

Commonwealth Lecture 2011, 17 March 2011, London, UK

**Women as Agents of Change**

**Mrs Sonia Gandhi**

**I. Introductory Remarks**

Prime Minister, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Foundation, Secretary General, Distinguished Guests, I am honoured to deliver the fourteenth Commonwealth lecture on the theme of women as agents of change. It was an invitation I could not refuse for two reasons – first, my own personal involvement in the cause of women’s empowerment, particularly that of Indian women who constitute some 60 per cent of all the women in the Commonwealth; and second, my family’s close association with this organization.

**II. India and the Commonwealth**

The modern Commonwealth owes much to India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. It is ironic that a man imprisoned for so many years by the imperial masters of his country should have become so crucial for the survival and evolution of the Commonwealth. During the long years of India’s freedom struggle, membership had been widely opposed, implying as it did dominion status and allegiance to the Crown. Yet, in the aftermath of Partition and the polarised world scene, Nehru, the student of world history, saw that the Commonwealth could be a bridge between the dying world of Empire and the new post-colonial world being born. Nehru, the statesman, saw merit in an institution that sought to build bridges at many levels between countries and peoples.

Indira Gandhi valued the Commonwealth in a less idealised way than her father. She shared a personal bond with the leading Commonwealth figures of her time and brought to it a special focus on the development needs of its members.

I accompanied my husband Rajiv Gandhi to successive Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings and remember some of the colourful episodes that took place behind the scenes. To give you just one example, at the 1985 CHOGM in the Bahamas, the issue of sanctions against South Africa dominated the discussions. Margaret Thatcher stood out in solitary opposition to the rest of the Commonwealth’s call for sanctions against the apartheid regime. At the weekend retreat, Shridath Ramphal put together a three-member team to talk informally to Mrs. Thatcher and persuade her to relent. They were Rajiv Gandhi, Brian Mulroney of Canada and Robert Hawke of Australia, selected by him apparently as much for their looks as their political weight.

In private, he jokingly told them: “She will not be able to resist the three best-looking men of the Conference”.

The Iron Lady was unmoved and the handsome threesome failed either to charm or to persuade her. Thus was the stage set for the most heated political confrontation in the Commonwealth’s history.

At the subsequent Vancouver CHOGM in 1987, Rajiv Gandhi pledged India’s support to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning, which has played such a significant role in improving the quality of distance education in our country. India has always been in the forefront of important cooperation initiatives launched by the Commonwealth and I am sure will continue to be so.

I am particularly glad about the theme for this lecture. Women are disproportionately vulnerable in our world, even today. The global economic downturn of recent years has hurt them hardest. Similarly, climate change and environmental degradation exact a greater price from women, who have less access to resources, technology and credit. Conflict and warfare impose their own terrible toll. And it bears repeating that in many countries a girl is less likely to go to school, get adequate healthcare and social protection, or be given the chance to make her own life-decisions.

But on the positive side, we also know that investing in women is the highest-return venture. It’s not just about improving things for them, it is as vitally about letting women improve things for themselves, their families, their communities and the world at large. Even a small investment in women has great economic, political and social reverberations.

### **III. Women and Change: The Global Context**

Women as agents of change is an idea that seems self-evident in the Commonwealth. The two most influential women personalities of the twentieth century - Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher -- were both Commonwealth leaders. Margaret Thatcher changed Britain. Indira Gandhi changed India.

Indira Gandhi was described as the only man in her cabinet, much as Margaret Thatcher was in Britain - the assumption being that it is only men who shape our destinies and alter the course of events. There are other vivid examples of women who overturned such conventional wisdom. Rosa Parks’s refusal to give up her seat in a bus to a white man triggered the civil rights movement in America, leading to the end of racial segregation. During Nelson Mandela’s long imprisonment, Winnie Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and the Black Sash Movement, led by Jean Sinclair and Sheena Duncan, along with others, kept resistance to apartheid alive within South Africa. And

there is Aung Saan Syu Kyi in Myanmar whose sacrifices have become the focus of the democratic cause in her country.

