

How Parliamentarians modify attitudes, customs and barriers to the political, social and economic development of women.

Submission to the Panel Discussion by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health
46th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference UK, 20-29th September.

INTRODUCTION

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive health was set up 20 years ago. The Parliamentary Group has members from all parties and from both Houses. We provide a forum for discussion by MPs and Peers on population, development and reproductive health issues. We encourage initiatives to increase access to and improve reproductive and sexual health programmes worldwide.

The group has five broad aims:

1. To review reproductive and sexual health programmes and education worldwide and the impact these have on the individual, and on the economic and social development in the context of world population, human rights and women's empowerment.
2. To assess how the UK might respond to requests from outside for assistance and to press for action by Parliament and the Government. This will be done in consultation with Government departments working in relevant fields such as the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Department for Health, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other international organizations and NGOs.
3. To study the results of research into the causes and consequence of population and reproductive health issues and to draw these to the attention of both Houses of Parliament.
4. To increase awareness of the interdependence between countries, with reference to the environment, poverty, consumption and pollution and the impact of the policy and practice of one country upon another's.

5. To maintain contact with existing sister parliamentary groups overseas, also in the European Parliament, and promote the establishment of similar Parliamentary Groups in all Parliaments of the World.

The work of the All-Party Parliamentary Group is of crucial importance to the political, social and economic development of women, and illustrates how Parliamentarians can work together for this end. If a woman does not have control over her own reproductive and sexual rights or lives in fear of violence; she cannot begin to develop the political, social and economic rights she is entitled to. We feel universal access to reproductive and sexual health programmes should be an integral part of the discussion on the broader social and development goals. In this context sexual and reproductive rights are fundamental human rights. As a Parliamentary Group we are committed to women's empowerment, gender equity, equality and ensuring a safe society and our work reflects these objectives.

Violence against women is one of the most shocking manifestations of women's inequality and most acts of violence occur in a sexual context and affect reproduction; this is one of the areas the Parliamentary Group is working on. Sexual violence is linked to further sexual and reproductive health problems including HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, infertility, maternal mortality, teenage pregnancy, unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortion.

The socio-economic consequences of gender-based violence are not only detrimental to women's position, but to society at large. Women's participation in the labour force is limited by violence and studies have shown the link between violence and decreased production and increased absence from work.¹ The fear of violence also has a detrimental effect on women's self esteem and work performance. Therefore, by working to tackle and limit manifestations of gender-based violence towards women, parliamentarians can make a huge step towards the greater political, social and economic development of women.

IMPROVING THE POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN

As a Parliamentary Group we have been able to facilitate and participate in many activities. All have been aimed at modifying the attitudes, customs and barriers to women's reproductive and sexual rights that exist both in the UK and worldwide.

In May 2000 Parliamentary Hearings were held on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)², and the report will be launched in November. The audiences consisted of Parliamentarians, FGM activists, representatives of local authorities, national and international civil servants, medical experts, human rights experts and the press. As a group we stressed the importance of promoting health education among groups affected by the practices of FGM. As parliamentarians directly addressing issues like FGM, we can help modify the attitudes and barriers that women face. For example, where there are high rates of FGM there is a strong association with low status of women, illiteracy, poverty, and poor health services.

In this context, the Parliamentary Group can also contribute to Government policy, for example, Lord Hunt of Kings Head, The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health said in the House of Lords in March 2000:

“..education is central to eradicating the brutal practice of FGM. My department continues to fund relevant voluntary organizations. In addition, the Government will ensure that the findings of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health hearings on FGM are fed into the development of our sexual health strategy.”³

¹ “Violence Against Women: The Impact on Reproductive Health” Report of expert meeting at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) November 1999

² This was the fourth in the Parliamentary Group series on Parliamentary Hearings: 1995 – Women's Rights and Sexual Health 1997 – Development Strategies for the 21st Century: the South-South Partnership in Population and Development, 1998 – Taking Young People Seriously: Improving Sexual and Reproductive Health for the Next Generation.

³ House of Lords Hansard, Starred Question: Female Circumcision, 23 March 2000

The Parliamentary Group firmly believes that in order for women's political, social and economic status to be modified, the attitudes towards women's sexual and reproductive health need to be changed and the Commonwealth plays a key role. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Durban, South Africa in November 1999, two issues were addressed that will contribute towards this change:

- First, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was recognized as a global emergency, with devastating social and economic impacts. Priority was to be given to research into new methods of prevention. The Group firmly believes that female education is an extremely effective preventative measure. Women who are better educated have a better grasp of issues of health, sanitation and nutrition; they are more likely to use contraception; more likely to defer childbearing; have fewer children, and pass education on to the next generation. One consistent strategy for the preventative combating of the spread of HIV/AIDS is education in sexual and reproductive health, combined with appropriate services.
- The second issue addressed was of gender. A goal to achieve gender mainstreaming in all government policies, plans and programmes, enhancing women's participation in political decision-making and promoting women's human rights was set. This needs to include the right of women to have control over their sexual health and reproduction. Without the educational and community facilities that allow women to have this empowerment, their human rights are being denied.

The work of the Parliamentary Group addresses both of these themes. Chris McCafferty MP, Chair of the UK Parliamentary Group, co-chaired a meeting in Durban, entitled "Violence Against Women: The Impact on reproductive Health". Recommendations to Governments included the promotion of women's empowerment initiatives to increase self-esteem, build confidence and negotiation skills. To assure legal rights for women, and promote sexual and reproductive rights as human rights for all. Two very important recommendations were to provide the resources to carry out research on gender-based violence, an area that has received little research attention; and to promote men's role in reproductive and sexual health.

