

Gender-Sensitizing Commonwealth Parliaments



**The Report of a
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
Study Group**

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Foreword

Without doubt, more and more countries and Parliaments are appreciating that women have a right to participate in political structures and legislative decision-making. However, for the most part, although women may overcome the more general obstacles to their participation in Parliaments, once they reach there they often encounter additional difficulties.

In 1998 the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) collaborated with three Commonwealth legal NGOs in the development of the Latimer House Guidelines on Parliamentary Supremacy and Judicial Independence. Among many other matters, the guidelines point out the need to improve the numbers of women Members in Commonwealth Parliaments and suggest ways in which this goal can be achieved. An earlier CPA study had already identified barriers to the participation of women in public life. The next logical step was to endeavour to identify means by which the task facing women Parliamentarians can be rationalized.

Against this background, in February and March 2001 the CPA, with the assistance of the CPA Malaysia Branch and the approval of the CPA Executive Committee, arranged a Study Group in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Gender-Sensitizing Commonwealth Parliaments. The aims of the Study Group were set out as:

1. To share analyses, experiences and good practices of Standing Orders in Commonwealth Parliaments;
2. To identify concrete strategies and mechanisms to make Commonwealth Parliaments as gender-sensitive as possible;
3. To prioritize key areas for action, based on the recommendations of the Study Group.

This Study Group was set up in furtherance of a suggestion made originally by the Steering Committee of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) that it was necessary to examine conventions and language embedded in Standing Orders that possibly affect behaviour and attitudes towards women. The focus of this Study Group was, however, widened to include considerations of other aspects of parliamentary life which women find alienating or difficult.

Highly participatory and interactive discussions focused on the female Parliamentarian and discussed the challenges and impediments she faces from the stage of standing for a seat in Parliament to her participation in the parliamentary process, after election.

I extend the thanks of the CPA to the Study Group Members and advisers, to the CPA Malaysia Branch for providing a congenial venue and to my colleagues Raja Gomez and Anthony Staddon, respectively Director and Assistant Director of Development and

Planning, for their valuable contribution to the organization and delivery of these successful deliberations.

This report, prepared by Ms Jacqui Sampson-Jacent, Clerk of the House of Representatives of Trinidad and Tobago and Rapporteur to the Group, identifies the issues discussed by the Study Group and presents to the reader the Group's recommendations which I hope will assist Parliaments and their Members to understand better the difficulties faced by women Parliamentarians. In a wider perspective, it is the Association's hope that the extensive commentary and recommendations for future action will inform many of the current debates in national and sub-national Parliaments, both within and outside the Commonwealth, and have a substantial positive impact on the way in which Parliaments conduct their business.

Arthur R. Donahoe, QC
Secretary-General
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Report Of the CPA Study Group On Gender-Sensitizing Commonwealth Parliaments

Introduction

1. When Nancy Astor, the first female Member of Parliament to take her seat in the United Kingdom House of Commons, entered Parliament for the first time it is said that her male colleagues went out of their way to make the experience as difficult and embarrassing as possible. From being refused a seat on the corner of the Back Benches requiring her to clamber over the legs of other Parliamentarians, to searching for the toilet in the most inaccessible part of the parliamentary estate, it must have been a sobering experience¹.
2. Admittedly, since the days of Nancy Astor, there have been many changes in the environment of Parliaments as well as in the participation of women in legislative work. The U.K. Parliament, for example, introduced in the autumn of 2000 more “family friendly” sitting hours with debates on Bills ending at 10 p.m. from Mondays to Wednesdays (MPs were already free to leave early on Thursdays). A less controversial initiative was opened for trial periods in 2000 and 2001, namely a children’s playgroup in the Palace of Westminster.
3. Women in the South African Parliament have been instrumental in creating an environment in which women are comfortable. Session times have been changed, a crèche has been established and the rules governing attire have all been altered because of the influence of women Members.
4. It is also true that women Members across the Commonwealth have not only made a difference to the ambience and procedures of Parliament, but also affected the type of legislation promulgated.
5. The principle of equality between men and women is enshrined in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which 154 states are parties. In addition, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action reaffirmed this commitment. And yet in practice, genuine power sharing for women remains elusive and distant.
6. This report summarizes the issues discussed by the Study Group and puts forward wide-ranging recommendations which, if implemented, would improve the overall functioning of Commonwealth Legislatures and in the final analysis benefit Commonwealth countries and their peoples as a whole.

¹ Reeta Chakrabarti, *The Independent*, 25 January 2000.

Challenges on the road to Parliament

7. >From the onset, the group acknowledged that ultimately, gender equality is inseparable from the wider goal of development since any society that excludes 50 per cent of its population from playing a meaningful role in decision-making in that society is undermining itself and inhibiting its growth and development.

8. Against that backdrop, the Study Group noted that female representation in Commonwealth Parliaments is not impressive with women making up only about 13.8 per cent of Membership.² Progress has been mixed and varies widely among regions (see Table 1). Today, women's representation in the Lok Sabha, India, is only 49 Members out of 550 or 8.9 per cent of the total membership. In Sri Lanka it is four per cent, in Cyprus seven per cent and Nigeria 3.4 per cent. In Canada, women represent 20 per cent of the House of the Commons and 32 per cent of the Senate. In several Caribbean countries, the proportion of women appointed to the Senate is relatively high while the share of women elected to the lower Chamber by direct vote is low. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, women represent 32 percent of the membership of the appointed Senate but only 10 per cent of the elected House of Representatives.

