

Opening Statement by  
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Minister of Social Care, Constituency Empowerment and  
Community Development  
of  
Barbados  
During the 67<sup>th</sup> Session of the  
Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women  
(CEDAW)

July 2017

Geneva, Switzerland

Madame Chairperson,

Distinguished Members of the Committee for the Elimination of  
Discrimination Against Women

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour and privilege to be here today to discuss with you the commitment of the Government of Barbados to advance the rights of women.

Women are generally regarded as the repositories of our social conscience and purveyors of our values and traditions, teaching and transmitting these to successive generations.

Having attained national self-determination, the elected Government was empowered to aid in the advancement of Barbadian women. This was early expressed in the Independence Constitution's Bill of Rights which is written to incorporate the principle of equality of women and men.

It should be emphasised that the Constitution of Barbados is the supreme law of the country and gives equal protection to all citizens

regardless to race, creed, gender, political opinion, religion or place of birth. These protections have been further enhanced by a body of laws that give effect to the rights enshrined in the Constitution. It should be noted that no law enacted can be inconsistent with the rights given by the Constitution.

As you may recall, we in Barbados celebrated our 50th Anniversary of Independence on November 30<sup>th</sup>, just last year. The attainment of that milestone provided us with an opportunity to reflect on our national challenges and achievements.

These principles have informed the policies of successive Administrations and have resulted in efforts to build, consolidate or deepen the enabling framework in which women and girls may access opportunities for fulfilling their potential and realising their rights. The understanding of the important contribution made by women and girls to nation building, achieving economic advancement and securing social stability and progress, has contributed significantly to the high levels of sustained investment, in the social infrastructure, notwithstanding the perennial challenges that are to be faced as a Small Island Developing State.

In 1980, Government, recognising that the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women reflects the widely held belief in Barbados that women and men are inherently equal, signalled its support by signature and ratification of the document. By so doing, Barbados underscored its intent to ensure women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life, notably the right to vote and to stand for election, as well as equal access to education, health and employment.

Madame Chair,

Some here today may be aware that in 1989, Barbados' Representative to the United Nations underscored our country's commitment to working with other members of the international community to address issues of discrimination against women and violence against them. On that occasion, she stated:

*It is true that for more than three centuries the vast majority of Afro-Barbadian women endured slavery and related suffering. Those who were not shackled by racial prejudice endured systemic and legally sanctioned abuse and discrimination.*

*Nor did the travail of the majority end at formal Emancipation. It was only through ceaseless striving that our*

*mothers, in unison with enlightened men, achieved the franchise, won our right to participate in politics and opened the door to Independence.*

It should be noted that the Permanent Representative at the time was Her Excellency Ruth Nita Barrow. Most will, however, remember her in the subsequent role as Governor General of Barbados.

Dame Nita's statement underscored the important role that was and continues to be played by women in Barbados. As noted earlier, such views are not uncommon among us at home.

In 1987, the Honourable Maizie Barker-Welch, speaking in a forum of the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), of the Organisation of American States, observed:

*Women were never simply passive spectators in society. Certainly, in Barbados, if men are the arms and feet, women are our nation's heart and spine.*

This is certainly true as women continue to lead out formally as instructors and teachers in institutions of learning and informally as the repositories of wisdom in homes and communities. It is also the

case that women are the backbone of our population. The estimate for the first quarter of 2017 certainly affirms the view that females are at the core of the country - numbering approximately one hundred and forty-four thousand (144,000) compared to around one hundred and thirty-three thousand males (133,000) males.

Senator Irene Sandiford-Garner, who has served, in more recent times, at the Hemispheric level as Barbados' representative to the CIM, often attests to the contribution made by women in building a better Barbados through their service in all areas of work - as entrepreneurs and engineers, Civil Servants and Civil Society actors, managers, magistrates and Judges. They are also to be found in that solitary category of 'politician'.

Senator Sandiford-Garner would be on safe ground if she were also to suggest that the important role played by women in national life is in no small part due to their innate abilities. I am not of a mind to disagree with such a statement as I certainly share the sentiment.

It is the commitment of the Government, of which I have the honour to be a member, to continue the investments made to key sectors, for example, social care, education, health and housing.

