

# Women as agents of change

By THE HON KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR

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**KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR** holds a Diploma in Education, a BA of Laws and a Legal Education Certificate. In 2006 she obtained an Executive Masters in Business Administration from the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business. Since 1995 she has been the Member of Parliament for Siparia, serving as Attorney General, Minister for Legal Affairs and Minister of Education between 1995 and 2001. In 2006, Mrs Persad-Bissessar was appointed Leader of the Opposition and in May 2010 was elected Prime Minister.

In 2009, Trinidad and Tobago became only the third Caribbean country to host a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). This was our second major international summit in the space of a couple of years, as CHOGM was held hot on the heels of Fifth Summit of the Americas.

The 2009 CHOGM was held during the 60th Anniversary of the modern Commonwealth and witnessed the participation of non-Commonwealth leaders in the persons of the distinguished President of France, President Nicolas Sarkozy, Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen of Denmark and United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon.

Two years after Trinidad and Tobago assumed the mantle of Commonwealth Chair, much has changed in my country and, indeed, the world. In 2010, after successfully contesting a general election, I become the first female Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the first female Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth; positions which have allowed me to raise the profile of women in politics, women in decision-making roles and perhaps most importantly, women's contribution to peace, security, development and nation-building. This is a role which I readily embrace and on which I shall elaborate further in this article.

From an international perspective, Trinidad and Tobago has chaired the Commonwealth of Nations at a time of great global transition and challenges. Many countries, both within and outside of the Commonwealth, still find themselves weathering the storms brought on by the global economic and financial crisis, volatility in major commodity prices and the debilitating impact of climate change.

To our credit, the Heads of Government have recognised that to combat these challenges will take sustained commitment, collective action and international co-operation. The poorest in our communities and most vulnerable among us, individuals and nations, must be protected.

As I stated at a reception for Commonwealth Heads of Government held in New York last year, "not one of our Nations need be left behind." Through the deepening of the Commonwealth's existing networks of co-operation and partnerships with other members of the international community, we have the potential to improve the lives of our citizens while strengthening

the bonds between, and among, our member Nations.

Trinidad and Tobago has weathered the worst effects of the global economic downturn, in large measure thanks to our abundant energy resources and prudent fiscal management.

For 2011 as a whole, it is cautiously projected that Trinidad and Tobago may achieve growth of 1.5–2 per cent. Like in many other countries, the economy of Trinidad and Tobago contracted (3.5 per cent) in 2009 but through policy adaptations involving the utilisation of available fiscal space, the decline was arrested in 2010.

It may be argued that the hosting of CHOGM 2009 has generated significant investor interest in Trinidad and Tobago. Foreign Direct Investment, though lower than in previous years, totaled US\$550 million in 2010 – a remarkable achievement for a country of our size, given the tight global financial conditions which severely reduced the supply of investment funds.

Additionally, we understand the need to bridge the gap between the Commonwealth and the Americas to build awareness of trade and economic opportunities as well as further enhance South-South Co-operation. In this regard, Trinidad and Tobago, this year, hosted the first Caribbean Investment Forum in collaboration with the Commonwealth Business Council.

Themed "Partnering with Trinidad and Tobago to Create a Gateway between the Commonwealth and the Americas," the Forum sought to position our country as a strategic jump-off point for businesses wishing to enter the Latin American market using the trade agreements which T&T has, and will be negotiating with several Latin American countries. Over 300 participants from 26 countries took advantage of this opportunity to develop, renew and strengthen ties between and among Commonwealth nations and between the Commonwealth and the growing economies of the Americas.

Such initiatives also serve to highlight the value which small states may bring to the Commonwealth. Very often Small States and Small Island Developing States in particular add a different perspective to the Commonwealth voice. Faced with the peculiar challenge of remoteness and small size, they balance the views and work programmes of the Commonwealth very effectively.

### Empowering women and girls is an essential prerequisite to achieving sustained economic, social and political development

I am also proud to note the role of island states such as CARICOM in moulding the views of the Climate Change debate as was undertaken during the 2009 CHOGM. This was also the case in the adoption of Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) into the 2009 CHOGM agenda, which was first discussed and brought to the forefront through the efforts of CARICOM. The Port of Spain Commonwealth Declaration on NCDs produced at CHOGM 2009, has now culminated in the United Nations High Level Meeting on NCDs to be held in September 2011, and hosted during the 66th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), “with the aim of developing a strategic response to these diseases and their repercussions.”

