empowerment.

2 Develop a shared Commonwealth framework for understanding and applying the concept of gender

Research and consultations confirm that the word 'gender' carries fundamentally different meanings for different actors across the Commonwealth, and that this definitional ambiguity is fracturing coalitions, stalling workshops and diverting substantive policy discussions into definitional dispute. This report recommends that the Commonwealth Secretariat initiate a structured, inclusive process of dialogue among member countries to develop shared working definitions and common guidance on how gender is understood and applied in Commonwealth programming and policy contexts. The goal is not to resolve a genuinely contested question, but to establish a shared foundation sufficient to sustain the implementation of commitments already agreed, without requiring member countries to resolve deeper norms-based disagreements as a precondition for practical co-operation. Promoting (gender) equality – through, for instance, gender impact assessments for all legislation or mandated gender budgeting – is an important part of technical assistance as it leads to better outcomes for the greatest number of people and groups.

3 Calibrate responses to distinguish between organised opposition and institutional conservatism

Research findings make clear that treating all opposition to gender equality as a single phenomenon produces inadequate responses. Organised, transnational anti-rights actors require a strategic, co-ordinated multilateral response, including mapping and monitoring these networks, intelligence sharing across the Commonwealth ecosystem, and coalition building with like-minded partners to defend agreed normative frameworks. Normative ambivalence and institutional conservatism, which account for a significant share of what one respondent termed 'procedural dilution'[8] and ultimately implementation resistance, thus requires a different approach: values-based programming, patient dialogue and the building of domestic normative consensus grounded in member countries' own development interests. The Commonwealth Secretariat's convening power and trust-based relationships mean that it is well placed to support both, with responses calibrated to the specific conditions of SIDS. This must also include support for addressing the fiscal deprioritisation of gender equality-related initiatives, related, as Figure A emphasises, to structural concerns including debt and austerity.

Economic resilience

4 Establish care-responsive design and gender-responsive budgeting as non-negotiable standards

The care economy is the single most consistently identified structural barrier across all five priority areas. No economic empowerment programme should be designed, funded or evaluated without a care-responsive component: where childcare, flexible scheduling and transport are not built into programme architecture, the women most in need of support will continue to be excluded. Gender-responsive budgeting must be treated as a condition of financing rather than a reporting afterthought. Sustained investment in gender expertise within implementing institutions is equally essential, as its systematic marginalisation is hollowing out the capacity to translate commitment into delivery. The 2026 *Gender Equality* report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2026a) recommends the adoption and adaptation of UN Women's 3R model to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid work (UN Women 2024b). The Samoa model, a legislated ringfenced, district-level allocation for gender equality and social inclusion, also offers a replicable example of how these commitments

'Racialized women living in poverty, especially those in the Global South, continue to subsidize the global economy. Each day, women contribute an estimated 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work, adding at least US$10.8 trillion [annually] in value to the global economy; the economic contribution of their care work is three times the financial value of the global tech industry.'

Taneja et al. 2025

can be institutionally protected from fiscal pressure. As noted in the 2026 *Gender Equality* report (Commonwealth Secretariat 2026a), these initiatives can form the basis of critical knowledge exchange among Commonwealth countries in tackling the unequal burden of unpaid labour borne by women and girls as part of broader investments in transformative social policies (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004).

Environmental resilience

5 Support greater co-operation, integration and partnership on addressing the gendered effects of climate change

A substantial amount of work is being undertaken on climate change across the Commonwealth, but as this report has found, there is still resistance to consideration of the climate crisis as an overtly gendered issue. Instead, there is a tendency to position climate change as a purely technical or economic domain, in which gender considerations are treated as incidental rather than central to adaptation and mitigation processes. Work on how gender is integrated into measures of Nationally Determined Contributions (Allinson 2022), as well as the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) work to embed gender advisers in member countries to ensure women shape and benefit from climate adaptation efforts in response to the 2025 Belém Gender Action Plan (COP30), are both welcome initiatives. What is needed, however, is a more concerted effort to not only react to the gendered nature of the climate crisis, but to proactively address how pushback dynamics might further set back progress. More co-operation, integration and partnership facilitated through the strengthening of The Commonwealth Collaborative Network on Gender-responsive Climate Action is recommended.

