**83rd SESSION FOR THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (CEDAW)**

**SAINT KITTS AMD NEVIS - MINISTER’S STATEMENT**

Good day, I’d like to thank the Chair and executives of this committee for the opportunity to present during this 83rd session of CEDAW. My name is Isalean Phillip; I am a Senator in the National Assembly of St. Kitts and Nevis and a Minister with responsibilities for Youth Empowerment; Social Development, Gender Affairs, Ageing and Disabilities. I am honoured to be here to present the periodic report on how my country has been meeting its obligations to the CEDAW convention.

St. Kitts and Nevis ratified the CEDAW convention in 1965 and presented its first report in 2002. This session is the second time in our nation’s history that we are presenting a report and it covers the period 2002 to 2018. For those who may not know, St. Kitts and Nevis is a twin-island federation located in the Eastern Caribbean. We are the smallest sovereign state in the Western Hemisphere with a population of around 55,000. Since the submission of the official report, in August this year, St. Kitts and Nevis underwent a change in government administration which resulted in the election the 4th Prime Minister in the history of the Federation. The change in my country’s leadership was followed by the inauguration of a new Cabinet of Ministers that took office on August 13th, just one month before the country celebrated its 39th year of independence.

Now I’m highlighting these historic details because I believe they are important to consider as the committee assesses and evaluates the performance and potential of St. kitts and Nevis to fulfill its commitment to the objective and articles of the CEDAW Convention.

Subsequent to our report submission, CEDAW followed-up with a list of issues and questions that came out of our submission. Our responses to the committees initial questions are captured in our latest submission which I understand is posted online.

Now for my presentation and statement today, I will use the opportunity to speak to more to recent developments, by acknowledging consistent challenges faced, identifying opportunities for growth, and share visions of progress and our plans for the advancement of women’s equality, girl empowerment and social protection and legal protections afforded to women across St. kitts and Nevis.

**Regarding the constitutional and legislative framework**

Women in St. kitts and Nevis can rely on the constitution and enshrined laws to ensure our entitlement to equal recognition and treatment according to human rights law. The constitution prohibits discrimination of any kind on the basis of sex and currently there are no laws that legalize discriminatory behaviour towards women specifically. When it comes to our legislative agenda, judges and magistrates are setting legal precedents that dismantle laws which do not represent the forward thinking, liberal social and political thought of citizens and residents in St. Kitts and Nevis today. For example, just last month on August 29th, the High Court struck down the colonial buggery law which criminalized same sex intimacy as well as consensual heterosexual anal sex. The High Court determined that the buggery law was discriminatory since it was found to unfairly target members who identify with the LGBTQ community. This recent High Court ruling demonstrates the awareness and readiness of our state judiciary to address and repeal discriminatory laws that unfairly bias or repress individuals of a certain gender or sexual orientation.

I can also report that the Attorney General and myself as Minister of Gender Affairs have been in discussion about plans for the formation of an inter ministerial committee to review and consider adjusting the constitutional definition of discrimination so that it can align more with the definition proposed and advocated for by the Interamerican Convention on Human Rights. This inter-ministerial committee will form part of the strategic plan to influence cultural shifts in the elimination of discrimination against women.

To support legislative advancements cultural reform to break gendered stereotypes is also needed in St. Kitts and Nevis. Cultural practices and gendered stereotypes influence attitudes towards the roles and responsibilities of men and women in society. As such, programmes directed towards boys and men that aim to increase awareness in society and change discriminatory attitudes are developed and implemented by government and community groups. The Department of Gender Affairs creates opportunities to educate and raise public awareness through its Boys Mentorship Programme and International Men’s Day commemorations. Activities include panel discussions on men’s issues and family matters to sensitize and educate men on their rights and responsibilities as men and fathers and cook-off competitions that promote healthy expressions of masculinity in the domestic sphere to break gender role stereotypes.

**Gender-based Violence and Women’s Access to Justice**

Gender-based violence in St. Kitts and Nevis continues to be a concern due to its prevalence. According to statistics from the Royal St. Christopher and Nevis Police Force, reported cases of domestic violence have increased steadily, with a noted surge following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brought additional pressure to families already suffering from financial hardship including sudden loss of income and increased household tensions, exacerbated by lockdown measures designed to contain the spread of the virus. As a result, statistics for domestic violence reports in 2020 reveal a 400% increase in reports, where the total number of reported cases increased for 87 in 2019 to 359 in 2020. Correspondingly, in the first quarter of 2022, there were 132 reported cases of domestic violence, of which 83% represented female complainants. To respond to this issue, a multi-pronged approach for system and cultural reform is required.