Of tremendous significance to the Commonwealth, and of particular interest to me, is the issue of gender equality, with specific reference to the enfranchisement of women and girls and the role of women in politics and decision making processes. Indeed, Commonwealth Day 2011 was celebrated under the theme, “Women as Agents of Change”, in recognition of the fact that empowering women and girls is an essential prerequisite to achieving sustained economic, social and political development.

At the level of Heads of Government, I believe that our Commonwealth is fully aware of the potential and successes that could be unleashed and achieved in countries where there is greater gender parity, yet there is still much work to be done to overcome the pressing inequalities still confronting many women in the Commonwealth.

There are several critical areas which must be improved if we are to achieve gender equality in the Commonwealth. Of primary importance is the implementation of universal access to education, healthcare and finance regardless of gender. Furthermore, opportunities must be created for women to enter leadership roles. Women must be given a voice through representational politics if we are to achieve gender equality in and outside of the Commonwealth. Indeed, we already have a blueprint for proactive and pragmatic measures in the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015.

This year, in collaboration with several key stakeholders including the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership, I hosted the first Caribbean Regional Colloquium on “Women Leaders as Agents of Change”.

The outcome document emanating from that conference titled “The Port of Spain Consensus on Transformational Leadership for Gender Equality” emphatically highlighted the need to strengthen national gender/women’s machineries for effective implementation, monitoring and mainstreaming of national, regional and international commitments on gender equality.

I put forward the Port-of-Spain Consensus at the 32nd CARICOM Heads of Government Meeting which recently concluded in July in St Kitts/Nevis. Again, at the 66th United Nations General Assembly

*Photo: UN Women/Hilary Duffly*



Kamlia Persad-Bissessar meets US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton and other female political leaders at the UN General Assembly

in New York in September, I will co-host a high-level dialogue on “Women’s Political Participation” in the margins of this prestigious event.

We have secured the participation of the President of Brazil, Her Excellency Dilma Rousseff; the United States Secretary of State, Her Excellency Hillary Rodham-Clinton; the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton; United Nations Development Programme Administrator, Ms Helen Clark and the Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and might I add a former President of Chile, Ms Michelle Bachelet. This promises to be a landmark event in advancing the cause of women as agents of change.

At present, out of the 54 countries of the Commonwealth, only three have governments headed by women – Julia Gillard of Australia, to whom I have the privilege of handing the Chairmanship of the Commonwealth later this year, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Bangladesh and myself. It is my fervent hope that my efforts to raise the profile of women, both within and outside of the Commonwealth, and lobby for their increased involvement in the development of their countries will result in wider participation and acceptance of women in the political process, thereby actively shaping the destiny of their Nations.

As we move towards the 2011 CHOGM, there is much to celebrate about the Commonwealth of Nations, in particular our adherence to our core principles and values of international peace and security; democracy; human rights; tolerance, respect and understanding; the separation of powers of the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary; rule of law; freedom of expression; development; gender equality; access to health and education; good governance and acknowledging the important role of civil society.

Yet as members we all know the challenges we face to keep the Commonwealth relevant to the changing times. The Eminent Persons Group (EPG) which was established by the Heads in November 2009 and tasked with developing options for reform to sharpen the impact, strengthen the networks and raise the profile of the Commonwealth will lay their report

at CHOGM 2011 be held in Perth, Australia.

It should be noted that women’s and youth empowerment; women’s political participation; increased intra-Commonwealth trade; a frank and proactive approach to tackling HIV/AIDS; the establishment of a Commonwealth Youth Corps, and the need for greater co-ordination among the Commonwealth Secretariat; Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth Designated Organisations form the main thrust of the proposed reforms.

If the Commonwealth is to survive, thrive and hold the interest of the 60 per cent of its population aged under 35, bold visions must be articulated and implemented. As Chair-in-Office I have worked to raise the profile of the Commonwealth in international fora including the 65th UNGA in 2010, the Hemispheric Forum hosted by the Organization of American States (OAS) in April of this year. I will do so again at the upcoming 66th UNGA in September, 2011.

What is left for all of us, as members of this unique Commonwealth of Nations, characterised by deep historical roots and unparalleled diversity is to “walk the talk”. As was so succinctly stated in the final report of the “Commonwealth Conversation”, “a values and principles-based association that does not consistently strive to defend its ideals, and to be defined by them risks appearing to be little more than an imperial relic.” Instead, let us be seen as a true champion of those precious values and principles which have been the hallmark of our Commonwealth for the past 60 years.

**Women must be given a voice through representational politics if we are to achieve gender equality in and outside of the Commonwealth**

Kamla Persad-Bissessar addresses the United Nations General Assembly in New York