Accountability

6 Resource comprehensive data collection, which is crucial to addressing implementation, enforcement and accountability gaps

The absence of good quality, comparable and disaggregated gender data is both a technical and a political problem. Data on VAWG create accountability pressure that such data's absence removes; data on unpaid care make visible a structural burden that, if measured, would require a policy response. Data are the most powerful diplomatic tool available for building consensus and making the case for investment. The Secretariat must take a more active role in connecting and amplifying the evidence generated across its ecosystem of affiliated organisations, reducing the siloing that leaves significant bodies of relevant evidence invisible to the policy-makers who need them. Especially given the challenges of funding data collection amid limited fiscal space and the growing professionalised information ecosystem being funded by anti-gender actors, ensuring that all existing evidence is collated and made as widely available as possible is a form of technical support that is crucial to achieving gains in all five priority areas.

7 Broaden measurement frameworks to capture substantive power, informal resistance and the psychosocial costs of opposition

Quantitative data collection is, as noted, crucial, but it is also important to recognise that on their own, indicators are systematically inadequate to respond to the challenges documented in this report. Representation metrics cannot measure whether women hold substantive authority. Legal frameworks are tracked as present or absent, but enforcement and survivor access remain unmeasured. Progress on gender–climate integration is recorded without distinguishing compliance-driven from normatively embedded change. And the interpersonal, psychological and institutional dimensions of opposition are entirely invisible to current data systems. The Commonwealth Secretariat should work with member countries to develop a revised measurement framework that captures substantive power rather than positional visibility, distinguishes formal from operational compliance, incorporates qualitative indicators for the psychosocial dimensions of opposition, and monitors the health of the institutional infrastructure on which implementation depends.

8 Activate the Commonwealth ecosystem as a connected accountability and advocacy infrastructure

Promoting effective collaboration between the Secretariat and Commonwealth Accredited Organisations (AOs) is essential to move from tokenised mainstreaming to transformative implementation. Commonwealth-aligned organisations, including the CPA, the CBWN and the CLGF, are producing detailed, policy-relevant evidence on gender equality that is not systematically drawn upon by member governments or the Secretariat's monitoring frameworks. Formalising civil society access ensures intergenerational and broad-based civil society organisations have a permanent seat at the decision-making table.

The Secretariat should establish a co-ordinated evidence-sharing mechanism across affiliated organisations, position itself as the 'connective tissue' of the Commonwealth's gender equality knowledge ecosystem, and use the resulting evidence base as a diplomatic and advocacy resource to strengthen and reinforce dialogue and action in multilateral spaces. The role of the Commonwealth in providing strategic support and guidance is key, as there are in-built opportunities for cross-country learning and exchange. This could include more technical support, outreach and training, supporting member countries to convert political will into context-sensitive legislative outcomes.[9] Proper resourcing is not just about money, but is also about sharing information and expertise, and facilitating learning and knowledge exchange across the Commonwealth.

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1 Documents cited include: 2005–2015 Plan of Action for Gender Equality (Commonwealth Secretariat 2005); the 2016, 2022 and 2024 CHOGM meeting communiqués (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022b, 2024a); the 'Commonwealth Priorities for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: 2017–2020 and Beyond' (Commonwealth Secretariat 2017); Gender Equality in the Commonwealth 2017/2018 (Commonwealth Secretariat 2019); the Commonwealth Declaration for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2022-2030 (Commonwealth Secretariat 2022a); the 13th Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting (Commonwealth Secretariat 2023); the gender roadmap report, Progress Towards Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women in the Commonwealth (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b); and 'The Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2025-2030' (Commonwealth Secretariat 2025).

2 Interview with civil society-based respondent who works with women in politics, April 2026.

3 Progress on girls' secondary school enrolment has been uneven: gains in Africa and Asia are being offset by declines in the Pacific, the Caribbean and the Americas, meaning the 2030 goal of full enrolment will fall short by around 15 per cent. Female labour market participation has grown modestly, but unpaid care work continues to consume significantly more of women's time than men's, with that gap projected to persist until at least 2050. Women's access to finance for business has declined in most regions, and nearly half of Commonwealth countries still lack comprehensive legal protections for women in the workplace (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b).

4 The figure of US$1.5 trillion as the cost of VAWG is an estimate undertaken by UN Women in 2016 (Puri 2016). As a cost estimate that is 10 years old, it is likely to have significantly increased due to inflation, increased gender-based violence during the pandemic and other ongoing challenges, as noted in Figure A.

