

***COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT/ Gender Affairs Strategic Workshop
Jolly Beach Resort
Hon. Dr. Jacqui Quinn-Leandro
Minister of Labour, Public Administration & Empowerment
June 6-8, 2005***

Thank you Madame Chair, hon. Senator Jacinta Bannis, Senator Deborah Backer, Hon. Senator Hazlyn Francis, President of the Senate; Executive Director of the Gender Affairs Bureau, Sheila Roseau, Dr. Rawwida Baksh, Commonwealth Secretariat, Roberta Clarke of UNIFEM, Distinguished Facilitators and Participants.

It is indeed an honour and privilege to be a part of this Strategic workshop being held under the auspices of my Ministry in collaboration with the Gender Section of the Social Transformation Programmes Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat. I would like to add my voice in welcoming all our visitors to beautiful Antigua and Barbuda and wish you a most enjoyable and productive stay.

We have seen over the years an increase in women's global activism, especially at the level of the United Nations. I was indeed happy to represent Antigua and Barbuda at the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March of this Year. The assessment made by the United Nations Development Program for the Beijing+plus10 verifies that women are still greatly under-represented in political and bureaucratic posts around the world. The UNDP reports that women are nowhere near half of the decision making structure. The threshold of 30 % advocated by the UNDP Human Development Report as a prelude to the 50% is still a dream for most women. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's monitor pegs at 15.2% the total number of women in parliaments around the world.

In light of these figures, the Beijing Platform for Action calls on governments, national bodies, the private sector, political parties, trade unions, employers' organizations, research and academic institutions, sub regional and regional bodies and non-governmental and international organizations to "implement measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision making; and increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership."

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is also an important international treaty that upholds the importance of women's involvement in the political machinery of nations. The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women reports that as of September 30, 2003, 174 countries or 90 % of the members of the United Nations have become party to the Convention. Antigua and Barbuda and I believe most Commonwealth countries are signatories to that Convention.

I wish to draw to your attention to Articles 2 to 4 of the CEDAW which call on state parties to actively pursue the elimination of discrimination in women's political participation through legal and temporary special measures and affirmative action. Article 7 instructs state parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country.

I came upon some interesting information while looking at the work of IDEA, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. They held a workshop in January similar to the one we are now having, and the experiences shared by Argentina, Mexico, Ecuador and the USA demonstrated that seemingly minor adjustments to electoral systems can have a strong impact, negative or positive on female representation.

We must insist on a mandate for our political parties of 30% female representation on party lists and in internal party leadership positions. This is a small measure that can go a long way in impacting women's participation and representation. My Antiguan colleagues will tell you that I am a strong and ardent advocate for this measure since I sincerely believe that it is at the political party structure that we must begin to redress the gender imbalance.

In his book, "*Women in Parliament: Beyond numbers*" Professor Richard Matland states that women have to overcome three types of hurdles in order to be elected to public office. Firstly they have to be willing to stand for election. Secondly they have to be nominated by their party and thirdly they have to be elected by the voters.

Matland argues and I concur that of these three barriers, nomination by the party is the most critical. I would like to see emanating from this workshop some of the proactive steps and measures which political parties should and must take to promote female participation and leadership.

Antigua and Barbuda made a break through in 2004, when for the first time the two major political parties actively courted three women and ran them on their tickets in key constituencies. The rest as they say is history.

We have to begin to nurture our girls and young women across the Caribbean into thinking that they are indeed capable of doing any job, and we must interest them in political leadership positions. Women have for too long stayed in the back ground, being the help-meets and wall paper for our male counterparts.

We women have toiled on the political campaign trail, organized fund- raising activities, fried the fish, barbecued the chicken; handed out the pamphlets, put up the posters and licked the stamps for voter letters and leaflets. But we have sunk into the back ground and into oblivion and kept our traditional "place" when it comes to challenging the political leadership and asserting our own personalities and abilities.

Too often I have seen women who are ordinarily bright, articulate, intelligent and well positioned lower their eyes in humility, become bumbling, rambling airheads, and defer to men because they are intimidated by them. Too often I see women unwilling or unable to hold their side of an argument or debate a cause because they are afraid to be deemed aggressive.

