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CWP COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS
30th anniversary year 1989-2019

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REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION TO INCREASE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

CWP COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS
30th anniversary year 1989-2019

Rt Hon. Baroness D'Souza was elected as the second Lord Speaker of the UK House of Lords in 2011, a position she held until 2016. She first entered the House in 2004 and was Convenor of the Crossbench Peers from 2007 to 2011. Baroness D'Souza has a special interest in human rights and development issues and is the co-founder of the Marefat High School in Kabul, Afghanistan. She was director of an independent research group focusing on development and emergency aid. Baroness D'Souza taught anthropology at both the London School of Economics and Oxford Brookes University.

In the early 1960s a world-wide advertisement for a *Virginia Slims* cigarette especially designed for women carried the strapline '*you've come a long way, Girl!*' The point being, one supposes, that having their own cigarette brand emancipated women from having to smoke those shared by men! This together with a penchant for bra-burning characterised the women's liberation movement of the late last century. I have never been a militant feminist and struggle with what such militancy adds in today's context. *Does it alienate those from whom women most need support OR without militancy, would we not have got so far in the last 100 years as we have and therefore militancy is a vital tool?*

Looking back on the actions of the brave suffragette women in the early part of the last century and noting the ridicule, abuse and disbelief with which they were confronted by all sectors of society – not least the press of the day – we can only wonder at the strident courage of these women fighting the entrenched views of both men and of society more generally. It seems unthinkable today to recall that women did not have the full vote until 1928 and only as a result of sustained attacks on the prevailing wisdom. *So, who can say that militancy didn't work? It did, and we are all the beneficiaries of it. However, is it legitimate to ask if it still works?*

Let us look for a moment at the *#MeToo* movement. After the first flush of widespread indignation against men's sexual abuse of women, we now begin to see that the movement has on occasions become vindictive and exploitative. The temptation is to jump on the bandwagon of punishing men – understandably because of the long history of persistent abuse of women. But not all men are guilty and not all women are entirely free of revenge. There remain brutal systems such as slave labour, enforced marriages, girl trafficking, female genital mutilation, and the total lack of legal protection for women in many countries. But if the *#MeToo* movements and others like it are to be truly successful in changing societal patterns, it is important that men are afforded the same legal and other protections as are available to women.

What has changed in the last 100 years since women first got the vote in the UK? What protections has the world managed to set in place?

First there are the UN Conventions that aim to protect and promote women including the fundamental International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), asserting that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights; the UN Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESR); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a host of other international, regional and national commitments. But laws alone do not make for a gentle and humane society and although legislation is a first critical step in an effective response – vigorous monitoring and strict accountability are also needed to effect a change in culture.

The last 25 years or so have seen truly remarkable changes in attitudes towards women and the entry of women into all sectors of the workforce. The research attention paid to this trend has not been lacking. For example, there are now several reputable and comprehensive studies showing the economic advantages of having women on the boards of major international companies; an IMF 2016 report documented a positive association between corporate return on assets and the share of women in senior positions in two

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million European companies.

The rate of women doctors qualifying increases significantly each year; the number of women who apply for science and engineering-based degrees is growing. Women astrophysicists, including space travellers, are now commonplace. However, these advances are not true for all women.

The vast majority of women work endlessly to feed families, are regularly exploited and abused by society and by their male relatives, are prevented from any participation in matters that affect their lives and livelihoods, who are weary beyond description and still have no access to proper contraception, maternity care, education, let alone any leisure.

Who has not travelled through rural areas in all five continents and witnessed groups of men chatting away in cafes drinking tea, coffee, alcohol amidst clouds of cigarette smoke while the women continue to toil? Indeed, evidence from our hunter/gatherer past suggests that the women's food gathering was a far greater contribution to the daily diet than were men's hunting activities!

Why does it matter that so many millions of women are nowhere near parity with men in just about every aspect of life? Apart from the obvious and horrific abuse that women continue to suffer – *why and how should we fight to ensure that women the world over have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods?* Although there is now great focus on women's political engagement at national levels, the local context is equally if not more important. As I have so often said to audiences around the world, politics is about organising people in order to achieve a common goal. Therefore, the village woman who brings together others in her own and neighbouring settlements to insist on clean water is as much a politician as is a Head of State. Village politics are a valuable training for wider political representation and empowerment.

Above: Baroness D'Souza visits the school that she co-founded, the Marefat High School, in Kabul, Afghanistan.

That said the importance of women's political engagement regionally and nationally is hard to overstate. This is not because women necessarily have a unique view by virtue of their gender, but because without women, the political conversation is simply incomplete. Democratic systems are at their most legitimate, credible and effective if there is engagement from all corners of society. It damages democracy if women are excluded. Looking more broadly it is striking that this exclusion happens most frequently in less developed countries, in tandem with the fact that 70% of the world's poorest people are women. In the least developed countries, in the absence of quotas for women politicians, the average is 12% of women Parliamentarians compared to almost 20% globally – and still far from the UN and Commonwealth target of 30%.

