

Women's Rights as Human Rights

Submission by the Women's and Youth Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat

Women's Rights as Human Rights

1. The Harare Declaration identified "Equality for Women" as a priority area for Commonwealth action. Commonwealth Heads of Governments pledged their support to ensure women may exercise their full and equal rights. Heads of Government reaffirmed their strong collective commitment to the principles of justice and human rights, including the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, equality for women and accountable administrations.
2. When Ministers Responsible for Women's affairs met in Cyprus, 5-9 July, 1993, they identified a number of key issues concerning women's rights as human rights, which should be brought to the attention of Law Ministers at their meeting in November, 1993.
3. In the message to Commonwealth Heads of Government (annex 1), Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs asked Heads of Government, to make a commitment to the eradication of violence against women by endorsing the draft UN Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women at the forthcoming 1993 United Nations General Assembly. The Commonwealth Secretary-General forwarded on the Ministers' behalf a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on 19 July, 1993, indicating their support for the draft Declaration (annex 2).
4. In the Meeting Communique (annex 3), Ministers stressed that women's rights are human rights, and called on member governments to recognise the priority given to women's human rights at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, and implement the recommendations of the Report. Ministers urged member governments to create awareness and promote recognition of the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as a major human rights instrument. Ministers urged those governments which had not yet done so, to ratify and implement CEDAW.
5. Recognising that CEDAW was subjected to more reservations and interpretive declarations than any other convention; and that some countries were experiencing difficulties in ratifying CEDAW or implementing it fully because of cultural and religious values and beliefs, Ministers encouraged member governments to explore various ways in which the positive aspects of culture and traditional values which promote respect for women could be harnessed to enhance the full implementation of CEDAW.
6. Noting that legislative action pursuant to CEDAW

was a necessary but not sufficient condition to promote equality for women, Ministers emphasised that legislative reforms should be accompanied by changes in social attitudes, administrative practices and economic structures, with the adoption of active programmes of public education and debate.

7. Ministers recognised the mutually reinforcing link between CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). They were conscious that to combine implementation of CRC and CEDAW would send young women off to adulthood with better chances as well as enhance the protection of women's and girls' rights. Ministers therefore urged member governments to use them both.

8. Ministers also recognised the valuable contribution made by Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to the advancement of women. They encouraged member governments to strengthen co-operation with women's organisations and human rights organisations to promote adequate monitoring of the implementation of CEDAW, and to organise public awareness programmes on the human rights of women and girls, on legal literacy and legal counselling for women, and on the many different forms of violence against women.

9. It was proposed that an office of a Commonwealth Commissioner for Human Rights with special responsibility for women and children should be established and that the Secretariat should prepare a position paper on this proposal and circulate it to Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs for their consideration. The Secretariat is preparing a position paper modifying the original proposal to reflect the practice and approaches of the Commonwealth. The paper will be submitted shortly to the Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs.

The Women's and Youth Affairs Division

10. Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs requested the Secretary General to set up a Commonwealth Expert Group to review, assess and recommend options for revitalising the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women and Development. The Expert Group will hold its first meeting in December 1993, subsequent to which its Report on the Renewed Plan of Action will be submitted to governments. The renewed Plan of Action will be an integrated and up-dated strategic plan for the Commonwealth towards the year 2000 and beyond. It will have a specific Commonwealth orientation and be grounded on the essential principles and goals of the Commonwealth, such as the

Harare priorities and fundamental political values, and on its effective consultative and consensual approaches. Priority will be given to working on legal and constitutional issues which will be reviewed and strengthened in the new Plan of Action.

11. The Women's Affairs Department of the Women and Youth Affairs Division provides technical assistance to member governments on the implementation of the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women and Development. The Department is responsible for managing and co-ordinating the Secretariat's programme on "Equality for Women". The Department liaises with United Nations and other international and regional agencies, and NGOs, on gender issues.

12. In the area of women's rights the Department has focused on activities related to the UN Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and combating Violence Against Women. Activities include: organising workshops, attending conferences and producing training manuals, such as, "The Reporting Process: A Manual for Commonwealth Jurisdictions", assisting member countries to fulfil their reporting obligations and implement CEDAW.

13. In April 1992, in conjunction with the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, the Women and Development Programme organised a Caribbean Re-

gional Workshop on the CEDAW. In December 1992, a similar workshop for the Africa Region was organised, in the Gambia. The workshops brought together representatives from Women's Bureaux, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Judiciary, to examine issues related to ratification and the reporting process of the Convention. The Africa Region workshop acted as a catalyst, as the Gambia government ratified the Convention on the first day of the Workshop.

14. The Department has produced so far three manuals on violence against women, targeting women and women's organisations, lawyers and law enforcement officers, and Police officers. These manuals are:

1. Confronting Violence: A Manual for Commonwealth Action
2. Guidelines for Police Training on Violence Against Women and Child Sexual Abuse.
3. Violence Against Women: Curriculum Materials for Legal Studies

In June 1992, an update of Confronting Violence - A Manual for Commonwealth Action, was published.

15. The Women's Affairs Department participated in the preparatory activities for the World Conference on Human Rights in Geneva, supporting women's rights as human rights.