TABLE 1
Female Representation in Parliament by Region

Region	Percentage of Women in Parliament (including national, state, federal and provincial Parliaments)
Africa	15.5
Asia	5.8
Australia	24.7
British Isles and the Mediterranean	18.6
Canada	22.2
Caribbean, the Americas and the Atlantic	17.5
Pacific	8.7
South East Asia	8.5

² As at March 2001. Source www.cpa.org

Source: www.cpahq.org

9. There are many Legislatures where the proportion of women may be small but they occupy a large percentage of high-ranking posts. Whether these Legislatures offer better terms on which women Members may participate is a matter for debate.
10. Women's strongest representation is in northern Europe, particularly in the Nordic countries. For example, women hold 73 out of 200 seats (36.5 per cent) in the Finnish Parliament. In the term beginning in the spring of 1996, the Speaker and both Deputy Speakers of the Parliament were women. It is important to note that 19 women were elected to the first unicameral Parliament of Finland in 1907.
11. In the Commonwealth, women's representation at the top levels of government is similarly disappointing. Women constitute a small percentage of cabinet Ministers, with responsibility generally confined to areas such as social affairs, education, health and family matters. While women are key contributors to economic development, they are almost completely absent from ministries of finance, trade and economic planning. And although women have suffered as victims of wars and other conflicts, they are rarely found in ministries of defence or foreign affairs, and their participation in preventive diplomacy or conflict resolution continues to be extremely limited. Women felt they would be strong additions to these portfolios.
12. It was acknowledged that in almost every society patriarchal values are constantly reinforced through traditions, religion, customs and socio-political structures which are difficult to change and that, generally, there is very little effort to encourage women to take on positions of public responsibility. There was support for the view that in reality women are discouraged against giving up "their domestic responsibilities" in order to enter the world of politics. The Study Group therefore concluded that more effort is needed to encourage women to enter politics and Parliament and concerted efforts made to eliminate systemic barriers especially in the party process to nomination in winnable constituencies.
13. It was felt that regular programmes of youth training and empowerment, such as local, regional and international youth parliamentary debates, should be undertaken to encourage young women to get involved in politics. The Group commended the CPA for its role in such efforts and stressed the need for the CPA to continue to sponsor and support local, regional and international Youth Parliaments. Other activities recommended are Essay Writing Competitions at all levels and institutionalized-training activities that the Group believed should also be encouraged within the political party.
14. In addition, the Study Group maintained that experienced female Parliamentarians should play a vibrant role in encouraging young women to enter politics. It was suggested that they should visit schools, universities and other institutions to give

lectures that could include accounts of their experiences. They should also invite young female politicians to accompany them at meetings and other public gatherings as this will help eradicate the perception that older politicians feel threatened by younger colleagues.

15. The Study Group felt that state funding, insofar as it is economically feasible, is necessary in order to encourage women and young persons to participate in elections. The suggestion that specific party funding should be provided to encourage women to run for seats in Parliament was also strongly supported. Parties should encourage male and female delegate selection to all their conventions.
16. There was consensus therefore that changing attitudes towards political participation of women and sensitizing the political system to accept women, requires a co-coordinated effort at various levels, by governments, Parliaments and other decisions-making bodies, political parties, civil society including non-governmental organizations and academic institutions, the media, inter-governmental organizations as well as the family unit. There was overwhelming support for the view that, in the final analysis, political participation of women cannot be achieved without certain underlying concerns being addressed, including:
 - a. Women themselves have to be made aware of their political rights in, and political obligations to, society;
 - b. Men have to be sensitized to the unconscionable nature of gender inequity in politics;
 - c. The political party must recognize the need to provide support for women candidates;
 - d. Political commitment to gender equity has to be firmly established at national and international levels;
 - e. Affirmative legal actions have to flow from this political commitment, and
 - f. The legal regime has to reflect this commitment in letter and spirit.
17. The Study Group agreed that the concern related to women in politics is not only about the number of them who succeed in running for parliamentary office but the ways in which they can be effective in Parliament. In pursuance of its main objective, the Study Group gave much attention to the major obstacles women face when entering Parliament and the means by which such obstacles could be overcome.

Removing the Obstacles

18. The Study Group believed that, once elected or appointed to Parliament, the female MP encounters additional barriers and limitations to her equal participation in political decision-making. Such obstacles were identified as follows:

Political

- The historical domination of politics and the political environment by the male gender;
- The prevalence of male political networks (both formal and informal), and
- The traditional political power structure and its in-built bias against women.

Cultural and Economic

- Traditional gender roles of women;
- The perception of women's subordination to male control and the necessity of male "permission" to participate in public life;
- Lack of support from the family (emotional and sharing of domestic responsibilities) and the burden of having to successfully manage her domestic responsibilities and her professional obligations, and
- Lack of adequate financial support.