While the federation has made strides in promoting women’s access to justice through the adoption of domestic violence legislation and the establishment of a Special Victims Unit that responds to cases of domestic and sexual crime, there still exists a lack of public trust in the police to respond to reports of domestic violence, sexual harassment and abuse at home or in the workplace. This likely results in the underreporting of related crimes by victims and community witnesses. To improve in this area the Department of Gender Affairs has taken the initiative to build stronger relationships with the SVU, and support the unit’s efforts to increase capacity by recruiting and training more officers in gender-sensitive response and investigation practices. To extend this work, Gender Affairs also plans to build its own staff capacity in order to provide the expertise and curriculum that facilitates consistent and sustainable gender-sensitive training to all police officers as part of mandatory training programs. Also in an effort to reduce instances if harassment towards female officers within the Military Defence Force, an institutional policy against sexual harassment was drafted and adopted for enforcement.

As part of the national gender policy action plan, gender mainstreaming will be coordinated across government ministries and programming. With the assistance of PAHO, a Gender Sensitization curriculum was revised for children under the age of 12, and a 3-day Gender Sensitization Training of Trainers was delivered to stakeholders in February 2022. Seventeen persons from various government ministries and NGOs, including school counsellors received this training. The gender sensitive training curriculum is intended to teach children about appropriate behaviours when it comes to issues of sexual conduct, the importance of consent and how to recognize and report experiences of molestation, harm or abuse.

When it comes to sex trafficking and exploitation of prostitution, while there are no formal reports about these activities, management and staff in the Department of Gender Affairs have received unofficial reports and hearsay of situations of human sex trafficking and forced prostitution, particularly among members of immigrant communities. Since there have not been any formal reports or clear evidence of such activities the Department/State are not at liberty to act at this time. However, this is a noted area of concern that should be monitored and examined as time unfolds.

The Office of Legal Aid is integral in ensuring access to justice for cases where legal representation for survivors may be financially out of reach. However, recognizing the limited knowledge that individuals have about domestic violence legislation and their rights and options for recourse to justice, Gender Affairs has made a plea for the office of Legal Aid to extend its work in the area of public education and awareness building so that women can have necessary information about the law, their rights and their entitlements in order to keep themselves safe and access the justice they need.

Non-governmental organizations must be mentioned and affirmed for their advocacy in improving the system and providing resources for housing women who attempt to flee abusive homes. In the past few weeks various NGOs took to the the streets calling for compassionate release of a domestic violence survivor who was taken into custody for murdering her alleged abuser during a brawl. This advocacy of NGOs has brought much more attention to the prevalence of gender-based violence and the public’s desire for state action and change. While the Department of Gender Affairs works to support victims and survivors by providing and directing them to resources that help them to leave abusive environments and to stay protected, there is still no government-run shelter to house victims fleeing situations of domestic violence in St Kitts or Nevis. However, the Ministry of Social Development and Gender Affairs has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with a privately-run shelter to provide temporary accommodation for women and their children under the age of 5 years. Faith-based organizations also continue to lend support in temporarily housing victims of domestic violence. The provision of temporary housing is part of the strategic agenda and Gender policy action plan for government to take a more comprehensive approach in its provision of social protections for women and children who experience violence and abuse. The department also offers short-term rental assistance to women who have left abusive partners and need a boost of economic stimulus to start over and resettle on their own.

**About Women’s Participation in Political and Public Life**

Since the 2022 General election, women’s participation in political and public life has seen a marked increase. This year was the first time in the federation’s history that seven female candidates campaigned for elections federally and locally. Not only does the new Cabinet have female representation of 38%, including myself, but the newly appointed deputy Governor General is a woman who was formerly an elected member of parliament and the first female speaker of the National Assembly. I believe these developments represent a shift in attitudes and culture around women’s leadership in politics. NGOs also have a part to play in encouraging, training and supporting women in this regard. Regional organizations like Caribbean Women in Leadership (CEWiL) and the Women In Politics Leadership Institute (WIPLI) have been instrumental in creating peer networks and facilitating workshops that build confidence and development leadership competencies for women to participate in political life and take public office.

Although there are still no laws that mandate quotas for woman’s representation in political parties or in government, it is positive to note that each political party in St Kitts and Nevis has either elected or appointed female representation in politics and public life. Since this year’s 2022 election there have been appointments of women as Chairperson on statutory Boards, as well as the appointment of women in prominent leadership roles including, Press Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Office and the Permanent Representative to the UN for St. Kitts and Nevis. Appointments of competent women in these roles align with the new Prime Minister’s commitment to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. In fact, at the UN General Assembly just two weeks ago, the Prime Minister the Hon. Dr Terrance Drew, during his state presentation, reaffirmed his pledge to advance gender equality and youth empowerment across St Kitts and Nevis and internationally in pursuit of achieving SDG 5 – to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The Prime Minister’s commitment thus far has been demonstrated in his openness, encouragement and political will to change and adapt systems for the betterment of women’s life and experiences in social, political and public life. As one of three women in his Cabinet the people of St. Kitts and Nevis and members of this committee, and the international community can rest assured that the Prime Minister will be held accountable to following through on his aspiration and commitment to achieving SDG 5.

