

Young women accept responsibility for forging equality, justice, peace and development in the Commonwealth Caribbean

CYPCC Statement on the occasion of International Women's Day 2007

International Women's Day on March 8 is an occasion marked by women's groups around the world. In the 1900s when the observance of IWD began, women faced considerable and deeply engrained obstacles in their fight for equality, justice, peace and development.

Today, advances in gender equity, removal of gender stereotyping, availability of more structured education, health care, and information on which to build choices are serving to create a committed, well-informed and ambitious breed of young women with the potential to be leaders in all spheres of development.

In fact, several studies in the Caribbean point to the pre-eminence of the Caribbean female, while the young Caribbean male seems to be at the cross roads of atrophy and marginalization. Of the 35 million people living in the Caribbean, approximately eight million are between the ages of 15 and 29. School enrolment rates and graduation tend to indicate that our young women are in the majority. But young women are also disproportionately impacted in their ability to contribute to political and economic development.

High unemployment among young people and limited opportunities for personal development characterize the life of the majority of youth in the region. Unemployment particularly increases the vulnerability of young women between 15 and 19, as it fuels their dependency and limits opportunities for their personal development.

Keisha, not her real name represents a real but hidden reality in the Caribbean. She is the eldest of nine siblings who were all abandoned by their parents when Keisha was only nine years old. At eleven she was taking care of her brothers' and sisters' needs by working as a regular sex-worker. Keisha admits she missed most of her schooling. As Keisha explained, she loved her brothers and sisters and wanted to make a "quiet" place for them,

to get food for them, nurture and make them happy. Keisha is now 31 years old and is turning her life around. She is developing her skills and self-esteem to go into her own business as a cosmetologist, because according to her, she recognizes that this is the best way she can ensure that her children “remain on the right track”.

Another young woman, let’s call her Indra, is thirty and the mother of five children. She is anxious for personal economic stability and wants to better support youth at risk and youth conflict in her community. Most of all she wants to raise law-abiding children who are respectable members of society.

Keisha and Indra are both single-mothers with dreams to empower their children and contribute to a better society. Some sociologists explain the role of women in this development process in their context as *creators* and *nurturers of life*. In fact, for the most part, cultural norms pre-determine that women will be more caring, peaceful and non-violent.

But what do Caribbean young women really think about their role in this process?

Natasha, 25 from Guyana agrees that women have traditionally played an integral part in helping to develop and maintain peace, equity and progress in the society. From time immemorial it has been the specific function of the woman to nurture and care for the children. While to a large extent this nurturing and caring refers to satisfying physical needs, in part, it also refers to the woman inculcating wholesome values into the child. There is therefore a role for the woman as the moral educator in the home – what she describes as a “cradle to grave’ approach.

Simone 26, Jamaica believes that young women are natural agents of peace building and progress because they bring sensitivity and emotion to relationships. Because they are not afraid to cry, young women can prevent built up hatred that leads to conflict and can make a more holistic contribution to justice, peace and development.

Carlyn, 19, from Dominica makes a critical point that resonates with a well known and loved hymn- *Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me*. She says young women must be clean, pure and positive, and at peace with themselves to be truly effective as leaders, innovators and peace builders. She sees a role for young women in communicating and affirming

their gender and pride and in passing on their skills and gifts to others at community levels. She also feels strongly that young women are the ones to get Caribbean young men to think positively, to accept responsibility and to be equal partners in building a just, equitable and peaceful world.

Natalie, 23, feels that young women tend to show their courage and leadership as problem solvers and peacemakers, reaching across the conflict divide to seek resolution and common ground. Young women tend to keep the future of their society and communities in mind when they are involved in decision making. However, in many instances, young women are deeply affected by conflicts in which at times they have had no role to play. She feels that the role and contributions of young women still remain under utilized and under valued and want young women to be more strategic in seeking to be empowered politically and economically.

Keria 20 from Anguilla feels that young women must not ignore the use of cultural and traditional norms in their work for peace, justice and development. Music, dance, and drama are all ways of engaging other young people to transform conflict, foster development and build peace.

All of these young women represent a microcosm of Caribbean youth who already work at grass roots levels in their communities and societies for social and economic development:

- They educate their peers (both male and female) on health life styles and healthy behaviours, dangers of HIV and AIDS, on the value of human life and the resolution of conflicts in a non-violent way.
- They provide crisis intervention to victims of domestic violence.
- They act as a public advocates for women's issues as community educators against gender bias.
- They raise public awareness of the implications of family violence, to control/prevent its occurrence and promote healthy non-violent family life.
- They provide counseling, education and support services for abused women and their families.

- They provide educational and religious applications and tools to help concentrate on socio-economic and cultural differences.
- They mobilize and organise training and group sessions to transfer learning to other youth to share Commonwealth and UN principles of respect for diversity and human dignity, opposition to all forms of discrimination whether based on age, race, ethnicity, creed or gender; adherence to democracy and the rule of law, the protection of human rights; and upholding international peace and security.
- They volunteer at counseling centres, work with youth councils, youth clubs, NGOs and CBOs to support other young women and youth at risk in their villages and communities.
- They champion the interest of the youth in all areas of life; to build reconciliation and patriotism amongst youth.
- They agitate for policy reform and programmes to empower all young people so they can contribute to the economic, social and cultural advancement of their families and countries, and to their own fulfilment.

Young women need the support of Governments, the international community and big sister agencies and the continued focus of IWD to help them enhance their role and reach in the development process.

First of all, they must be beneficiaries of better policy support and programmes that recognize and provide for their special circumstance. Secondly, young women and all young people must be better empowered. Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the directions of others. Young women must also play a bigger role in national governance and in government policy formulation to impact all aspects of development.

All evidence shows that Caribbean young women are anxious to take up this role, even if they have been battered by personal circumstances. There is an even-widening circle of young women who are agents and advocates for development. They need special arrangements and resource allocations from the international donor community. They need husbands and fathers,

brothers and lovers, governments and institutions with visionaries that do not view the role and contributions of women as a threat.

The Commonwealth Youth Programme Caribbean Centre salutes all women, young and old who are part of this living and breathing cycle of national and international development, those who make small, unrecognized contributions and those who are at the helm of international policy making.

We reaffirm our commitment to empowering young people and young women across the Caribbean in their continuing role as agents of change and development.