Institutional structures, arrangements and styles

- Inadequate training/orientation for women entering Parliament, on procedures, regulations and other technical information;
- Relative lack of women role models in Parliament;
- Hours of sittings;
- Seating and other physical arrangements within Parliament, and
- Traditions styles and norms of parliamentary debate and language.

Psychological

- The predetermined and psychologically established social roles that are assigned to men and women, and
- The mass media and its attitude towards female Parliamentarians.

Removing the Political Obstacles

19. Without a doubt, Parliaments are products of political processes that were male-dominated or exclusively male. Indeed, most established Parliaments were created and organized by men, and have traditionally been reserved for them. Over the

centuries males have established procedures in their own discretion. Even newly established Legislatures, patterned after their predecessors, prove to be male dominated and reflect male influences and language. Consequently, upon entering Parliament, the female MP immediately realizes that she has entered a male domain.

20. The Study Group believed that through training and supporting women candidates and female Members of Parliament, entrants to Parliament could be properly prepared for their new role. It was agreed that such training should be undertaken by Parliaments themselves as well as by political parties. Training by political parties would help incoming female MPs to understand more fully what is expected by their party and will help them understand their party's position on the legislative procedures and systems used in Parliament. Although in some parts of the Commonwealth political parties offer such training and orientation, the Group recognized that in many countries most parties do not have the resources and, more often than not, the willingness to offer such training. The use of women's commissions were utilized by some parties (e.g. Liberal Party in Canada) to do some of this training.
21. Support for the view that the political parties themselves should primarily be responsible for grooming new Members and initiating them also came from India where many women move from the state Assemblies to the Union Parliament. It was noted that in New Zealand there is a "buddy" system in which every new Member has a "buddy" who is an older Member. Within one party in New Zealand, Ministers invite new Members to join them at meetings to familiarize the new recruits to responsibility and to parliamentary life. The Group also considered other ways in which New Zealand has managed to gain ground for women in politics and high office. It was postulated that the introduction of a system of proportional representation in New Zealand was a major contribution to a greater number of women in Parliament and new ways of working in Parliament.
22. The Group also concluded that female Parliamentarians could be assisted by a mechanism of networks both inter-party and intra-party, for the benefit of the female Member. It was accepted, though, that working at an inter-party level could be difficult as there are always tensions and a degree of mistrust. Indeed, not all women's issues achieve the degree of unanimity that they require and there are widening gaps on what were once agreed social platforms on policy for women and children. However, the Group suggested that areas of inter-party communication could be improved through internationally focused organizations, such as the CPA, and the advocating of greater equality of representation of women in Commonwealth Parliaments. In this context, the Group maintained that the CPA's women's caucus, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, must be appropriately funded and have representation on the Executive Committee of the CPA.

23. It was noted with commendation that the Minister of Women's Affairs in New Zealand calls a Joint Meeting of all female Members of Parliament at least once a month each parliamentary session, with emphasis being placed on policy rather than mutual party support. At the intra-party level, the New Zealand Labour Party has a Women's Council and a Women's Parliamentary Caucus. The party has a paid Women's Coordinator who attends women's caucus meetings and liaises with the party's Women's Council. All female Members of Parliament are invited and expected to take part in the Women's Council meetings when their schedules permit. The most important functions of the Caucus are policy formulation and monitoring its implementation. It meets weekly when Parliament is sitting and discusses and monitors legislation currently before the House that has a particular impact on women. The Caucus, when appropriate, speaks as one voice when reporting back to the main party caucus. In addition, support at this level is available to female party Members through simple gestures like sitting besides a colleague when she is speaking in debate and the "buddy" system where all new Members are paired with a senior Member primarily for their guidance.
24. In Canada, the Chair of the governing party's women's caucus reports to the Prime Minister in front of the entire party caucus each week the Parliament is sitting. On a regular basis, the women's caucus invites Ministers to talk to it and asks questions of them about how the caucus can help them. The status of the female MP is further enhanced in this particular party by the rule that there must be male and female co-chairing at all party conventions. This helps women gain experience in presiding and handling major responsibilities and increases public awareness of the strengths of women. It was also noted that in the Canadian Parliament, there is usually a woman Deputy Speaker and there is at least one woman on every parliamentary committee.
25. In India, there is a Women's Empowerment Parliamentary Committee. Its inter-party mandate is to consider how legislation impacts on women. However, it was noted that unfortunately, to date, this Standing Committee of Parliament has not been very successful in meeting its objectives.
26. It was therefore fully agreed that political parties, wherever they exist, have a role to play. It was felt that women's caucuses should be established; they must be active and vocal; and they should demand important parliamentary positions for women as well as key places within the government.
27. During the discussions on the role of the political party, there was a concern that the party should from time to time review the criteria for the exercise of a conscience vote on issues related to gender. This view held that the party should declare its position on such issues and require positive and supportive action by all its MPs, regardless of gender. Some participants felt that the criteria for deciding a conscience vote should be re-examined by political parties in Commonwealth Parliaments, especially when the vote impacts on gender issues.

However, it was recognized that differences in party structures between Parliaments would have an impact on the universal application of this suggestion.