Too many women today still live in states of poverty, fear and exploitation. Political participation is undoubtedly their right but it is perhaps unrealistic to expect such women to aspire to political leadership when their primary concern remains subsistence and survival. So the conditions for political equality have first to be created. In an ideal world, girls go to school, learn employment skills (resulting as often as not in later marriage, better family spacing and fewer children). They take up dignified and rewarding work and ultimately become politically engaged at the local, regional and even national levels. Once enfranchised some become democratic representatives themselves and it is at this stage that women's empowerment becomes transformative in bringing about permanent shifts in the distribution of social and economic power.

Let me give a brief example of how creating the conditions for equality can work in a limited amount of time in a country not renowned for its liberal attitude towards women – Afghanistan. Early in 2002, as a Governor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, I visited Afghanistan and met a young man, Aziz Royesh, passionate about education, most especially of girls. He was a recently returned refugee from Pakistan and had set up an embryonic school in a bomb-damaged building in which he taught basic subjects in three shifts to 30 pupils, ranging in age from seven years to middle aged women.

I began to raise, to begin with small amounts, of money with which Aziz repaired a large building and put in heating. This was a master stroke because it drew the whole community in on long and cold winter evenings and Aziz was able to persuade parents to allow girls to be schooled and he also started adult literacy classes. This was after years of Taliban rule when anything approaching education for girls was severely punished.

Marefat High School today has almost 4,000 students ranging in age from seven to the early twenties; approximately 500 girls have graduated and almost 98% have gone on to higher education including universities in South and central Asia, the Far East, the USA

and Europe. A total of 271 full scholarships have been won. 60 students went to the USA for high school, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees of which 42 were girls. One statistic of which I am most proud is that a few years ago, the Women's University in Bangladesh offered 16 full scholarships to girls in the region (Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal) and the Marefat female graduates won 11 of them. This is an indication of the quality of the teaching. The school has been praised by the President and the First Lady and has international recognition.

These graduates now work in the President's Palace and the First Lady's Office, in various Ministries, in the Parliament, the Elections Commission, the media and the academic world. 28% of the teaching staff at Marefat are themselves graduates of the school. It is an undoubted success and although its future cannot be guaranteed in a country as unstable as Afghanistan continues to be – it has already produced future leaders for the community and demonstrates that, even under the most extenuating circumstances, much can be achieved.

This is of course in line with the widespread acceptance of female education as the basis and the pathway to development generally. The time-worn adage that if you educate a girl, you also educate a family, a neighbourhood and, eventually, a nation continues to ring true wherever you look in the less developed world.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, largely through its active and effective Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) inaugurated in 1989, has long lobbied for greater participation by women in parliamentary affairs. It has argued that given that women constitute slightly more than 50% of the world population and it is incumbent on the CWP to lead the way. The Commonwealth population of 2.4 billion, is one third of the world's population, and 94% live in Asia and Africa. Potentially this is a powerful force and the CWP has worked ceaselessly to mobilise this force. There have been conferences, regional and Branch workshops, networking, the setting up of women's parliamentary caucuses and a great deal of campaigning against injustices such as the abduction of girls by Boko Haram and honour killings in India and the Sudan. The CWP has championed issues such as gender equality, the elimination of gender-based violence, parental leave and childcare, pensions and electoral reform.

But the CWP would itself admit that there is still a long way to go. Twelve of the Commonwealth countries have achieved 30% or more women Parliamentarians with Rwanda, one of the newest members of the Commonwealth, achieving 61% female parliamentary representation by means of quotas. However, this still leaves 41 Commonwealth countries which are nowhere near the UN target.

Other persistent anachronisms affecting Commonwealth countries include sexual and domestic abuse, unequal pay, lack of full access to education and/or abortion, and the criminalisation of same-sex relations, let alone same-sex marriage. In the UK for example, despite legislation, there has been a reluctance to enforce the criminalisation of Female Genital Mutilation and a recent House of Lords *Report on Affordable Child Care in the UK* makes it clear that the lack of care is holding back many women from pursuing a career.

The world's ancient and modern history tells us that women get things done! One issue which continues to be discussed and debated is how better to build on the potential for an international movement among Commonwealth women Members. There is no shortage of meetings and opportunities to renew individual friendships. The problem is how these links can become more institutionalised and effective. We all return to our day jobs after our Commonwealth gatherings and time is always short. Unless we agree clear, do-able actions to continue our conversations and our legislative campaigning on agreed goals in between our meetings, progress will not accelerate. There should be a common standard on women's rights to which all Commonwealth countries not only aspire but activate.

Changing the law to facilitate women in politics is not, by itself, enough. Neither do I believe that quotas are sufficient; arguably such arrangements, by providing a quicker route to political involvement might undermine progress towards political engagement for all women, because they do not allow for the organic change in cultural norms and social power that are also required.

It is important to emphasise that the history of women's political participation should not focus alone on increasing 'women's rights' but should reflect everyone's rights. Political participation is a basic human right. Creating the social and cultural conditions that encourage such political participation for women is a crucial driver for achieving wider development an establishing stable and successful societies, to benefit women AND men.

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