



XIII Regional Conference on Women
in Latin America and the Caribbean

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**Round table: Equality and sustainable development: the future
agenda for women's rights**

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Thank you, Madame Chair,

And let me begin by expressing my appreciation for the invitation to participate in this important roundtable. I extend my heartiest congratulations to Nieves and her fantastic team in the CEPAL Division of Gender Affairs for organizing this most successful week of activity. I know very well the effort it takes to put a Conference like this together, and we in the ECLAC Port of Spain Office have been pleased to play our little part, particularly with the convening of the subregional preparatory meeting for the Caribbean in July this year.

I must also thank the Government and people of Uruguay for their warm hospitality which has made our meeting here this week such a pleasure. My office in Port of Spain serves twenty-six countries in the Caribbean, many of which are represented here this week at the highest levels. You will forgive me if I take the time to acknowledge the President of the Senate of Barbados; the Honourable Ministers of Haiti, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and the Turks and Caicos Islands, the Permanent Secretaries of Belize and Jamaica; and the Directors of Gender Affairs of Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Suriname.

The Caribbean presence is strong and we are working at making it even stronger, with the support of our colleague Caribbean subregional representatives at UNFPA and UN Women, because it is *so* important for the Caribbean to be here. This Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Women is the principal forum that affords the women of this region; decision-makers and civil society alike - the opportunity to regularly exchange views; share experiences and shape strategies to advance their just yet still elusive aspirations for gender equality, autonomy and empowerment.

My team and I have been privileged to participate in the Caribbean delegations' caucusing this week, and I can tell you it was a rich, vibrant, energetic, edifying experience. Views, common or varied were passionately exchanged, and, as expressed by Minister Mora of Costa Rica yesterday, it has been an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of sisterhood and kinship that will no doubt bolster individual and collective resolve for the work to be done when we leave this place.

Now, why, you may ask, my emphasis on the involvement of the Caribbean? Because **participation** is a central tenet of the sustainable development process, and this week has been dedicated to exploring the synergies of our regional gender agenda with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. I invite you to consider that the powerful, transformative premise underpinning Agenda 2030: “leave no one behind” applies as much to the sustainable development goals as to the sustainable development process. Every citizen; every country must be involved; must be touched, for Agenda 2030 to have meaning. I therefore use this opportunity to pledge the continued effort of my office to ensuring continued Caribbean engagement towards advancing the regional gender agenda and implementing the sustainable development goals.

In the same vein, I will offer perspectives on gender equality, sustainable development and the advancement of women’s rights in the context of the Caribbean reality. As has been stated many times this week, sustainable development cannot be achieved without gender equality, and has been so well articulated in the document prepared by Nieves and her team, Agenda 2030 is well aligned with the measures of the regional gender agenda, since it assumes a rights based, non-discriminatory approach, it promotes targets for the rights of women and girls and their empowerment, and it identifies measures to assure their implementation. And conversely, on adopting Agenda 2030, the General Assembly stressed that the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls would have significant implication for the achievement of progress across all goals and targets. Thirteen of the SDGs have targets explicitly focusing on women’s rights and gender equality, and all have implicit reference.

So synergising the regional gender agenda with Agenda 2030, is both strategically and politically prudent, given the overwhelming global, regional and national commitments that have been made to implementing the sustainable development agenda. Of course, we will need to see comprehensive legislative change to ensure women’s rights, and to redress entrenched gender discrimination, which undermines the achievement of gender equality. Greater attention will also have to be given at the national level to the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Now in the Caribbean, some progress has been made in the adoption of legal and policy frameworks that promote and protect the rights of women; in efforts to reduce maternal mortality and the spread of HIV. Positive trends also include promotion of greater awareness of the rights of women and girls, particularly with respect to gender based violence. In recent years there has been concerted action by many States to tackle violence against women, including domestic violence, sexual or emotional abuse, abandonment, and neglect, as well as financial or material exploitation. National action plans, legislation and policy frameworks are being implemented, as well as a variety of campaigns to promote greater awareness and sensitivity to the right of women to live with dignity, free from abuse.