28. The Study Group also concluded that, regardless of the party's perspective on training and orientation for female MPs and on co-operation among women in Parliament, women MPs should inform themselves about gender issues and perspectives as they relate to their functioning in Parliament. Female MPs could achieve this by maintaining close links with women's organizations, particularly within their communities, to tap their knowledge and experiences and to be familiar with their concerns pertaining to the role of women in decision-making bodies. The Group felt that such liaisons also enhanced the legitimacy of the female MP while strengthening female political networks that were essential to sustain women who, despite the odds, strive for seats within their Parliaments.

Removing the Cultural Obstacles

29. The Study Group agreed that cultural changes are necessary if Commonwealth Parliaments are to become gender-sensitive. Any cultural changes must be profound and include efforts aimed at increasing gender awareness. Such efforts should also embrace changes to parliamentary procedures and methods of functioning geared towards accommodating the female MP.

All Parliamentarians as well as those involved in policy development and analysis should have an understanding of gender issues and be more gender sensitive.

30. The Group maintained that to discharge their responsibilities properly, all Parliamentarians, as well as those involved in policy development and analysis, should have an understanding of gender issues and be more gender-sensitive. This understanding will only be achieved through training combined with specifically designed initiatives. In this regard, the Group suggested that all Commonwealth Parliaments should be urged to commit to gender-based analyses of all parliamentary documents, including policy proposals, legislation and committee reports in order to assess their impact on women and men and to ensure that government policies, programmes and legislation are equitable for both sexes.
31. Gender-based analysis is defined as a process that assesses the differential impact of proposed and/or existing policies, programmes and legislation on men and women. It makes it possible for policy to be undertaken with an appreciation of gender differences, of the nature of relationships between women and men and of their different social realities, life expectation and economic circumstances. It is a tool for understanding social processes and for responding with informed and equitable options and compares how and why policy issues affect women and men. Gender-based analysis challenges the assumption that policies, programmes and legislation affect everyone in the same way regardless of gender.³

³Gender-Based Analysis: A Quick Guide to Policy-Makers, Status of Women, Canada (www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/publish/gbabro-e.html).

32. The Study Group was therefore pleased to hear of those Parliaments, such as in Canada and Finland, where a committee has been established to consider and report on legislation with gender equity issues. In Canada, the procedural rules are often used by both men and women to influence the parliamentary agenda by introducing women's concerns into otherwise gender-blind debates, highlighting the fact that the life experiences of both sexes are different and that equity in numbers does not necessarily mean equal rights. Such tactics ensure that policies and legislation, once implemented, are equitable as far as possible for both men and women.
33. It was the consensus that such positive actions combined with gender-sensitivity training would help eradicate the cultural barriers that impede the work of the female MP as well as remove the male's perception of a *female threat*. The Group therefore further recommended that women should be encouraged to network with their male counterparts and, if possible, work in association with them to break through established "codes of conduct". If this were done, male MPs would become increasingly more sensitized about gender issues. They would also appreciate that enabling female MPs to be effective representatives and legislators has important implications, not only politically, but also for the social and economic sectors of their communities.
34. There was full support for the suggestion that the CPA should sponsor an annual seminar with equal representation by male and female Members of Parliament, representative of the various Branches of the Commonwealth, with the major objective of promoting gender-sensitivity, equality and inclusion. All delegations should have Members of both sexes included.
35. The Group maintained that Commonwealth Parliaments should be encouraged to enact legislation to make changes that will benefit Commonwealth countries and their peoples. With this in mind, the Study Group endorsed the suggestion that, as far as possible, women and men in Parliament should be encouraged to propose laws for the improvement of the status of women and other marginalized social groups and initiate new policy proposals favourable to women as well as to the wider society.
36. In order to reverse those traditional cultural barriers which work against women MPs, it was also suggested that Commonwealth governments should be urged to enact legislation with a clear declaration that the rights and obligations of men and women are identical. Such Legislation should stipulate minimum quotas for women on decision-making bodies or, alternatively, introduce systems of affirmative action for representation by women in all areas of public life. Some countries already have this in their human rights legislation while others have statutes but little in the manner of real change.

37. During its discussions on cultural barriers, the Study Group found that, generally, the timing of parliamentary sessions does not take into consideration the many domestic duties faced by women. It was noted that, in many cases, the female Parliamentarian faces the burden of expectations from her own family and is assumed to be a super-human being: she must carry out her parliamentary responsibilities with breadth, depth and vigour; she is expected to be a better representative than her male counterpart; she must take care of her family, seeing to the care, protection and education of her children; she must ensure that the home is appropriate for her status in the society and certainly for that of her spouse; she must see to the well-being of her spouse, and she must, in the eyes of many, at all times be perfectly groomed. These are very high, if not impossible standards to be met at all times, and they are often standards not expected of their male colleagues.
38. Although concerns related to family responsibilities also relate to men, in most societies, despite widely changing attitudes, it is still considered that the mother is primarily responsible for the care of the family. Therefore lack of maternity benefits, day care facilities for children and separate rest rooms for women in Parliament restrict the participation of women in the political arena. Some countries have made physical accommodation with appropriate rest rooms, changing rooms and day care facilities.
39. It was the accepted view that across the Commonwealth, many women with young children have traditionally been deterred from entering politics for a number of reasons, including the lack of childcare facilities. In South Australia, for example, comparatively few women Members of Parliament have children of school age or less. Of the 16 women Members in mid-1995, 12 had no children or their children had grown up and had left school. However, of the 55 men, 26 of them had children of school age.
40. The Study Group noted that the average age of women Parliamentarians in Finland is 42, which means that many of them are of child-bearing age or have young families. In common with all other mothers in that country, a female Parliamentarian can take a maximum of 263 week-days maternity leave whereas a male Member is entitled to three weeks paternity leave, all with full pay.
41. There was general agreement that all Commonwealth Parliaments should be encouraged to consider introducing maternity and paternity benefits for Parliamentarians as well as citizens and that proper facilities for the care of infants and young children should be established in Parliament buildings.
42. There was also concern that in many Parliaments there is a high rate of divorce of persons elected to Parliament within the first two years of their being elected. The