**Regarding Education, Employment, Health, and Covid-19 Recovery**

In St. Kitts and Nevis, female representation in traditional education classes and courses has observably outnumbered males. Although when it comes to STEM and IT fields, effort to increase female participation is needed and ongoing. Reports received from the National St. Kitts and Nevis Robotics Association and Team indicate that since 2017 there has been a steady increase in female representation among members for the association. In 2022, the percentage ratio of females to males is 54:46 percent, respectively. I’d like to take this opportunity to note that our national robotics team is currently here in Geneva competing in the FIRST Global Robotics Challenge under the leadership of a female team captain. So I must express my congratulations and wish our team the best of luck, I have no doubts that the young people will represent St. Kitts and Nevis extraordinarily well. Correspondingly, in technical and vocational education female representation is similarly on an upward trend as more females enrol in tech voc courses at the local 6th form college and advanced vocational educational school on the island.

The Department of Technology also plays a part in promoting digital training for girls and young women on St Kitts and Nevis. International Girls in ICT Day is an initiative of the International Telecommunications Union aimed at recognizing the contributions of women in ICT and to encourage girls and young women to pursue careers in the digital and tech economy. Girls in ICT Day is observed on the fourth Thursday of April each year; 2021 marked the tenth anniversary of this initiative. One key activity hosted by the Department of Technology was the Robotics & Programming Session held on April 28th 2022. Sixteen girls from different schools learned about the fundamentals of programming using mini-robots as learning aids. The Department has also organized an internship for girls in 1st and 2nd form (I.e. 7th and 8th grade) to learn web development, programming and 3D printing. This was a 2-week paid internship held during the semester break in March and April for 6 to 12 girls to participate. A 2-week summer day camp was also held for children aged 10 to 15.

In employment, promotion and training programs for women’s entrepreneurship and economic empowerment are ongoing on both islands. In addition to program explanations detailed in the submitted report and subsequent responses, opportunities for entrepreneurship in agriculture for women are being promoted and provided by women-focused farming organizations, namely Capisterre Women which is a rural based NGO and Helen’s Daughters, a regional initiative for women farmers. It is also worthwhile to note that the Department of Labour has taken steps to designate a gender officer to increase gender-based assessments of the work carried out by the department, this step aligns with the government intentions to adopt gender mainstreaming across all ministries and programs.

Heath promotion among women is led by the Health Promotion Unit within the Ministry of Health. Regular health fairs that offer free health checks to individuals are held in public squares, community centres, churches, and in business places in an effort to promote healthy lifestyles and better health outcomes. A new oncology unit was opened at the main hospital in St. Kitts and local Breast Cancer Associations and NGOs work to promote awareness, coordinate support groups and offer free mammograms to women regularly throughout the year. In relation to reproductive health, barrier contraceptives are freely available from the office of the Ministry of Health and the Youth Department, which partners with the Ministry of Health to spread sexual health education among young girls and boys. The availability of free condom contraceptives complemented by increased access to sex education through school curriculums and the internet may be contributing to the declining trend in teen births that is recorded over the past five years. Work in this area can increase to become more established and form consistent programming.

**Regarding marriage and family relations**

The St. Kitts and Nevis National Gender Policy and Action Plan codifies the government’s commitment to mainstream gender. The policy highlights Culture, Family, Religion and Mass Media as a primary domain of socialization and speaks ‘To strengthening the family as a healthy and cohesive unit to promote the elimination of discrimination and promote gender equality for all’. The strategic actions under this tenant are to:

1. Promote consistent positive messaging, reinforce all family structures, and the principle of equality and shared responsibilities for household maintenance and care work.
2. Reinforce the role of fathers/men as caregivers and home-makers in providing guidance, care, and support for their children's overall wellbeing and development.
3. Increase opportunities for dialogue among men and their associations on issues of interest and importance: health etc, and as positive enablers of gender quality.
4. Advocate for/promote the equality of rights and access of men/boys and women/girls
5. Invest in community-level parent education and support programmes that redefine the prescribed gender roles of women and men.

Through the implementation of these actions, the government seeks to strengthen family bonds while breaking gender stereotypes and toxic notions of masculinity that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women.

In summary, St. Kitts and Nevis acknowledges the work that is still to be done to advance women’s safe and equitable participation is social, economic and political life. As a new Minister of Social Development and Gender Affairs et al, I am committed to supporting the advancement of this work among technocrats and staff across the government. I must thank UN agencies, including UN Women, for the country level support and technical assistance they provide in helping St. kitts and Nevis develop polices, projects and programs that enable us to meet our obligations under this CEDAW Convention. In my country’s thrust to continue this work, it would be remiss of me not to solicit continued support and assistance for UN agencies and multi agency development organizations that have the means and resources to assist with our plans and efforts. I look forward to continued dialogue and questions from the committee in relation to this statement and any of our previous submissions. Thank you.