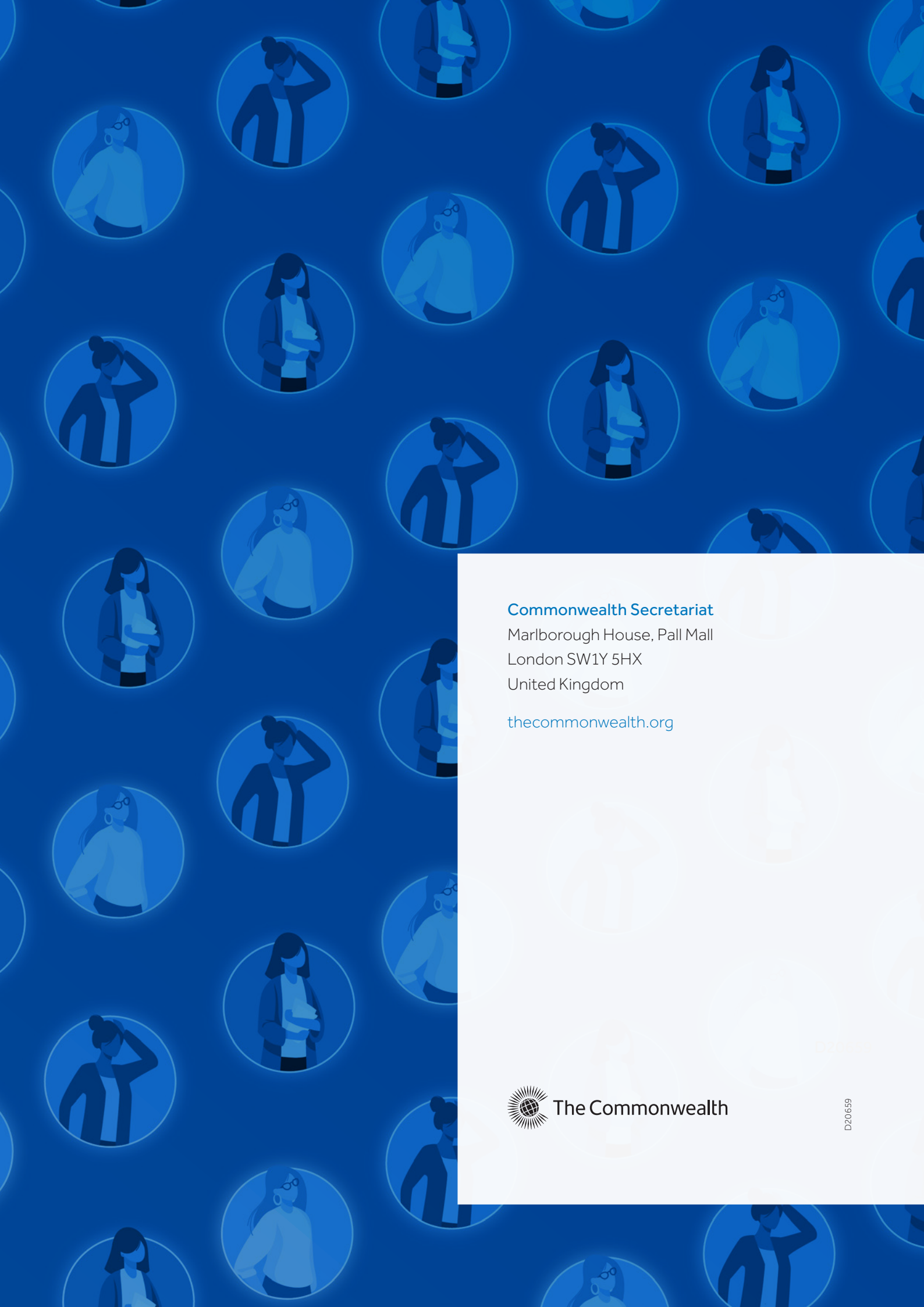
5 Interview with civil society-based respondent who works with women in business, April 2026.

6 Interview with civil society-based respondent who works with women in politics, April 2026.

7 Only around 21 per cent of Commonwealth member countries engaged women's groups in developing their Nationally Determined Contributions in 2021, with European and Asian countries showing no evidence of participatory approaches. Gender-responsive budgeting was referenced in only 12.5 per cent of Commonwealth climate plans, and just 15 per cent reported intentions to collect gender-disaggregated data to monitor climate impacts. Africa and the Pacific have shown relatively stronger performance, but the overall picture is one of marginal and fragile progress (Commonwealth Secretariat 2024b).

8 Interview with civil society-based respondent who works with women in business, April 2026.

9 For example, the CPA produces guides, including on harassment (Dibateza 2020) and gender-sensitising (Childs 2020) in parliaments.



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