“Democracy can only be achieved if the same opportunities are available to all. It is our responsibility to safeguard the future and put in place for the next generation of politicians, conditions that will allow them to serve.”

**Hon. Hazel Hannan, MKH,
Isle of Man**

Group believed that where geographical factors require MPs, both male and female, to reside away from home, Parliaments should, wherever possible, be encouraged to increase the level of travel, including air travel, permitted to MPs from their constituency to and from the capital as well as within the country generally. Such facilities should be extended to immediate family Members.

43. The Group recommended that in those countries where, due to size and distance, it is necessary for MPs to utilize temporary accommodation nearer to Parliament, the parliamentary week should be narrowed with Parliament, if needed, sitting longer hours. This will free up more time for MPs to attend to constituency matters and to return home regularly.
44. The Group further recommended that, where applicable, Constituency Weeks should be free of committee work removing the requirement for MPs to travel away from their constituencies or home territories during such weeks. Where possible they should coincide with school holidays.
45. It was also the consensus that Commonwealth Parliaments should be urged to be more flexible in the amount of time off allowed for family purposes for Parliamentarians and that, where possible, the good convention of pairing should be introduced for dealing with necessary absences by MPs.

Removing the Institutional Obstacles

46. The Study Group spent a considerable amount of time considering the measures to alter the institution of Parliament to make it as gender-sensitive as possible.
47. It was accepted that for women to be effective Parliamentarians, they must clearly understand the role and functions of the Legislature and they must learn the rules by which it operates, both written and unwritten. All agreed that women must first learn the internal practices of their respective Parliament in order to equip themselves to utilize these rules to advance women's interests and goals.
48. A new female MP can acquire knowledge of parliamentary rules and practices in a variety of ways, including specific training and orientation programmes as well as more general socialization processes.
49. In the South Australian House of Assembly, introductory training is provided to all new Members following every election. In addition, Legislative Council staff also carry out less formal induction exercises for new Members that have been found to be more effective. This training includes information and instruction in many areas, including: daily proceedings, Chamber procedures; rules of debate;

In addition to programmes especially geared for women, Parliament sponsored training and orientation programmes involving both men and women are essential.

facilities and legislation applicable to Members; parliamentary privilege and the committee system.

50. However, throughout most of the Commonwealth no specific structured training for female Parliamentarians exists. It was believed that this lack of training is a great impediment to women entering Parliament and delays their optimal participation in the parliamentary process. The Group therefore believes that special training for the female MP is essential if she is to overcome the many barriers to her successfully taking her seat in Parliament.
51. Nevertheless, in addition to programmes especially geared for women, training and orientation programmes involving both men and women are also important. It was stressed that such programmes should be sponsored by Parliaments and should be held on a regular basis throughout each parliamentary session, particularly in the larger Parliaments. The Group agreed that areas of training should include the following:
 - a. All aspects of parliamentary practice and procedure;
 - b. Computer training, including Power Point for the making of presentations;
 - c. Time management;
 - d. Speed reading;
 - e. Voice projection;
 - f. Dealing with difficult people;
 - g. Media training;
 - h. Gender-sensitivity and equity training;
 - i. Language training;
 - j. Public speaking;
 - k. The process of law-making;
 - l. The Parliamentary Library and its facilities.
52. As already mentioned, the Study Group noted that in every aspect, Parliament as an institution was designed to be, and has always been, the preserve of the male sex. It therefore follows that even at the level of language and communication, the institution is considered to be male-oriented. For example, “he” includes “she” and other formal and informal parliamentary language is used to let women know that Parliament is a male preserve.
53. Terms like “manning” and “manpower” persist instead of “staff” and “personnel”. So do “man in the street” instead of “person in the street”; “one-man one-vote” instead of “one-person one-vote” and “Chairman” instead of “Chairperson or Chair”. Terms of endearment such as “luv”, “m’dear” and “sweetheart” are sometimes used and, consciously or not, belittle women in an incredibly male-chauvinistic arena. Women Parliamentarians do not find this endearing or amusing and at best they tolerate these unacceptable practices.