Although the women's movement has already transformed the way in which we look at society in each of our countries, the search for equality is far from finished. History, culture and economics still remain weighted against women. In my own country, most worrying of all is the declining sex ratio of females to males. The age-old preference for sons, coupled with the development of sex-selection technologies, has given an alarming demographic twist to gender bias. That this is happening in regions of substantial economic prosperity within the country is even more disturbing. I should add here, however, that in the recent Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, young women from these very regions won the most number of medals. In a poignant interview, one of them recalled that her parents had wished her to be a boy -- but reconciled themselves after she developed her sporting prowess.

Among all the challenges facing humankind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, few are more pressing than climate change and global warming. Unfortunately, as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has pointed out, most of the climate debate has so far been gender-blind.

Yet women have played a special role in raising environmental consciousness. Some may remember only Julia Roberts in the Oscar-winning role of *Erin Brockovich*. But there have been others in an earlier era who blazed a whole new trail. Rachel Carson's book "The Silent Spring" published in 1962 was a watershed and led to the banning of DDT. Indira Gandhi herself, at the UN Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972, powerfully expressed the link between poverty and environmental degradation, an issue which continues to shape the current debate.

The *Chipko* movement in the Himalayas in the 1970s, in which village women hugged the trees to protect them from being felled, gave a new meaning and momentum to environmental activism in India. In other parts of the world too, women have taken an inspiring lead in protecting the environment, such as Wangari Maathai in Kenya, Rigoberta Menchu in Guatemala and Marina Silva in Brazil, to name just a few.

I sometimes wonder whether women's greater empathy with nature and concern for their children's future might not help the world to find a new, more sustainable, less consumerist path of development.

In 1989, the Commonwealth became the first major international organization to publish a landmark scientific study on the devastating effects of climate change. Commonwealth Heads of Government also agreed on a Climate Change Action Plan in 2007, where, among other things, they called upon the support of women to ensure effective action.

How can such support be extended if women's voices and concerns hardly figure in the global climate negotiations, or in national and local climate management plans? Perhaps it is time for a fresh Commonwealth initiative to help the world bridge this gap. Such an initiative could suggest ways to bring women's participation and perspectives more squarely into the global negotiations. We need climate justice not only between countries, but also between genders.

Enhancing the role of women in protecting the environment is necessary. But what about protecting women themselves? Economic growth is leading to mass migration to cities. Disturbingly, this is being accompanied by growing violence against women. If urbanization is the world's future, we must design urban environments and services in ways that will give women greater security, and educate and involve citizens in this cause. A Commonwealth initiative bringing together our great cities to collaborate on this issue would be timely.

So these are two areas - climate change and urbanisation - where I hope that the Commonwealth can do more for women.

At the same time, I do recognize and appreciate the gender work it is already doing, such as building women entrepreneurs and leaders, and drafting laws which meet women's needs.

#### **IV. Women and Change: The Indian Scene**

Now this evening you will appreciate that my own experience equips me better to focus on the importance of women's issues in India, which is what I now turn to. In order to understand where Indian women are today, let me first tell you where they once were.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Raj, a section of educated Indian women looked to Queen Victoria for relief from oppressive customs, hoping that as a woman she would intervene on their behalf. Alas, Her Majesty showed them no gender solidarity!

Women in Europe and America too, had to struggle to be educated. In India, however, the opposition to female education was far more intense, grounded as it was in millennia of patriarchy -- even though Indian culture has very prominent female deities, including a Goddess for Learning. In the west, the argument was that women did not *need* to be educated. In India, the argument was that women *should not* be educated, that education would ruin women's character and their traditional submissiveness and subvert the very basis of Indian culture. Dr. Anandibai Joshee,

who later became India's first woman doctor, described her experience of going to school in the relatively progressive city of Bombay in the late 1870s as follows and I quote:

*"When people saw me going with books in my hands, they put their heads out of the window just to have a look at me. Some stopped their carriages for the purpose. Others walking in the streets stood laughing, crying out derisive remarks so that I could hear them.... Some of them made fun and were convulsed with laughter. Others, sitting respectably in their verandahs...did not feel ashamed to throw pebbles at me. The shopkeepers and vendors spat at the sight of me, and made gestures too indecent to describe."*

Unquote.