While women have also made some important advances in education, labour force participation, political participation and equality before the law, gender inequalities persist; much more remains to be done for the Caribbean to achieve gender equality and autonomy for women and girls in the context of sustainable development. Across the subregion, the economic sectors that have traditionally provided employment and contributed to the livelihoods of poor women and their families have undergone significant decline. These economic factors, together with other factors of gender inequality, including the gender employment gap, the gender pay gap, and the burden of unpaid work, contribute to the marginality of Caribbean women. Furthermore, the significant rate of poverty among women, coupled with their dependent status within countries and in the region, has had long-term negative effects, not the least of which is the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality.

We need to address inequalities that exist in economic and political opportunities, including access to and control over productive assets, such as land and capital. Against this background, it is of concern that the Caribbean indices for women's political representation still lag behind wider regional trends. In 2014, the share of parliamentary seats occupied by women in the Caribbean was 15%, well below the regional average of 29%. In some countries representation was as low as 3, 4 and 7%. Only two countries, Grenada and Guyana, exceeded the regional average, and of course Cuba by far remains the region's leader with female representation at around 49%.

Unemployment has been a very serious concern in the Caribbean in the post crisis period, with many countries recording unemployment rates well over 20%. Women and young people in the Caribbean have been the ones most affected. Indeed, in most countries, the unemployment rate for women and youth remain well above the national average; unemployment of young women has reached as high as 40%. This is a particularly anomalous situation given the high levels of enrolment of Caribbean women in secondary and tertiary institutions.

Young people particularly young women are also increasingly less integrated in the economy. Moreover, there is under-employment, low quality jobs and a general lack of social protection interventions needed to mitigate the risks associated with such high levels of unemployment.

Those who succeed in finding work are often hired in entry level jobs or become active in the informal sector. As a result there has been significant increase in informal employment throughout the Caribbean. In many countries the informal sector accounts for a significant proportion of total employment, often over 50%. In this sector women predominate. And because there is strong correlation between informality and high poverty rates, women invariably find themselves economically vulnerable. This especially true of young women, particularly those whose education was interrupted by adolescent pregnancy. The social and economic implication of this is compounded by the large number of households in the Caribbean that are headed by women.

The economic disempowerment of women thus continues to be of widespread social and economic concern. There is need to address policies that impact women's access to credit, social protection and social safety nets; their right to own land and have equal access to productive resources; women's entrepreneurship, income levels, and inheritance rights. Underinvesting in women puts a brake on poverty reduction, undermines gender equality and increases the demand for social welfare intervention. This is particularly important for countries facing high debt and slowing growth with narrowing financial options to maintain social programmes and policies.

This is perhaps a good time to underscore the challenges that the Caribbean faces in implementing measures to advance gender equality and sustainable development. Unquestionably, the most critical development issue to be addressed by Caribbean countries is

the unsustainably high level of accumulated debt throughout the subregion. In 2013, TEN Caribbean countries had debt-to-GDP ratios that exceeded the accepted critical threshold of 60%, and several ranked among the most highly indebted countries in the world, with debt ratios of well over 100% of GDP. In 2014, the total debt burden of the Caribbean stood at \$49 billion; just over 70% of subregional GDP. This situation has limited governments' capacity to support public investment and sustain social protection programmes.

Specific mention must be made of the impact of climate change and natural disasters on the subregion. A disaster resulting in damage and losses in excess of 5 per cent of GDP can be expected to hit any Caribbean country every few years. Nearly all countries here experienced in some way the impact of Hurricane Matthew. During the period 2000-2014, the economic cost of natural disasters in Caribbean countries was in excess of US\$30.7 billion.

Caribbean peoples are also especially vulnerable to the increasing influence of weather events and climate related vector borne diseases which have significantly the health of Caribbean populations, particularly women, the most recent being the Zika virus.