54. There was a view that in many cases women who have been elected become complacent or are intimidated. Many women tend not to like non-sexist terms like “Chair” instead of “Chairman” or they continue to use terms such as “manning” instead of “staffing” because they perceive this attitude as being feminist and something with which they do not wish to be aligned. On the other hand, if a female Member takes a stand she is accused of being strident, overbearing or plain ridiculous, and even women join in the mockery.
55. It is the recommendation of the Group that Standing Orders should be amended to reflect gender-neutral language. Moreover, it is further recommended that gender-inclusive language should be a requirement in all public institutions and forums and that early gender-sensitizing education of boys and girls should be pursued.
56. The Study Group is of the view that the Westminster-style debating Chamber is a competitive forum designed for men and reflecting male values. There was consensus that adversarial Parliaments naturally encourage theatrical posturing and aggressive behaviour that often degenerates to the personal, which many women (and some men) find uncomfortable. The Group was disturbed to learn that in some jurisdictions undignified comments with sexual undertones, directed at women, have been allowed. Such an atmosphere is disrespectful and is likely to discourage women’s participation. Here, the Speaker must also be vigilant.
57. The Study Group recommended that, wherever possible, seating arrangements should be instituted to foster a less combative atmosphere more amenable to constructive debate. There was also consensus that Speakers should encourage a high standard of debate and that provisions in Standing Orders against the use of offensive and insulting language should be strictly observed. Moreover, it was felt that female Parliamentarians should be encouraged to raise Points of Order more regularly, whenever such orders are breached.
58. The Study Group noted that generally there is an absence of a dress code for women in most Parliaments. It was recognized that in many Legislatures although women were expected to follow in the footsteps of men, hence the Westminster-style “dark suits”, issues related to dress posed no real difficulties for the female Member. Still, most agreed that the psychology of dress is the real issue and that women need to remember that the professional judgement of their constituents is important.
59. Many felt that the expectation, perhaps self-imposed, that women would wear a variety of clothing, places an expense on women that does not exist, to the same

Standing Orders should be amended to reflect gender-neutral language and, wherever possible, seating arrangements should be instituted to foster a less combative atmosphere more amenable to constructive debate.

extent, for men. Moreover, the media and the public generally focus unnecessarily on women's attire and not sufficiently on the policies issues which the female MP may be dealing with.

60. It was noted with concern that in some Parliaments there still exist rules pertaining to dress that could be construed as discriminating against women. For example in the South Australia House of Assembly, Standing Order 131, which states that "*Every Member desiring to speak shall rise from his seat on the benches, uncovered [hat removed], and address himself to the Speaker*", has been held to include a woman who chooses to wear a hat in Parliament. The Study Group believed that any Standing Orders which relate primarily to an earlier era should be amended or deleted entirely, wherever they still exist.
61. The Study Group agreed with the view that institutional customs as well as rules, to a lesser degree, determine who gets important legislative positions and opportunities such as prime speaking times on the Floor of the House. The Group noted that customs vary from country to country; but generally factors like party position, seniority, knowledge and expertise and popularity were the main contributors.
62. With this in mind, the Study Group suggested that women within Legislatures should identify key positions and opportunities in Parliament and devise ways and avenues to get women into these positions. All agreed that the appointment of women to key parliamentary positions is an encouragement to women generally and provides opportunities for female MPs to make an impact and advance their careers. The Study Group was therefore pleased to learn that women are represented on all of the 14 Special Committees in the Finnish Parliament and six are chaired by women.
63. It was observed that women appointed to government are usually assigned less prominent portfolios such as health, education and community affairs. The Study Group believed it is necessary to establish women's presence in the more prestigious and traditionally influential positions within Parliaments and governments, for example finance and foreign affairs, although it was accepted that those areas customarily assigned to women are of national importance as well.
64. The Study Group believed that efforts to ensure that women are appointed to serve on, as well as chair, important committees and to prominent government offices could, wherever necessary, include amendments to Standing Orders and legislation. Moreover, it was agreed that Standing Orders should be regularly reviewed and, whenever necessary, amended, to ensure that the presence of women and issues pertaining to gender are taken into account by Parliaments. Pertinent reference was made to The Equality Between Men and Women Act, passed by the Finnish Parliament in 1986, which seeks to prevent direct and indirect discrimination based on gender. The Office of the Ombudsman for

Equality monitors the observance of the Act. The Group believed that Commonwealth countries should, at the very least, have Ministries of Gender and Equality Affairs for the monitoring of issues related to women. In Canada the Secretary of State for Womens Issues participates in cabinet committees.

65. Other suggested efforts geared towards ensuring that women are represented in high profile offices included fostering support from non-government women's organizations and the media as well as international pressure. It is also recommended that, since parliamentary rules evolve on the basis of practice, female MPs should be consistent in nominating and voting for women to the Chairs of important committees and in proposing the names of their female colleagues for less formal positions in Parliament. It was also suggested that there should be established, primarily within the larger Parliaments, a mechanism for monitoring all legislative appointments and for the drawing of attention to the absence or relative absence of women in key positions or committees.

Efforts to ensure that women are appointed to serve on, as well as chair, important committees and to prominent government offices could, if necessary, include amendments to Standing Orders and legislation.