We can learn from each other as women therefore we welcome this forum that is aimed at discussing and identifying challenges and problems that hinder women's participation. I look forward to the discussions on regional experiences on constitutional and legislative reforms because it is at these levels that tangible action can be taken by our governments.

I am a realist and a firm believer that women's roles in political leadership have been highly influenced by religious and cultural factors that shape popular perceptions of women's roles, talents and possibilities. The cultural roles of the male as protector and breadwinner of the family reinforced the ideas of men as protectors of the collective national family. The structural difficulties are intertwined with cultural attitudes, norms and mores: many women have been brought up in a social environment in which women are taught to shy away from risk and confrontation. We are to be seen and not heard. We must be submissive and compliant.

It is common knowledge that women politicians have had to overcome this type of stereotypical or identity politics. Even as we forge ahead making inroads in increasing the numbers, we are faced with the challenge of tearing down some of these very cultural restrictions on how women should look, speak, and act while at the same time transforming the political culture into a genuinely *gender-fair* environment.

Carolina Rodriguez-Bello writing on Women's Political Participation describes a "gender-fair" environment as one which estimates women's capabilities not on how well they imitate "male-speak" or how well they compete but on their capacity for collaboration, vision and leadership.

This is critical to all that you will discuss here today: "capacity". How well or how badly we do as women in the political arena will turn largely on our capacity to perform, our capacity to take criticisms and not be thin-skinned; our capacity to endure long, arduous and grueling hours; our capacity to listen and to hear the cries of our fellow women-folk (you know there are some people who hear but are not active listeners) and finally our capacity to lead from the front. **I believe in the unlimited potential of women and I know and feel that women don't need to be more like men to be strong, capable leaders. We can lead as we are and be successful.**

Fortunately, nothing about politics and culture are set in stone. Like all aspects of culture, politics is humanly constructed and subject to transformation through the interplay of history and ideas. The age old beliefs about the special attributes women are presumed to bring to the political process: integrity; collaborator, compassion, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the concerns of all citizens- are the traits that most women feel they

bring to the practice of public service. These are also the traits and characteristics which the public seeks in its leaders. Interestingly, (and this is not to cast aspersions at male politicians) the Lee Foundation in America conducted a study in which they found that voters overwhelmingly see women political leaders as more honest, less corrupt, less willing to cut political deals and less likely to be controlled by special interests.

When we look across the length and breadth of the Commonwealth Caribbean, we are finding more and more women candidates demonstrating forcibly that they can utilize the kinds of skills, tactics and messages needed to defeat male opponents and frame an agenda responsive to the needs of our constituents.

Outside of the 30% of decision making positions set by the United Nations; let us look seriously at gender mainstreaming strategies that promote a culture of gender sensitivity in government; our national machineries for women, which have the primary role of leading and monitoring gender mainstreaming strategies and affirmative action all of which assist in leveling the playing field.

Gender mainstreaming efforts mainstream gender perspectives and the goal of gender equality in government policy making, planning, implementation and evaluation. This makes our governments more efficient in serving the needs of its citizens by ensuring that even seemingly neutral policies and programs take into account women's concerns and needs right at the onset.

We have very powerful international instruments that will guide us as we seek to tackle this issue of gender equality and equity in an ongoing process: the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW), and the Commonwealth Plan of Action, and these should be maximized.

Strategies to implement them such as advocacy, policy reforms, special measures and affirmative action, accountability and evaluations systems and all other means should be explored. I have absolutely no doubt that all of these will be addressed over the next three days as you deliberate.

As we toil in the vineyard encouraging, nurturing, and recommending Gender Equity in political participation, we must never tire; we must never become jaded in spreading the message of getting more and more women into political decision making. If we are timid or if we tire of spreading our own message, who will? Certainly not the men, many of whom are in denial and refuse to admit that there is a problem with equity and yet others who simply carry on their daily lives without giving it a first, much more a second thought.

I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations as you seek to advance women's political participation and representation. In particular, I look forward to the increased training which our participants will receive, which will no doubt redound to the benefit of Caribbean parliaments and ultimately the people of the region. Thank you.