



GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

ADDRESS BY

THE HONOURABLE KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR

PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

**[DELIVERED BY DR SURUJ RAMBACHAM, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS &
COMMUNICATIONS]**

At the

**LAUNCH OF THE
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY SIDE EVENT
ON
WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

TUESDAY 16TH AUGUST 2011

DIPLOMATIC CENTRE

Cabinet colleagues,

Members of Parliament

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Representatives of the Eminent Persons Group

Representatives of inter-governmental Organisations

Representatives of Non-governmental and Academic Organisations

Distinguished guests,

Members of media,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good Afternoon.

Introduction

On June 29th and 30th the Government of Trinidad and Tobago hosted the first Caribbean Regional Colloquium on “Women Leaders as Agents of Change”, in partnership with the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership (CIWiL) and supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

At the opening ceremony of that event I stated, in no uncertain terms, that we were “laying the groundwork for an era which was set to witness far greater participation of Caribbean women in the politics, governance and decision-making processes in our countries across the Region”.

I believed then, as I do now, that we must position Caribbean women as transformational leaders who will bring not only unprecedented political changes, but who will seek to change all aspects of National and Regional life.

I endorse the definition of “*transformational leaders*” as stated in the Regional Colloquium which refers to women transformational leaders as “women with a vision of social justice, individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes to mobilize others around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realization of human rights for all.”

As it is already acknowledged, women often face daunting challenges as they demand their right for greater leadership and decision-making roles in both the public and private sectors.

Indeed, coming out of the Caribbean Regional Colloquium, *the Port of Spain Consensus on Transformational Leadership for Gender Equality* noted that “despite high levels of participation by women as voters and campaigners, relatively few women are selected by political parties for leadership positions or as candidates to contest parliamentary election, and even fewer are elected as members of Parliament. Most Caribbean countries have fewer than 15% women as elected Parliamentarians.”

The Consensus document also recommended:

- an increase in women’s representation in Cabinet, Parliament and local Government to 30% and where that percentage had already been achieved, strive for parity or 50%; and, also
- the strengthening of national gender/women’s machineries for effective implementation, monitoring and mainstreaming of national, regional and international commitments on gender equality.

Today, the call of women in our region for political parity and inclusion into the processes which shape our Nations’ development, will be taken a step further into an international forum.

Launch of event

It is now my distinct privilege to inform you that together with other global women leaders as well as the UN entities, I will co-host a high-level dialogue on *Women's Political Participation* in September, in New York in the margins of the commencement of the 66th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The other co-hosts of this event, will include the President of the Federative Republic of Brazil, Her Excellency Dilma Rousseff; the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton; a former Prime Minister of New Zealand and current United Nations Development Programme Administrator, Ms Helen Clark; and the Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and might I add a former President of Chile, Ms Michelle Bachelet. I have been advised that the United States of America has agreed in principle to participate in the event. The mechanics of its involvement are being finalized. A task force which includes the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Brazil is also finalizing arrangements for the event.

This is the caliber of the women who will be taking part in this event in September.

In addition, we anticipate the support of women leaders from Africa, Asia and the Arab countries to complete the distinguished panel of global women world leaders.

The event is intended to attract the attendance of, among others, women Heads of State and Government as well as women Foreign Ministers and Ministers with responsibility for gender affairs/gender equality, senior diplomats and members of civil society.

Timing/Rationale of this side event

Some of you may well ask... why now? Why bring the issue of women's political participation to the forefront at this time?

I remind you of our very own Caribbean Regional Colloquium which was held in June and which elicited strong support from a broad cross section of Caribbean women.

I undertook to bring its outcome document, the Port-of-Spain Consensus forward to the 32nd CARICOM Heads of Government meeting in St Kitts & Nevis, which I did.

The theme of Women's Political Participation also ties in very closely with the Commonwealth theme for 2011, "*Women as Agents of Change*". As Chairperson-in-Office of the Commonwealth, I believe it is my mandate to address and raise awareness for this theme in international fora.

I have done so, first at the Organization of American States (OAS) Hemispheric Forum on Women's Leadership for a Citizen's Democracy, which was held in April.

And again at this Side Event in the margins of the 66th United Nations General Assembly in New York in September, where I intend to articulate the views of the Commonwealth on this important issue of women's empowerment.

In 2011 we marked the centenary of the celebration of International Women's Day.

To date we now have 20 Female World Leaders in Power, a number which is double that of 1990.

What better time than in 2011 to give prominence to the cause of women's political representation!

And as you know, I am deeply passionate about the issue of the empowerment of girls and women, women's rights and women's leadership and will undoubtedly use my Office to further the cause of the world's women

My own journey to political success has not been easy. But inspired by my mother and with perseverance and the support of the women and men of our country, I am now in a position to make things better for all our citizens.

I am sure you've all heard the saying that "the reward for hard work is more hard work". Well this is a journey where all efforts will be made to ensure that women find their rightful place in our country, our Region...our World.

I also wish to share with you the perspectives of some of the participants of the Regional Colloquium, which I believe show clearly the importance of hosting this side event:

- The Honourable Mia Mottley of Barbados stated, "There is no doubt in my mind that we have reached a juncture where a new politics is demanded of us. This new politics is not going to come from the status quo. It is not going to come from the corridors of power that are dominated by men.... It comes when we [as women] recognize that we do have the power..."
- The Honourable Deborah Backer of Guyana questioned, "Are we happy and comfortable with the political system/parties that we are striving to get involved in? Are we/they delivering the goods to our people?"
- Ms Yasmin Odlum of the Inter-American Commission of Women was emphatic in her view that "Without women there is no democracy... without women in decision-making positions, there is no democracy."
- Ms Icilda Humes, Director of the Women's Department in Belize reminded us that "We must build our capacity and knowledge to move forward initiatives for gender equality. We need men in this strategy. We need Champions for our cause. We need men and women."
- More recently US congresswoman Yvette Clarke, who was also a participant at the Regional Colloquium, has been quoted as saying, "Young men have been socialized into

a “take no prisoners mindset. Male politicians have transferred this mentality, the win-win scenario into the political equation, hence at times you see little room for compromise and negotiation, to the detriment of the people.” *Quote taken from Trinidad Guardian interview of 10th August 2011.*

These sentiments give voice to the very real need for women to take their rightful place to ensure the progress of our societies in the interdependent areas of democracy, development and peace.

