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**Statement by**  
**The Honourable Ayanna Webster-Roy,**  
**Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister**  
**(Gender And Child Affairs)**  
**on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago**

**64th Session of the Committee on the Elimination of**  
**Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**

**July 18, 2016**



**OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
(Gender and Child Affairs)**

**OPENING STATEMENT**

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Madam Chairperson, on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, it is a privilege to present the country's 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> combined report under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It is an event of great significance to my government's human rights work and I welcome this opportunity to engage in an open and constructive dialogue with the Committee today.

I acknowledge the Chairperson of the Committee, Ms Yoko Hayashi of Japan, Professor Barbara Bailey from Jamaica, the country rapporteur for Trinidad and Tobago and other members of the Committee.

I also acknowledge the members of the Trinidad and Tobago delegation seated at the head table participating in this process. These are:

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- Ms Jacqueline Johnson – Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister;
  - Ms Ian Rampersad- Director, International Law and Human Rights Unit, Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs
  - Ms Antoinette Jack-Martin- Director Gender Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister
  - Ms Gaietry Pargass- Legal Adviser, Gender and Child Affairs, Office of the Prime Minis
  - Mr Learrie Barry- Manager, Policy Research and Planning, Office of the Prime Minister

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I also acknowledge the representatives of the Non-Government Organisations who are in Geneva.

Trinidad and Tobago respects the continuous efforts of the CEDAW Committee in promoting gender equality and the advancement of rights of women and girls. Importantly, I reconfirm Trinidad and Tobago's strong commitment to the Convention. CEDAW sets an imperative foundation for women's rights. The Trinidad and Tobago Government continues to strive to meet the standards set by the Convention and we look forward to our discussion today about how we can continue to do so.

Since it was formally ratified in 1990, CEDAW has been instrumental in guiding Trinidad and Tobago in addressing laws and policies as well as the cultural change needed to advance gender

equality and equity. Since ratification, Trinidad and Tobago has made significant strides with respect to achieving the standards set forth in the Convention through legislative and other measures.

Trinidad and Tobago is currently experiencing uncertain economic times due to falling energy prices. Nevertheless, utilizing collaborative and other strategies, particularly collaboration with non-governmental organisations and inter-governmental agencies, gender-related issues continue to be a priority. This is also reflected in the fact that the Gender Affairs portfolio for the implementation of the national gender programme now exists under the Office of the Prime Minister, because of the importance of this portfolio to national development. I wish to briefly highlight some of the priority issues of government.

### The Draft National Policy on Gender and Development

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Madam Chairperson,

Trinidad and Tobago is in the process of finalizing a National Policy on Gender and Development to provide a framework to addressing gender-related issues. The process has been delayed as certain areas of concern identified by certain sectors of the society required consultation and negotiation.

The current government which came into office in September 2015 has agreed to substantially adopt the 2012 document with modifications and certain additions such as climate change. The revised document was submitted to Cabinet for approval in the first quarter of 2016. Notwithstanding the absence of a policy, the Government has proceeded with addressing many of the articles of the Convention by building the framework legislatively and institutionally to support gender equality at to uphold the rights of our women. The Report highlights such progress made in women's health, education, child care and employment.

### Legislation

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Trinidad and Tobago has taken measures to incorporate the provisions of the Convention within domestic legislation as mentioned the in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh Combined Periodic Report at page 81. This legislation provides a fundamental basis for Gender and Human Rights in Trinidad and Tobago. Although some statutes in Trinidad and Tobago continue to discriminate against women, these are relatively few and are currently being reviewed. Nevertheless, Trinidad and Tobago has made tremendous strides in repealing a plethora of statutes which hitherto discriminated against women. This process began in the early seventies and is continuing.

Eliminating gender-based violence, and in particular, domestic violence continues to be a priority for Trinidad and Tobago. The right to health including sexual and reproductive health, employment, political participation, freedom of movement and personal autonomy, among others, cannot be achieved or these rights are severely diminished in the face of domestic violence. Addressing domestic violence at the national level is also imperative because of the important intersections between women's rights and children's rights.

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A review of the domestic violence legislation to ensure access to justice has been a continuing focus. Domestic violence legislation was first introduced in 1991. That Act was repealed and replaced by a more comprehensive piece of legislation in 1999. More recently the 1999 Act was the subject of an extensive consultative review in 2014-2015. Its recommendations, which encompass both reforms to the substantive law as well as recommendations for more effective implementation are receiving the attention of the Executive.

### Central Registry on Domestic Violence

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As noted in the written responses to the list of issues from the Committee, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago recognizes the need for a comprehensive system for the collection, analysis and dissemination of relevant and accurate data on domestic violence. In this regard, the Central Registry was launched on April 15 2016. One of the primary objectives of the Registry is the provision of a more efficient and effective method of monitoring domestic violence with a view to more targeted interventions and ultimately its reduction.

### Shelters

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The Government is in the process of preparing for the commissioning of three domestic violence shelters for victims of domestic violence and one Service and Training Centre to support the shelters. There are currently no state-owned shelters. This is expected to fill a large gap for providing suitable short-term accommodation with appropriate counselling, training and other services.

### Child Marriage

Madam Chairperson,

The issue of Child Marriage is one of concern for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The Government in June 2016 engaged in public consultations with a view to harmonising the age of marriage across the four statutes with the age of consent to sexual activity, as reflected in the Children Act, 2012, which is age 18 for sexual penetration. Trinidad and Tobago is a multi-cultural, multi- religious society and the different marriage acts is an example of the efforts of the State to manage diverse cultural and religious demands for recognition and inclusion in the nation state. Consultations with the various religious bodies, children and other bodies and their agreement to abolish under-age marriage is necessary before the Government can act legislatively. The consensus which has emerged thus far and which will guide the drafting of the legislation, is that the age of marriage should be increased to 18 years for boys and girls. It is expected that a Bill amending the four marriage statutes will be taken to Parliament shortly.

## The National Strategic Action Plan on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence in Trinidad and Tobago

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This Plan has been developed with the support of UN Women, Caribbean Office. It outlines strategic actions to be implemented within the short, medium and long term over a period of five years. It aims to foster zero tolerance to gender –based violence and provides a strategy to end this form of violence. It deals with prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment of gender-based violence and provision of redress. It also presents a mechanism to coordinate the implementation of national plan and will be submitted to the Cabinet in the near future for its consideration.

The plan to communication the National Strategic Plan on Gender Based and Sexual Violence is being developed with technical support from the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO).

Madam Chairperson,

In these opening remarks I hope to have touched on a number of the issues that I am sure will be raised and discussed throughout the day.

We attach great importance to the process of reporting to this distinguished Committee today. I am honoured to elaborate that during the reporting period there have been advances and we remain dedicated to addressing all forms of discrimination that affect women and girls.

On behalf of the Trinidad and Tobago Government I would like to express our deepest commitment to the full implementation of the Convention and to ensure continued progress on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Once again, we are delighted to be here with you today and welcome the opportunity to learn from you and discuss further with you, our progress to tackle discrimination against women with this constructive dialogue.