66. In the area of information and databases, the Group recommended that all Members should be provided with computers and related equipment and with Internet access. Where this is not possible, they should have easy access to such facilities. Apart from the obvious benefits that this would bring, the Member will be able to keep abreast of the data collected by various groups and NGOs such as the Beijing Declaration, IPU Statistics, UN Reports and CPA Newsletters. Frequent publishing of gender statistics of all public and state enterprises should be done to keep Parliamentarians up to date and promote vigilance and responsiveness on gender equality issues.

67. The Group noted that co-operation among women in the Finnish Parliament is extremely high. Such co-operation is well organized through the existence of a network called the Network of Women in Finland's Parliament. This Network brings together female Deputies across party lines to discuss issues of particular interest to women with the following key objectives:

- a. To promote equality between men and women;
- b. To further the implementation of women's rights, and
- c. To introduce the perspectives of women into the drafting of legislation.

68. This Network has to date been extremely successful. It meets with all groups and stakeholders within the society, arranges seminars and visits, takes part in international activity and co-operates with women Parliamentarians from other countries. It also meets with female students and has held parliamentary seminars for female students. Once each month, the Network holds what is called an "Information Lunch" for all female Members and often invites Ministers to these

lunches to raise issues and question of importance to women that fall within the portfolio of the Ministers invited.

69. The Study-Group considered this model to be quite instructive and took particular note of the fact that legislation introduced in the name of the Chair of the Network has been passed in the Finnish Parliament, with support being received from among all the parties and factions. The Network can only bring legislation forward if it relates to women and all female Members must support its introduction. No controversial issues can be brought forward.

“When issues regarding women are raised in Parliament, women speak and debate, but it is very seldom that they unite for the common good especially if it goes against the party whip.”

**Margaret Alva,
MP, India**

70. During this discussion, the Study Group agreed that cross-party networking could be a strategic tool for informally training women MPs and for familiarizing them with Parliament. It was held that female networks provide new recruits with knowledge held by long-standing MPs, acquired after many years in Parliament, and enables women MPs to come together to discuss their concerns and their potential for effectiveness.

71. The Group therefore recommended that female Parliamentarians should get together to discuss issues common to women. Toward this end, formal and informal women’s networks should be set up within Parliaments at an intra-party level and preferably at an inter-party level as well, and women should identify policy issues where cross-party co-operation can exist.

72. In addition, it is suggested that as an inter-party grouping, female Parliamentarians should work with the various groups in society, for example non-governmental women’s organizations and [community] radio and television, to promote awareness by the population of gender and equality-sensitizing issues and create the environment for wider public support.

73. The group also found that mentoring by more experienced female MPs is another important way of socializing new women entrants and of providing special training to them. The New Zealand “buddy” system was again commended since it was found that that this system assisted newly elected Members to gain confidence. Against that backdrop, it was generally agreed that experienced women in politics should feel privileged to be utilized as role models to younger female Parliamentarians. The Group felt that new female Members must be assisted in every way possible by more experienced, longer-serving Members.

“The adage that a woman has to be twice as good to go half as far still holds true – which is why our leading women are so very, very good and such wonderful mentors and role models.”

Dianne Yates, MP, New Zealand

74. The Study Group maintained that to cope with the inbuilt barriers in Parliaments and to secure equality women have had to adopt varying approaches. For example, the Group was of the firm view that women must maintain contact with their primary support base and hold regular debriefings with women in their

political parties and constituencies. There was overwhelming agreement with the suggestion that women Parliamentarians must at all times ensure that women are part of the process of shaping the policies that emanate from Parliament. The Group agreed with the comment that where men can be dismissive or simply unaware, women as a group should stand firm on subjects related to their rights.

75. The Study Group also looked at ways in which women in politics have interacted with non-governmental organizations both locally and internationally and commended those women who have successfully used coalitions and partnerships to strengthen their presence in Parliament.
76. In a related dimension, the Study Group suggested that communication links between women – within Parliaments and between Parliaments – should be maintained through newsletters, the Internet, publications and websites.
77. The suggestion that all parliamentary delegations must include female representation was broadly accepted. The Group felt that Commonwealth Parliaments and the CPA must be made aware of the fact that female Parliamentarians are anxious to be seen to be publicly doing their duties, not only locally but also internationally. It was noted that some Parliaments continually send only token representations of women Parliamentarians.
78. There were lengthy discussions on the role that the CPA can play, particularly in regard to the representation by women on its Executive Committee. It was generally agreed that structural change is essential to move the process forward. The Study Group recognized that the attitude of the larger body reflected the attitude of the individual Parliaments. It was agreed that women should represent at least 30 per cent of the Executive Committee by the year 2005 in line with the target that Commonwealth countries are working towards. The Group stressed that this should be brought to the urgent attention of all Branches and the Executive Committee of the CPA.
79. There were expressions of dissatisfaction over the fact that meetings of the Steering Committee of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians are no longer funded and it was unanimously agreed to recommend to the CPA that funding for the CWP Steering Committee should be re-introduced. Moreover, the Group recommended that the CWP Meeting at the CPA's annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference should be regarded as a regular plenary session attended by all delegates and that host Branches should be advised to avoid conflict with other activities in the programme.
80. At the international level also, the Group believed that the CPA should regularly undertake an audit of its member states and Parliaments, through the form of a questionnaire, with the objectives of assessing the extent to which Commonwealth governments fulfill their obligations with respect to the Beijing

Declaration and CEDAW, and of judging the procedures and practices of Parliaments from a gender perspective.