In order to realize our objectives, we must give effect to commitments under legally binding instruments such as the the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in addition to other mechanisms for example the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Commonwealth Gender Equity Plan of Action (2005 -2015) and the Millennium Development Goals; yet commitments to women, as enshrined in the principles of these agreements, continue to be elusive.

Globally we are seeing a gradual increase in female leadership and elected representation, which provides opportunities for women’s voices and perspectives to be injected into the legislative process. And this provides the motivation to keep going... to keep fighting and to keep making things happen.

Yet despite international observances and progress in the legal and constitutional arena in some countries, with the recognition of equality of rights and non-discrimination, the changes in everyday political life still do not go far enough to achieve equality in political representation.

Attitudes towards women as leaders must continue to evolve so that more trust is placed in women as quality contributors to legislation, governance and decision-making processes.

We already have outstanding female leaders in our communities in all areas... in religion, in Non-governmental Organisations, in Local Government. We must now take our women to the next level to embrace national and regional political representation.

There is so much more to be done in the areas of education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, housing, gender equality... areas that women can advance up the national agenda as well as contribute in the areas of national security, finance and trade.

The limitations that society, tradition and the status quo would seek to impose on us are not insurmountable but women and indeed men need to work together if we are to create ‘new and true democracies’ built on the principle of gender equality and gender equity.

Our discourse in September would seek to create a framework for a vision of longevity for the participation of women in politics, nationally, regionally and globally.

Tangible Outcomes It is my expectation and that of the other co-sponsors of the Colloquium that the outcome of the meeting would influence relevant UN resolutions on women's participation in the political process at regional, hemispheric and global levels.

While recognising the importance of drafting a negotiated text to be put forward to the Third Committee of the United Nations (UN), it has been noted that of equal priority to the co-hosts of the Event is the achievement of tangible results in the form of regional and international projects/programmes.

These projects/programmes will address the central theme of the Event, namely women's participation in politics at a representational level.

Through a multi-faceted approach, these projects/programmes will seek to target girls and young women (under thirty (30) years old), and encourage and facilitate their active participation in representational politics.

On the local front, fledgling ideas including Model Parliament / Model UN School Clubs which may follow along the lines of the current UNESCO Clubs; Internship Programmes, International Exchange Programmes and an online mentoring programme are being fine-tuned.

I ask for your input in designing sustainable programmes for educating and guiding our women on the many aspects of the political process.

Acknowledgements

An event of this stature would not have been possible without the expertise and dedication of many committed persons.

I extend my thanks to all those who collaborated and worked closely with my team at the Office of the Prime Minister to make the UNGA Side Event a reality...

United Nations Resident Coordinator and United Nations Development Programme Resident Representative, Dr. Marcia De Castro for her support and collaboration as we developed the concept for the Side Event.

I would particularly like to ask Dr. De Castro to convey my gratitude to the Honourable Helen Clark, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, for her continued endorsement of this event, from its inception in early March of this year, to now. I wish to also acknowledge the important contribution of UN Women in particular Ms. Michelle Bachelet, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, and her team, in the hosting and organization of this event.

I would also like to thank Her Excellency Beatrice Welters, United States Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago, and her team at the U.S. Embassy for their unflagging efforts to secure co-sponsorship from the U.S. Department of State and from Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Similarly, I should like to make special mention of the members of the Diplomatic Community who have worked with my Office to give input into the planning of this event - His Excellency Phillip Kentwell, High Commissioner for the Commonwealth of Australia; Her Excellency Karen McDonald, High Commissioner for Canada, and Mr. Alirio Ramos, Chargé d’Affaires for the Embassy of the Federative Republic of Brazil. Your enthusiasm and your efforts are noted with deep appreciation.

This Event would not have been possible without the devoted time and efforts of my staff at the Office of the Prime Minister, who worked closely with my Minister of Foreign Affairs and Communications, Dr. The Honourable Surujrattan Rambachan and his staff both here in Trinidad and in New York - notably His Excellency Rodney Charles, Trinidad and Tobago’s Ambassador to the United Nations; Ms. Laura West Director of Multilateral Relations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Communications and Ms. Frances Seignoret, Head of the European Unit in the Bilateral Relations Division.

My heartfelt thanks to all of you.

Closing Comments

Before I close, I must also let you know that I have been invited by the Honourable Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia, to speak at the Commonwealth Heads Of Government Meeting Side Event, “*Women Empowered to Lead*” on 27th October, 2011.

I look forward to this opportunity to further address the issue of women’s leadership and empowerment at this event.

I will also have the privilege of handing over the baton of Chairperson-in-Office to my esteemed fellow woman Head of Government, Prime Minister Gillard, shortly thereafter.

While I will now go on to a press conference after lunch to discuss the work of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group and its recommendations for raising the profile of the Commonwealth, I invite the various women’s organisations represented here today to remain in the Ballroom after the lunch as the Honourable Verna St. Rose-Greaves, Minister for Gender, Youth and Child Development, will be moderating an information sharing session, where you will be invited to share your thoughts and views on the upcoming UNGA Side Event on Women’s Political Participation and the priorities of the Ministry.

I thank you for your attention and may God Bless you all.