

Foreword by Commonwealth Secretary-General

It is now fourteen years since the international community initiated the United Nations decade for women. Much has happened in that time. Substantial efforts have been made to integrate women more fully into the economic, social and political activities of countries, and the results can be seen in terms of greater awareness of the issues, increased legislation on gender equality, and the establishment of more women's bureaux. Many conferences have been held, most prominently the 1985 Nairobi review of the UN decade. But in many developing countries, the economic crises which emerged in the early 1980s and the subsequent efforts to effect adjustment through programmes agreed with the international financial institutions have meant that the economic position of women has got worse rather than better.

In 1985, the first meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs identified the impact of structural adjustment policies on women as a priority issue. At their second meeting in Zimbabwe in 1987, they recommended that an expert group be established to identify the extent of women's contribution to different economies, examine the evidence of the impact on women of structural adjustment measures, and consider alternatives which would be socially and economically more effective. The proposal was supported by Commonwealth Finance Ministers and approved by Heads of Government at their Vancouver meeting later that year.

I was fortunate in being able to assemble a Group of distinguished Commonwealth women and men with expertise and experience both of women-in-development issues and structural adjustment policies. Their deliberations were chaired by Ms. Mary Chinery-Hesse, formerly Principal Secretary of Ghana's Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning and now UNDP resident representative in Uganda.

The Group's Report provides an incisive and moving analysis of the special difficulties women are now facing in many parts of the world.

It points to the severe and often disproportionate impact which women have encountered in carrying out their four major roles of producers, home managers, mothers and community organisers, in the face of the economic crises and ensuing structural adjustment programmes which have been experienced by much of the developing world during the 1980s. It finds that, in practice, these programmes have made additional demands on women as producers, while reducing the quantum of social support and other resources available to them in their other roles. The result is to worsen the already harsh pressures on women's time. In a chapter entitled "So Little Action", the Report catalogues the record of these adjustment programmes from the standpoint of women. The Group finds that though some measures have been taken to alleviate poverty, women have benefited only incidentally, and that measures directed specifically at their particular needs have been much too little and too late. It concludes that a new approach is required incorporating a much broader adjustment strategy.

The recommendations for such a strategy are set out in the context of three guiding principles: an emphasis on social equity and economic growth as well as efficiency; the full integration of women into all decision-making processes; and a supportive international environment. The recommendations themselves are comprehensive and cover a wide area. Most important are the many measures which governments of adjusting countries should incorporate into their structural adjustment programmes so as to help women to carry out their four main roles. Giving special attention to their access to productive resources such as land and credit and to basic goods and services is considered particularly important. But access to other inputs, such as foreign exchange, marketing and training facilities, extension and technical services, is also of the utmost significance, as is an ability to make use of adequate education and health services. Specific recommendations are made in respect of each, and the Group emphasises its view that structural adjustment programmes will only become effective in terms of their stated objectives if women are enabled to raise their production and welfare by playing a much greater role in economies and societies. Recognising that the implementation of its proposals would not be costless, the Group makes detailed proposals for financing the broader structural adjustment programmes recommended. This leads to the third strand of the Group's recommendations, a series of proposals for international action, especially in the areas of finance and trade. Fourthly, the Group sets out some specific requirements for enhanced data and monitoring to assess the continuing impact of structural adjustment on women. Finally, it makes some detailed proposals on implementation including possible procedures for follow-up by the Commonwealth.

At a very early stage of its work, the Group recognised that gender-disaggregated data were generally deficient, and that there was a particular paucity of detailed analyses on how women are affected by structural adjustment. To help rectify these gaps it asked the Secretariat to commission case studies in a range of Commonwealth developing countries. These studies have proved valuable in informing the work of the Group. They are being published separately. In addition, the members of the Group wished to complement their Report with a video film which, by means of interviews with some of those affected, could illustrate more graphically the subject of their investigation. In the preparation of the country studies and the making of the video, additional resources were required: I am greatly indebted to CIDA, UNDP, UNICEF, UNIFEM and UNFPA for their readiness to cooperate in these aspects and for their generous offer of financial support for them.

This is a significant, authoritative and timely commentary on a matter of immense importance. It deserves close and sympathetic attention and urgent responsive action. I commend it to Commonwealth Governments and to the wider international community.

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