



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
AT THE COMMONWEALTH CLUB



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New report urges Commonwealth Leaders to end early and forced marriage

LEADERS of the 54 Commonwealth nations are being urged to end early and forced marriage.

One month ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Perth Australia, the Royal Commonwealth Society and charity Plan International have issued a joint call for action in a new policy paper published today.

Entitled *Empowering Girls: what the Commonwealth can do to end early and forced marriage*, the paper reveals the shocking prevalence and damaging effects of early and forced marriage on girls across Commonwealth.

The paper highlights that more than ten million girls are affected by the practice globally every year and of the 20 countries in the world where early and forced marriage is most prevalent, 12 are in the Commonwealth.

Associate Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society, Patrick Wintour says: "Today, early and forced marriage represents one of the greatest barriers to girls' education, maternal health and economic empowerment. We're asking leaders meeting in Perth to make good on the commitments they have already made as members of the Commonwealth by working together to end this practice. Now is the time to demonstrate a real commitment to change, not just in word, but in action."

Marie Staunton, Plan International's UK chief executive says:

"Throughout the Commonwealth I've met with child brides who bitterly regret being forced to marry. At CHOGM 2011 Commonwealth leaders have the power to give millions of girls a future by ending this pernicious practice, which denies them their rights. Leaders must seize the moment and take action on this issue."

In 2011, the Commonwealth theme is 'Women as Agents of Change', offering leaders meeting in Perth the perfect opportunity to deliver tangible change for the women and girls who make up more than half of the Commonwealth's two billion people.

An Eminent Persons Group – tasked with exploring options for Commonwealth reform – are also expected to put strengthening the Commonwealth's role in protecting and promoting human rights at the very heart of the recommendations for reform they make to leaders in Perth.

The policy paper's key recommendations include:

- Ratifying relevant international human rights instruments and strengthening the enforcement of laws so every woman and girl is protected from being married against their will
- Funding prevention programmes to support girls, their families and communities to choose education over marriage

- Investing in support services for those who escape early and forced marriage

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Notes to Editors

About Plan: Plan is a global children's charity. We work with children in the world's poorest countries to help them build a better future. A future you would want for all children, your family and friends.

For over 70 years we've been taking action and standing up for every child's right to fulfil their potential:

- Giving children a healthy start in life, including access to safe drinking water
- Securing the education of girls and boys
- Working with communities to prepare for and survive disasters
- Inspiring children to take a lead in decisions that affect their lives
- Enabling families to earn a living and plan for their children's future.

We do what's needed, where it's needed most. We do what you would do.

As part of reaching out to those who need it most Plan's Because I am a Girl Campaign works to improve the lives of girls and young women who too often find themselves ignored, particularly when poverty means families have to make hard choices. The State of the World's Girls Report has been published annually since 2007 to support this campaign. www.plan-international.org/girls

About the Royal Commonwealth Society: The RCS is the oldest and largest civil society organisation devoted to the Commonwealth. Founded in 1868, it conducts a range of events and activities aimed at promoting international understanding. Its educational, youth and cultural programmes include one of the world's oldest and largest schools essay competitions, and an innovative international youth leadership programme. Headquartered at the Commonwealth Club in London, the RCS has some 4,000 members in the UK and a presence in over 40 Commonwealth countries through a network of branches and Commonwealth societies.

In 2009-2010, the RCS conducted the largest global public consultation on the future of the Commonwealth ever undertaken. 'The Commonwealth Conversation' played a significant role in kick-starting the process of Commonwealth reform which is due to culminate at the 2011 CHOGM with the publication of a portfolio of recommendations compiled by a Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group. For more information or comment, contact Joanna Bennett: joanna.bennett@thercs.org / +44 (0) 20 7766 9230.

The RCS is a registered charity in England and Wales. (226748). www.thercs.org

The Commonwealth: The modern Commonwealth was established with 8 members in 1949. In 2011, it has 54 members with a total population of nearly 2 billion. It is a voluntary association of governments and peoples, built around shared language, institutions, challenges, aspirations and values. Commonwealth countries work together to promote common values: democracy, freedom, peace, the rule of law and opportunity for all.

Commonwealth 2011 theme 'Women as Agents of Change': In 2011, Commonwealth organisations are focusing on the theme 'Women as Agents of Change', recognising that, by investing in women and girls, we can accelerate social, economic and political progress.

To mark the theme, on Commonwealth Day this year (14 March 2011), the RCS and Plan published

Because You're a Girl: Growing Up in the Commonwealth, a report which compares how well girls/women are doing relative to boys/men in their country across eight indicators, from survival (e.g. life expectancy, nutrition) to political participation and achievement (e.g. athletes and medals at the Commonwealth Games, Commonwealth Scholarships won). The report suggests that it is political will – and not economic wealth – which is most important in advancing gender equality. It is available for download at www.thercs.org/society/research.

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Marie Staunton, Chief Executive of Plan UK and Patrick Wintour, Associate Director of the RCS are both available for interview on request.