

Women are moving ahead

By DR CLAIRE CASSAR

CHAIR OF THE COMMITTEE FOR THE CHOGM WOMEN'S FORUM 2015



CLAIRE CASSAR is a lawyer by profession and for the past four and a half years has been the CEO of HAUD, a software company developing solutions for the telecommunications industry in the field of fraud and security controls and revenue assurance. She was appointed to chair the first ever Commonwealth Women's forum in April 2014 and has since been working actively with the support and dedication of a sub-committee set up specifically for this task.

Claire Cassar
launching the
Commonwealth
Womens Forum

There's a great deal of diplomacy and protocol involved in Commonwealth summits, not to mention the divides in culture and tradition, but we didn't want to get bogged down by any of that. It's a simple fact that women everywhere deserve equal opportunities, and our Forum is going to drive home that message.

Organising the first ever Women's Forum at CHOGM has been a challenge, because there was no template to work from, but a blank canvas also allowed free thinking.

An early decision was taken to establish the tone of the event. We wanted it to be upbeat, with speakers who inspire. Then came the slogan: "Women Ahead: Be All That You Can Be."

We want to see participants from all over the planet sharing their experiences, on how they overcame problems and found the path to successful change.

We have an incredible line-up. There were fifty names last time I checked – leading speakers, experts in their fields, some taking centre stage and others participating in workshops. Most are women. That's probably no surprise. But we are very keen for men to participate too, because if women are to succeed in life they need the backing, support and encouragement of women and men alike.

There are plenty of names to get excited about. For example, leading the way on our first day is Dr Lakshmi Puri, the Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, who specialises in gender equality and empowerment of women. I'm sure she will paint a broad global picture of what's happening and what needs to be done.

We will also be hearing from Khadija Gbla, famed for her campaigning against female genital mutilation; Hina Jilani, an international champion of human rights who was chosen by Nelson Mandela to be part of his Elders



Group; and Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, the African Union Goodwill Ambassador for Ending Child Marriage.

Our media session should draw a crowd. We will be hearing about life on the inside from Jackie Leonard, who broadcasts to an audience of millions on the BBC World Service, and it will be interesting to hear the experiences of Baria Alamuddin, the Foreign Editor of Al Hayat, whose daughter, the internationally acclaimed lawyer, Amal Alamuddin, made the front pages when she married the actor George Clooney.

We plan to concentrate on technology too. It's important because it's a way to reduce the digital divide between the sexes, and it propels women furthering along the road of entrepreneurship. From my own personal experience of 15 years in the telecommunications industry I know that women across the globe are increasingly taking on roles in engineering, IT and others areas previously male-dominated. That's my view but I'll also be interested to hear what another of our speakers, Dr Bola Olabisi (CEO of the Global Women Inventors & Innovators Network) has to say.

Overall, the positive stories unfolding at the Forum should encourage participants from various walks of society, be they parliamentarians, entrepreneurs or leaders of civil society organisations, to be inspired and become the catalysts for change they want in their own societies, or at least receive the motivation and impetus that comes from collective reinforcement.

It's worth adding that this is a truly global gathering. More than four hundred will attend. People are flying in from the islands of the Pacific and the Caribbean with sizable numbers coming from the UK, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda and Canada. Most of the 53 countries of the Commonwealth will be represented and a few more besides.

It won't be all work and no play. We have a colourful show for the inauguration ceremony and there will be plenty of coffee breaks, to allow everybody to get to know each other.

Once it's all over we will be presenting our outcomes document to the 53 Heads of Government. They will be hearing the views of the women of the Commonwealth and we will be asking them to keep gender to the fore in their decision making.

The Women's Forum of the Commonwealth has arrived. This may be the first but it certainly won't be the last.