As if the gauntlet of public hostility on the street was not enough, women had also to endure hostility within the family. In 1889 Kashibai Kanitkar, the first major woman writer in the Marathi language, described the stigma attached to women's literacy as follows and I quote:

*"If a woman picks up a paper, our elders feel offended, as though she has done something very shameful. If she receives a letter from her relatives, all the family feels dishonoured. If a woman's name appears in a newspaper, if her essay is published, if she stammers out a few words at a women's gathering, she is certain to be slapped with a gigantic charge of having tarnished the family's honour!"*

Unquote.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the emergence of a number of outstanding social reformers. But it was Mahatma Gandhi who brought about the first real and nation-wide wave of emancipation through his mass mobilization of women into the freedom movement. Unusually for his time, he believed that India's economic and moral salvation lay in women's hands. He condemned the traditions of child marriage, female seclusion, dowry, enforced widowhood, and the lack of education that had shackled Indian women for so long. He urged women to fight injustice and inequality and become masters of their own destiny. Women came out in their millions to participate in the civil disobedience movement, profoundly changing their outlook. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of our Nation, can perhaps also be called the Mother of Indian feminism.

Our Constitution that came into force in 1950 gave women a new charter for emancipation and empowerment. Women were given the right to vote in the very first national elections in 1952. Actually, the Congress Party had promised universal female

franchise way back in 1928 when many developed democracies were still debating the idea.

Like elsewhere in the world, and especially in India, it has not been easy to carve a direct solidarity among women. Their concerns are divided by class, by community, by caste, by culture. But through the 1970s and 80s, the women's movement in India flowered, banding together on issues like dowry and violence, household labour, discriminatory customs, property rights and wages. These campaigns resulted in the enactment of radical new laws.

A visitor to contemporary India will be impressed by the prominence of women in all aspects of life. India's President is a woman, as are the Speaker and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lower House of Parliament. The Chief Minister of India's most populous state is a woman from a section of society subjected to discrimination for centuries. Women are Presidents of four of our major political parties. Women are prominent in the judiciary, the higher civil service, the professions, academia, the corporate world, the media and every branch of civil society. At the time of Independence, women accounted for less than 10 per cent of enrolment in higher education – they will soon be on par with men.

And it is not by government action alone that this silent revolution is taking place. Today, women in India are becoming agents of change through their own initiative, their energy and enterprise. Through individual and collective action, they are transforming their own situations and indeed transforming the broader social context itself.

Let me give you some examples of where and how women—ordinary poor women—are beginning to make a difference with far-reaching implications for our country as a whole.

### **Self-Help Groups**

The first is the growth of women's Self-Help Groups which are changing rural India. Groups of women pool their savings on a regular basis and secure loans for a variety of activities that help them increase their incomes. There are now about five million such groups, averaging 10-15 members each. Last year, they secured bank loans worth more than two billion pounds.

This expanding network has had enormous impact. By giving poor women access to credit (and I might add, with a repayment record far superior to that of well-heeled borrowers!), these groups are helping to blunt the harsh edges of poverty and destitution. But women are doing more than getting loans. They are actually taking on a variety of functions on behalf of government departments. They are, for instance, buying rice and maize from farmers for sale through fair price shops. They are

distributing old age pensions and scholarships. They are managing primary health centres. And in this pub-loving country, it may surprise you to know how successful they have been in forcing the closure of village liquor shops to combat male alcoholism, domestic violence and the drain on household finances.

But there is something even more fundamentally revolutionary about this movement. It cuts across caste divides. It gives women a new voice, a new self-confidence, a new assertiveness. Attending a meeting of these women is an uplifting experience. When once they dared not open their mouths even within the family, let alone voice their concerns before outsiders, they are now vociferous in discussing personal and family problems as well as a whole range of community issues.

### **Women's Reservation**

The second arena where women have emerged as catalysts of change is politics, especially at the local level. In 1993, India amended its Constitution to provide 33 per cent reservation or quota for women in rural and urban local bodies throughout the country. There was cynicism, resentment and even anger – from powerful men, predictably -- when the idea was first mooted. No longer. Today, 1.2 million elected women representatives, including women from the most deprived and disadvantaged communities, have taken their place alongside men in the councils of rural self-government. Long-established power equations are now changing.

