

WOMEN AGENTS OF CHANGE



About Commonwealth Day

Every year, on the second Monday of March, people from around the Commonwealth gather to celebrate being part of a unique and diverse 54-nation organisation of two billion people which is spread across every continent in the world.

In 2011, Commonwealth Day takes place on Monday 14 March, and the theme is 'Women as Agents of Change'.

This theme will be celebrated all over the Commonwealth throughout the year, with special events taking place during the week of 14-20 March. In London, amongst a series of events, conferences and media news stories and features, particular attention is focused on the Commonwealth Observance at Westminster Abbey, and the Commonwealth Lecture. However, activities are organized all around the 54-nation Commonwealth throughout the year, and not just by Commonwealth organisations themselves. All member governments and their citizens are called upon to make their own contribution.

Introduction from the Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma

Every year, over 26 million girls are born in the Commonwealth. Of these, far too many do not get the chance to grow up and become healthy, educated women who can make a positive difference to their own lives and to the lives of others.

Women and girls make up half of the people in the world, but they receive much less than half of our attention, while they have to deal with much more than half of the world's challenges.

They are the barometers of society: they measure its internal pressure levels, and their fortunes can give to societies the clearest forecasts of good or bad things to come.

Where women prosper, societies prosper; and where women suffer, so too do the societies in which they live.

For nearly 40 years, the Commonwealth has run programmes looking at gender and health, gender and education, gender and enterprise, gender and leadership, and gender and conflict.

The 2010 theme 'Women as Agents of Change' reiterates our commitment to the 1 billion women of the Commonwealth:

- To promote women's participation and representation in democratic processes, leadership and decision-making;
- To promote the development of gender responsive laws, judicial processes, customs and practices in keeping with accepted human rights standards;
- To build awareness amongst Finance Ministers and non-government partners on the gender impacts of economic and financial policies
- To enhance integration of gender issues in HIV interventions through advocacy, research and information dissemination.

Women are the development lever we need.

What does the theme 'Women as agents of change' mean?

It means that by investing in women and girls, we can accelerate social, economic and political progress.

Young women and girls should be able to attend school and college, where they can learn important skills. They should be able to get access to the healthcare they need, and they should be treated fairly and have the same education, opportunities and protection as men and boys.

Women and girls need to be included at all levels of decision making, to ensure that their needs are properly met. This will benefit us all.

The Millennium Development Goals and Women

At the United Nations Summit in 2000, world leaders got together and adopted eight development goals to combat poverty by 2015. They included major new commitments for women's and children's health, and other initiatives to fight poverty, hunger and disease. They planned to change the lives of millions of people who were suffering because of hunger, war, lack of education, illness, lack of clean water and other problems.

All of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) affect women and girls, but some of them do so very specifically. These include the goals to get girls into school and to get women into government, where decisions are taken. Around the world one woman every minute dies from complications in pregnancy and childbirth. For every 100 such deaths, 66 are in the Commonwealth. Goal 5, to improve maternal health, addresses this directly.

The Commonwealth works to support all the MDGs through its human development programmes in education, health, gender and youth.

While much progress has been made, there is still much to do in the next five years. In September 2010, at the UN High Level Review on the MDGs, Secretary-General

Ban-moon said: "We know what works to save women's and children's lives, and we know that women and children are critical to all of the MDGs."

In May 2010, Commonwealth Health Ministers met in Geneva to assess progress made towards achieving the MDGs in Health. Less than a month later, Women's Ministers met in Barbados, and the outcomes of that meeting also focus on the MDGs.

<http://www.thecommonwealth.org/news/34580/34581/223902/170510chmmstatement.htm>

http://www.thecommonwealth.org/document/181889/34293/35232/191368/224855/9wamm_bridgetown_communique.htm.

Facts on Women and Girls:

Over half of the Commonwealth's two billion people are women.

Across the Commonwealth, there are markedly less women in parliament than men, and only six Commonwealth members meet the international target of 30% female representation in Parliament.

Two thirds of women work in part-time, seasonal, or low-paid work.

One woman, every minute, dies from complications in pregnancy and childbirth. For every 100 such deaths, 66 are in the Commonwealth.

Around two thirds of the 33 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Commonwealth countries are women.

According to the Global Monitoring Report 2010, 72 million children are still out of school. Girls still account for 54% of these and girls not in primary school are far less likely than boys ever to attend school.

How can Governments commemorate Commonwealth Day?

For all governments, Commonwealth Day is an opportunity both to address the specific theme (in 2011, Women as Agents of Change), and to celebrate the wider Commonwealth and the country's relationship with it.

- Advise your relevant ministries (Gender/Women's Affairs, Health, Education and Youth) that the 2011 theme for the Commonwealth is 'Women as Agents of Change', and encourage them to develop their own communications programmes – events, conferences, media, etc.
- Get your ministries to link to our website: www.womenasagentsofchange.org
- Draw their attention to the resources available to use www.womenasagentsofchange.org/get-involved/toolkits/
- Issue a Commonwealth Day message, and commit to making substantive public mention of the Commonwealth
- Encourage national and regional media (print, TV, radio) to cover the theme

For Education ministries and schools to consider:

- Distribute copies of the Commonwealth Day poster and encourage schools to look at the resource section on the Commonwealth Day website for schools: www.womenasagentsofchange.org/get-involved/poster/

- Organise a vote amongst school children for their most inspiring woman role model.
- Arrange a visit from a well-known local woman. She could be a politician, businesswoman, community worker, artist or writer.
- Encourage teachers to tell their pupils about the Commonwealth essay competition www.womenasagentsofchange.org/get-involved/competitions/.
- Organise a debate about women's role in society.
- Set a history project about a prominent woman encouraging them to describe why she was famous.

For Gender/Women's ministries to consider:

- Use the week of Commonwealth Day 14-20 March to launch projects or to highlight the role of Women as Agents of Change.

For Youth Ministries to consider:

- Use the week of Commonwealth Day 14-20 March to focus on young women in the Commonwealth and the particular issues they are dealing with.

For Health Ministries to consider:

- Use the week of Commonwealth Day 14-20 March to focus on women's health issues.

For Trade/Enterprise Ministries to consider:

- Is there a women's Chamber of Commerce in your country?
- Use the week of Commonwealth Day 14-20 March to focus on women in business.

For Parliaments to consider:

- Set aside Commonwealth Day 14 March to mention the theme and celebrate progress made with regard to women in parliament.