It is a sad fact that most acts of gender-based violence are carried out by men, and whilst the empowerment of women is vital, the involvement of men in programmes to eradicate violence against women is crucial along side this. It is often the attitudes and behaviour of men that perpetuates a climate of fear and silence surrounding the issue of gender-based violence. Lesley Ann Foster from the Masimanyane Women's Support Centre in South Africa presented evidence from her experiences. Whilst she welcomed the steps taken by the South African government with regards to the reforms made to address the inefficiencies within the criminal justice system, she felt this was too limited. She recommended that greater emphasis be put on public Education programmes to provide widespread teaching of human rights, and respect for fellow citizens. The education, involvement and encouragement of community leaders is also paramount.

The Parliamentary Group welcomes initiatives funded by the UK Government, both here and abroad, which aim to promote sexual equity. In particular, there have been several schemes aimed at changing attitudes towards women in East Africa and Asia, empowering women to take more control over their sexual relationships. User-friendly youth services have been funded in Nicaragua providing education and medical facilities. Further projects aimed at reducing violence have been set up in South Africa and Barbados. Using mainstream media as an outlet, the projects challenge the cycle of violence against women, and break the silence surrounding the issue.⁴

WHAT ROLE FOR THE COMMONWEALTH?

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health feels that the Commonwealth is an important forum to extend the work we do to modify attitudes, customs and barriers to the political, social and economic development of women.

⁴ "Equality in Practice", June 2000, Womens Unit, Cabinet Office

The Commonwealth is an association of diverse sovereign nations reflecting different stages of development and united by common values, therefore it can play a pivotal role in promoting consensus at national and international levels.

The UK Parliamentary Group hopes to establish a Commonwealth Parliamentary Forum on Population, Development and Reproductive Health in order to replicate the work we do on a Commonwealth level.

ACTIVITIES OF GROUP

Some examples of the group's activities over the past four years include:

- May 2000: Parliamentary Hearings on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the House of Lords.
- February 2000: World Bank published a consultation document "*Attacking Poverty, World Development Report 2000/2001*". The Group recommended that there be the inclusion of the need for adequate population policy and practices.
- December 1999: Joint meeting with the All Party Group on AIDS. Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. Therefore programmes are required that improve access to basic services, as are community-based campaigns to promote safer sex and help empower women and girls to reject unwanted sexual attention.
- November 1999: Chris McCafferty co-chaired a meeting at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting with Dr Nkomo MP, Chief Whip of the South African Parliament, entitled "*Violence Against Women: The Impact on Reproductive Health*".
- November 1998: Keynote address by Clare Short MP on the Tenth Anniversary of the Safe Motherhood Initiative at a joint meeting with Marie Stopes International.
- March 1998: Organized a film screening of a series on one minute films based on the 12 Rights of IPPF's Charter on Sexual and Reproductive Rights for MPs.
- February 1998: Viscount Craigavon hosted a joint meeting with the Birth Control Trust, entitled "*Contraceptive Choices, the way forward*".
- March 1997: Parliamentary Hearing on Development strategies for the 21st century: the South-South Partnership in Population and Development.

- October 1996: Members of the Group met with the Prime Minister to discuss the inclusion of global reproductive health needs on the agenda of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in October 1997.
- June 1996: Meeting with Doeke Eisma MEP, Chair of the European Parliament Working Group on population, Sustainable Development and Reproductive Health, to discuss EU population issues.
- March 1996: Two-day workshop for 22 representatives of European NGOs on “Working with Parliaments and Government Officials” at Westminster.

PARLIAMENTARY GROUP PUBLICATIONS

- “European Parliamentarians’ Agenda for Action on World Population”, 1992
- “Assessment of AID agencies priorities for population activities”, 1993
- “Annual Review of Activities 1993/4”
- “Women’s Rights and Sexual Health”, 1995
- Implementing ICPD 1994”, European Parliamentarians Forum, Brussels, 1995
- “Annual Review of Activities 1994/5”
- “Working with Parliamentarians and Government Officials”, 1996
- “Annual Review of Activities 1995/6”
- “Development Strategies for the 21st Century, South/South”, 1997
- “Annual Review of Activities 1996/7”
- “Annual Review of Activities 1997/8”
- “Taking Young People Seriously: Improving Sexual and Reproductive Health for the Next Generation”, Report of the Parliamentary Hearings held on 6 and 13 May 1998
- “Taking Young People Seriously: Report of the Findings of Research about the work of UK NGOs on Young People and Sexual Reproductive Health” 1998
- “Annual Review of Activities 1999/2000”
- Parliamentary Hearings of Female Genital Mutilation (pending publication November 2000)

**All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and
Reproductive Health**

Officers, Members and Staff of the Committee – July 2000

Chair: Christine McCafferty MP

Officers:

Vice Chair: Viscount Craigavon

Joint Hon Secretaries: Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP
Martyn Jones MP

Joint Hon Treasurers: Lady Flather
Tony Worthington MP

Members:

Labour

Alice Mahon MP
Brian Sedgemore MP
Barbara Follett MP
Lady Gould
Lord Rea
Lady Lockwood
Lady Massey

Liberal Democrat

Dr Peter Brand MP
Dr Jenny Tonge MP

Conservative

Eleanor Laing MP (C)

Staff:

Vanessa Haines, Parliamentary Advisor

Tel: 020 7219 2492
Fax: 020 7219 2641
e.mail: hainesv@parliament.uk