But I am less than happy to admit that at the national level we have not yet been successful. Women's representation in Parliament has hovered between 9 and 11 per cent, a figure that is considerably lower than in many other democracies. Legislation for a 33% quota in Parliament and state assemblies has been passed by the Upper House. We shall persevere in our efforts to get it approved by the Lower House as well.

### **Civic Activism**

The third area where women are leaving their distinctive imprint as harbingers of change is social activism. Over the last few years the language of rights has entered the mainstream of political discourse. Thus we now have a right to information, a right to work, a right to education and soon, a right to food security. What is remarkable about the rights debate and how it has progressed is the leading role women have played as its champions and advocates. Thanks to their passion and commitment, governance has become more open and accountable and public policies more caring of the poor.

Environmental activism too is something in which women are prominent. This is not surprising because, in essence, the issue of environment in India is an issue of livelihoods, of public health, of access to forests, of water security. What is particularly

noteworthy about this form of environmental activism is that it is spontaneous in nature and is not driven by any formal organization. A spark is lit and a movement begins.

### **Enterprise**

The fourth arena of impact is enterprise. The most visible may be women who lead some major Indian corporations, businesses and NGOs. But, perhaps even more significant are the unsung majority -- who make up over 90 per cent of all working women in what we call the informal or unorganized sector. For years, they enjoyed no pension, health insurance or maternity benefits, something that our government has begun to address.

Collective action by women has taken different forms. Thus, India, once the world's largest importer of milkfood, is now its largest milk producer. This White Revolution, as we call it, has proceeded in parallel with the Green Revolution. And it is millions of women in thousands of villages who have been the backbone of these milk cooperatives. There are many other instances such as *Lijjat*, producer of those poppadums so loved by British diners in Indian restaurants here. Founded by seven Gujarati housewives with a capital of about 7 pounds, it now has 42,000 owner-producers with a turnover approaching 70 million pounds.

The largest collective of women in India's informal sector is SEWA – the Self-Employed Women's Association, also founded by a woman. Its achievements within the country to provide a social security net for its members and add value to household enterprise have been widely recognised. But one of its most recent endeavours is particularly noteworthy – a programme in war-torn Afghanistan to train women, especially war widows, to acquire skills, set up food processing enterprises and initiate ecological regeneration. A similar programme is the Hand-in-Hand project in two provinces in Afghanistan based on the experience of our self-help-groups. In a true spirit of sisterhood, they are contributing to women's empowerment in that country.

Such initiatives demonstrate the role women's enterprise can play in regions ravaged by violence and conflict. Within India as well, these groups have taken the lead in mediating, peace-building and reconciliation in areas of strife.

### **Technology**

Finally, technology is proving to be a powerful tool for reducing gender inequalities. In the sunrise IT sector women already comprise close to one third – a million strong--of its workforce. There is a proliferation of knowledge-based enterprises, run by women in rural areas, such as village information centres and IT kiosks for accessing government services. Their ripple effect is growing. This is



beginning to impact age-old prejudices. Independent livelihoods are enabling women to stand on their own feet and resist pressure for early marriage. They are also being viewed as less of a liability by their parents.

## V. Concluding Remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen, few things give me greater optimism about my country's future than the amazing resilience of our women, their fortitude and courage, their capacity to overcome every obstacle, their readiness to grasp every opportunity.

India is at the cusp of a "demographic dividend" due to its young and increasingly educated and skilled population. Imagine, what might happen when this demographic dividend is multiplied by a "gender dividend". It will, I believe, yield enormous economic gain and lead to profound social transformation.

Mahatma Gandhi saw women as the future leaders of human evolution, bringing compassion and morality into public life. As always, what he said is memorable, and I quote:

*"To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she is not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater courage? Without woman, man could not be."*

Unquote.

It could be argued that the progressive victories of the women's movement, their achievement of the right to vote and other rights, were the 20<sup>th</sup> century's seminal contribution to human advancement. It has been a long journey. I fervently hope that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will take this to its logical conclusion. May this be, not the century of any particular country, but the century when women finally come into their own, the century when representative democracy is re-imagined to give women their due share, the century when the vocabulary of politics and culture is re-engineered fully to include that other half of mankind.

Thank you.