These circumstances suggest that the path to inclusive sustainable development and gender equality in the Caribbean will not be an easy one. Yet much can be achieved through strategic intervention with the necessary political will that recognizes and actively promotes and defends the rights of women, including sexual and reproductive rights; the right to live free from violence and discrimination; civil and political rights; economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. The statements of Caribbean countries registered on the ECLAC website for this Conference uniformly signal key interventions that must be ascribed priority.

First, there is need to ensure that every Caribbean country has a National Gender Policy. As recently as 2014 the National Women's Machineries (NWMs) in the Caribbean indicated that the majority of countries in the subregion lacked fully implemented National Gender Policies. There is also need to strengthen the National Women's Machineries, providing them adequate resources, in terms of human, financial, political and technical capacity. Without strong, dedicated institutional infrastructure and effective policy frameworks gender mainstreaming into national development will continue to be slow. In the same context, there is need for established

coordinating institutions or mechanisms to guide more effective collaboration among government entities to systematically advance gender mainstreaming, and to ensure that a gendered perspective is grafted onto national development plans. (Jamaica)

Concerted effort to implement legislative, policy and social interventions to address violence against women in all its forms is a very clear priority across all countries. Interventions may include public education and training programmes as part of efforts of raise awareness sensitize populations on harmful gender stereotypes. Special attention should also be given to older women. As Caribbean populations age, there is increasing need to promote the wellbeing of older women; to ensure that they are able to lead autonomous lives, and that they are protected from discrimination and abuse.

There is most urgent need for data, disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity and disability, to afford comprehensive assessment of patterns of inequality and discrimination. The data deficit in the Caribbean is very serious; not just the absence of data but the limited capacity for robust reliable data collection. Lack of data precludes evidence-based decision-making. Indeed, monitoring and measurement of indicators for both the regional gender agenda and the SDGs will present the Caribbean with a formidable challenge. ECLAC, in collaboration with our UN partners and CARICOM are already working to address this.

Finally, the financing of gender equality and sustainable development interventions will continue to be a challenge for these heavily indebted middle income countries, which are said to be too rich to receive concessional financing and yet too heavily indebted to be extended further credit. A necessary response will have to include innovative, non-traditional partnerships, and South-South cooperation.

Today we will leave here with a strong regional call to action, embodied in The Montevideo Strategy. The implementation pillars of the Strategy are especially important; practical and comprehensive. The Montevideo Strategy will serve as our roadmap to guide our work as we pursue synergy between the regional gender agenda and the 2030 Agenda. Of the ten main

implementation axes, I highlight five crucial to taking the Caribbean agenda forward: (though all are indispensable).

We need to strengthen the institutional architecture; improve capacity building; explore and expand financing; ensure effective communication; and strengthen our data collection systems to facilitate monitoring, evaluation and accountability.

The need for transformative change is urgent and the Montevideo Strategy gives renewed impetus to our commitment to the women and girls of our region. Through concerted effort we can ensure that we leave no one behind. For this to be achieved the protection of human rights must be placed at the centre of this Strategy.

I close with an extract from the essay ‘She Scrape She Knee: The theme of my work’, by the Jamaican poet Opal Palmer Adisa who wrote:

‘a writer is a person with vision, a seer, a mouthpiece for the voiceless, the mute, the braggart, the fool’ ... “ what this means is that I am specifically concerned with women, men, and children and their ability to cohabit and to create a world that is clean, safe, and open to differences; I am interested in planting the idea that equality is an appreciation for all of our talents that combine to make a unit, that equality is an act of love and faith in each other’s ability to receive and give love, that to be equal means to agree, understand and fight for everyone else’s opportunity to be heard’.

Here in Montevideo we have written yet another chapter in the Regional Gender Agenda. Let us all together give it vision and voice and action in the days and years to come.

Muchas gracias.