

25 years after the Beijing Declaration, Commonwealth trade unions call for urgent action on women's equality

With Commonwealth Day and International Women's Day so close together, the Commonwealth Trade Union Group is this year calling on Commonwealth governments to take urgent action to fulfil the promise of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) (BPfA) for realising gender equality and social justice.

The Commonwealth Charter makes clear the importance of fairness and equality. They are values we need to put into practice through instruments from global regulation to collective bargaining. As well as extending rights to LGBTI communities, we need practical measures to challenge violence and harassment, deliver equal pay and increase participation of women in the labour market.

In particular, ahead of the Rwanda CHOGM in June, the 70 million trade unionists in the Commonwealth are calling for the aspirations of the BPfA to be made real by Commonwealth governments:

- Guaranteeing the fundamental human rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining for all women workers;
- Ensuring that all workers, including in the informal economy, are guaranteed a [labour protection floor](#)¹ and access to social protection;
- Ensuring equal participation of women in the labour market (including raising participation rates in secondary education and increased investment in the public sector care economy);
- Joining the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) and discussing measures to implement equal pay with social partners;
- Eliminating gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work through ratifying and implementing ILO Convention 190 adopted last June; and
- Promoting women in leadership through a feminist approach to leadership.

A New Social Contract is needed to accelerate progress on achieving the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (SDGs), in particular Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work, Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 4 on education and vocational training, by 2030.

Adopted 25 years ago, the BPfA remains the blueprint for women's human rights and gender equality. While important progress has been made in all critical areas of action of the BPfA, no country has achieved the vision of the BPfA. Globally, women represent the majority of working poor, with less than half of women of working age being in paid employment. Occupational segregation and the undervaluing of women's work mean that women are more likely to be in low-paying, insecure and informal work. Women globally earn on average 20% less than men, with many retiring into poverty. And, as gender stereotypes in society persist, women continue to perform the lion's share of unpaid care work and are more disadvantaged in social protection systems. Gender-based violence, discrimination and intersecting systems of oppression, based on class, race, migration status, sexual orientation and gender identity, are at play at every stage of women's lives and continue to shape their working experiences.

¹ The ILO Centenary Declaration sets out the elements of the labour protection floor: respect for workers' fundamental rights, an adequate minimum wage, maximum limits on working time and safety and health at work.

Attacks on civil rights and liberties, including trade union rights, failed economic policies including austerity measures and the privatisation of public services, and the fragmentation of the workplace and employment relationships have hit women particularly hard. The climate crisis and massive disruption from technologies and new business models such as platform businesses, are making women's work even more precarious and informal. The rise of the populist right not only poses a threat to democracy and global peace but is already eroding women's human rights in many places around the world.

Trade unions are rising to these challenges. With women's rights, equality and equity at the core of their agenda, unions are winning equal pay for work of equal value, strong maternity leave and protections, reasonable accommodations for disabled workers, anti-racism policies and procedures, inclusion policies for LGBTI workers and equal treatment for migrant workers.

A [just transition for climate ambition](#), and the [care economy](#) must be at the forefront of the economic and social agenda. These hold the potential for millions of green jobs and the opportunity to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work.

On this Commonwealth Day, we celebrate the critical role that women and their trade unions have played over the years in realising the ambitious goals laid out in the Beijing Platform.