Removing the Psychological Barriers

81. The Study Group agreed with the view that one way to build women's parliamentary careers and promote their advancement into key positions is through the use of the media to increase the visibility and confidence of women Parliamentarians. However, it noted that the media is not generally kind to politicians and is often overly critical of female Parliamentarians in particular. It was agreed that there is a need to sensitize the media to the fact that the content of their reports and their method of reporting may harm not only the person being reported on but also the institution of Parliament as a whole.
82. There was a suggestion that there may be avenues for women MPs and media personalities to network in larger Parliaments on the basis of common interests and concerns. Indeed it was pointed out that female MPs in some Parliaments have promoted the establishment of a Women's Press Group. There was also support for the recommendation that female MPs should arrange media training sessions to bridge the gap and gain insight into how the media operates, network with media personnel and identify those media personalities who are sympathetic to gender issues.
83. There was a view that new political entrants and particularly female recruits are often not associated with autocratic practices and politicking, but rather are seen as symbols of honesty and caring – the latter being a characteristic that the television medium is best able to project. In this regard it was recommended that women Parliamentarians should take full advantage of any opportunity to utilize this form of media. It was noted that in some countries community television is more readily available for use than the mainstream press.

Conclusion

89. The Study Group concluded by recognizing that, although there are exceptions, generally the sole voices speaking out for women's rights and concerns are women. Women's rights are human rights. Therefore, it held that the active participation of women in Parliament is the only way to ensure that equality for women everywhere is achieved. However, it was universally agreed that co-operation between women and men is essential in any attempt at gender-sensitizing Parliaments and removing the barriers which inhibit fullest participation by women. Many participants acknowledged that support from influential men has proven to be useful in the political struggle that women face on a daily basis.

84. In order to increase the effectiveness of female Parliamentarians, it was suggested that:

- Political parties must be encouraged to nominate women for winnable seats in the Legislature, to train and initiate them to the workings of the Legislature and to appoint them to prominent legislative and governmental positions.
- Cultural barriers can only be removed through efforts geared towards gender-awareness and, wherever necessary, by positive action by way of legislation.
- Parliamentary institutions must sponsor regular training and orientation sessions for their Members, amend their Standing Orders so that male-oriented terms are replaced by inclusive language and make women-friendly changes to their seating and other physical arrangements.
- Female Parliamentarians should promote the appointment of women to key positions within the Legislature and the government; work at cross-party levels for the benefit of women as well as the wider society, and provide guidance and support to newer entrants; and
- Good working relationships with the media should be fostered.

85. The Study Group recommended the following areas for priority action:

- a. Commonwealth Parliaments should be urged to commit to gender-based analyses of all parliamentary documents, including policy proposals, legislation and committee reports, in order to assess their impact on the lives of women and men and to ensure that government policies, programmes and legislation are equitable for both women and men;*
- b. Commonwealth Parliaments should be encouraged to consider introducing maternity and paternity benefits for Parliamentarians;*
- c. Proper facilities for the care of infants and young children should be established in Parliament buildings;*
- d. In those countries where, due to size and distance, it is necessary for MPs to utilize temporary accommodation nearer to Parliament, the parliamentary week should be narrowed with Parliament, if needed, sitting longer hours;*
- e. Where applicable, Constituency Weeks should be free of committee work, removing the requirement for MPs to travel away from their home territories and constituencies during such weeks. Where possible they should coincide with school holidays.*

- f. Commonwealth Parliaments should be urged to be more flexible in the amount of time off allowed for family purposes and where possible, the good convention of pairing should be introduced for dealing with necessary absences by MPs;*
- g. Training and orientation programmes, sponsored by Parliaments and involving both men and women, should be held on a regular basis throughout each parliamentary session, to assist MPs in a wide range of areas related to their functioning as Members of Parliament;*
- h. Concerted efforts must be made to ensure that women are appointed to prominent government offices and to serve on, as well as chair, important committees;*
- i. The Standing Orders should be regularly reviewed and, whenever necessary, amended, to ensure that the presence of women and issues pertaining to women are taken into account by Parliaments, in order to encourage greater participation by women in the parliamentary process;*
- j. Female Parliamentarians should get together to discuss issues common to women. Toward this end, formal and informal women's networks should be set up within Parliaments and women should identify policy issues where cross-party co-operation can exist;*
- k. As an inter-party grouping, female Parliamentarians should work with the various groups in society, for example non-governmental women's organizations and [community] radio and television, to promote awareness by the population of gender-sensitizing issues and create the environment for wider public support;*
- l. The CPA should encourage all Branches to be mindful of the fact that women should represent at least 30 per cent of its Executive Committee;*
- m. The CPA should re-introduce funding for meetings of the CWP Steering Committee;*
- n. The CPA should monitor the extent to which Member Branches fulfill their international obligations pertaining to the rights of women.*

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