These allocations will enable Barbadian girls to develop and women to flourish in their chosen areas of endeavour.

Madame Chair,

I have alluded to the investments made by Government. Yet, you may not be able to fully appreciate these, without an understanding of the economic climate in which we currently operate. Many of the things on which we relied and on which this country was built have either been removed or significantly reduced. For instance, we no longer enjoy preferential access to large, inviting markets in Europe, the UK, Canada and the USA. We are also called to expend greater effort to achieve gains in tourism through source market expansion. At the same time, we are confronted by often nebulous and unwarranted challenges that require us to intensify our efforts to defend and even expand our product offerings in the international business and financial services sector.

Our efforts are beginning to bear fruit. In 2016, the economy of Barbados grew by 1.6 percent compared with 0.9 percent in 2015. This growth is expected to improve by 0.2 percentage points by the end of 2017. There are reasons for optimism yet we will continue to display the necessary prudence. This is essential for, while the international prospects for growth are encouraging, the domestic outlook contains challenges, like the slow progress of the fiscal consolidation efforts and the high debt burden. Current conditions

require continued fiscal discipline, with economic growth, to secure Barbados' future.

I take the opportunity, here, to provide some recent information related to specific sectors of activity. Traditionally, we have placed considerable emphasis on providing support for women by providing a wide safety-net of social services. Government recognises that this assumes greater importance during periods of economic dislocation. During the last year, my Ministry's Poverty Alleviation and Reduction Programme administered the Poverty Eradication Fund, established to provide assistance to persons with rent or critical utility arrears, educational or medical challenges or housing repair needs. Sixty-eight persons were recipients of the Fund last year.

Your attention is also drawn to the Identification, Stabilisation, Enablement and Empowerment (I.S.E.E) programme which provides psycho-social interventions to households. Under this initiative, the total value of benefits paid in 2016 totalled just over ninety-five thousand dollars. This programme is an adaptation of the Chilean Puente programme which was a programme adopted within the OAS context.

Throughout the period of 2016, the National HIV AIDS Commission provided assistance to People Living with HIV/AIDS who were outside the ambit of assistance provided by the Ministry of Health and the Welfare Department. The Commission provided assistance, specifically, with school supplies and nutrition. Eleven individuals benefited from these services, of whom nine were females and two were males.

It should be noted that the National HIV/AIDS Commission meets monthly with partners from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Housing, including the Rural Development Commission, Urban Development Commission, and the Ladymeade Reference Unit, to assess the housing needs of clients. Over the last year, nine meetings were held and eighty-five (85) clients considered for priority assistance, namely the providing of housing, repairs to existing structures and or the monthly payment of rent on behalf of clients, through the Ministry of Housing.

These interventions are made within a national framework where health care is free at the point of access for all citizens. In addition, education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 and 16 and is free of charge in all government-operated schools. There are twenty-two Government secondary schools. Twenty of these are co-educational and two are single sex schools.

I would wish to reiterate that the primary beneficiaries of these programmes are women.

Madame Chair,

In Barbados, girls continue to consistently outperform their male counterparts in obtaining scholarships and exhibitions at the Secondary School level. For example, in 2015 there were twenty-seven scholars, nine males and eighteen females; last year, 2016, there were nine scholars, three males and six females.

These trends continue at the tertiary level even as Government continues to subsidise the cost of studying, for citizens attending the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus in Barbados. It has been noted that even at this level larger numbers of women are enrolled in programmes and eventually graduate than men.

On the legislative side, we passed the amendment to the Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act, 1992 in January last year. Significantly, the amendments include a wider definition of domestic violence, enhanced power to the police to intervene in situations of suspected domestic violence and the expansion of the application of the Act to include couples in visiting relationships.

We are proud of what we have been able to accomplish thus far, to level the proverbial playing field, on behalf of women. It is recognised, however, that more work remains to be done. Barbados' national wellbeing and sustainable development depend on the ongoing understanding, improvement and application of human rights principles.

I look forward, therefore, to discussing how our strong support for the promotion and protection of human rights at home may be further strengthened. Your comments and suggestions, along with those of the other members of the Committee, in this regard, would be sincerely appreciated.

I thank you Madame Chair.