

Unemployment Relief Programme International Women's Day Celebration 2017
Women in The Changing World of Work
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"The Value Of Women's Work"

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- **Introduction**

I thank you for again giving me an opportunity to speak to the exceptional women of the Unemployment Relief Women's Programme as you commemorate International Women's Day 2017 under the theme "Women in the Changing World of Work. Allow me a few minutes to point out the immeasurable value of the work that you and I do every day- women's work.

- **The Importance of Work**

- *What makes us human? What differentiates us from other members of the animal kingdom?* There are many distinctive factors but one important difference is the ability to perform conscious labour. Work therefore is an expression of our humanity. It should be a way through which we exercise our competencies and skills, our creativity and innovation. Work, according to Merriam-Webster is, "an activity in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something: a: sustained physical or mental effort to overcome obstacles and achieve an objective or result b: the labour, task, or duty that is one's accustomed means of livelihood c: a specific task, duty, function, or assignment often being a part or phase of some larger activity".

The second definition is usually what comes to mind when one thinks about work, but when we examine more closely, women's work is far more extensive than this. For women, the 'workplace' is not limited to her place of employment outside of the home. Women, it should be recognized that your productivity in the workplace and

domestic responsibility i.e. work in the home, are both aspects of the same process of work or human labour. The concept of productivity is seldom if ever applied to women's work in the home, when the home is the one workplace all women have in common (Reddock 1985, 17). It remains a struggle to have society view 'domestic responsibility' as work.

- **The Value of Women's Work in The Workplace and in The Home**

- *Women you should see your 'work' as valuable and important, as more than just a means to earn an income but also as a valuable contribution to society.* In our culture, since the time of slavery followed by indentureship and bonded labour, Caribbean women have worked outside the home. It's for work that the majority of our foremothers came to this region as enslaved or indentured labourers. And the colonizers met the indigenous women hard at work when they arrived.

It was as Caribbean economies shifted from agricultural production and increasingly became influenced by colonial domestic ideology that the notion of the 'housewife' became important. Women's labour force participation rates declined over the 20th Century; however, the female labour force participation numbers have steadily increased since the late 20th century. The trends of employment have been progressing yet, women's work is still largely undervalued.

- **Women's Right to Work Outside the Home the Same as Men**

The right of a woman to work outside the home is something that is still not accepted or recognised. How many times have we heard people say – Today both parents have to work because of the cost of living. – What does that say? Which of the both parents are they usually referring to? Women's right to work outside the home should be the same as for men in our society. Similarly, the right for men to work at home taking care of the home and nurturing children full-time should also be the same as women. This should be an option for both women and men.

Working outside the home is empowering to many women yet still, women's work and income is often seen as a privilege- 'her husband lets her work', or as additional income (Reddock, 1985: 19). Paid work is not only a means to an end: it is also an avenue for personal achievement and identity. With increased levels of educational attainment, many women see the acquisition of marketable skills as a means to self-fulfilment.

➤ *Work in the Workplace- Women's work outside of the home has been viewed as something that women do because there is no man present to support the woman.* In fact, the ongoing struggle for equal pay for work of equal value for women has been necessary because of the perpetuated assumption that all women are dependent on some man, somewhere and their incomes are supplementary (Reddock, 1985: 17). Society sees wage work as the primary activity for men and secondary for women, even when fathers are absent. But women, in reality, we know that this is far from the truth. Jobs performed mainly by women, therefore, are often lower paid.

- **Value of women's work at home**

With all of the advancements that have been made in society, unfortunately, the importance of women's responsibilities as homemaker and employee to the organization of family life has not been adequately recognized. Indeed, work in the home is often not considered work. Do women still say things like – I do not work; I am a housewife?

➤ *Building communities-* In the home, women, you are responsible for building communities, in other words, holding communities together – through maintaining family and social relationships, preparing the workers of future generations, passing on society's values and norms (positive and negative). Women working outside the home also provide much-needed workers to the society, which contributes to overall economic development.

Most women are under pressure to produce at home and to produce on the job. It is important to stress the economic value of housework to the entire society and economy. Housework and childrearing duties are only acknowledged when they not performed. If women, even for one day, decided to not do the housework, the rest of society would be at a lost. Work at home is equally important and should be acknowledged as such.

For women in paid work, the onus is on them to organize their family life so that it does not interfere with their "work" life (Reddock and Bobb-Smith 2008, 29). Society believes that employed women, especially women with male partners and/or children should recognize their work in the home as their primary responsibility. Any problems, failures, accidents within the domestic situation are in the end the women's fault as they dare to leave the home. But this is not the end- At work the employed woman faces another problem. She is an at risk employee- at risk of becoming pregnant; at risk of having ill children who have to be taken to the doctor; at risk of worrying on the job

what to cook tonight and at risk of having to bring her children to work when there is no care support at home

At this end also women experience guilt and fear as they have been made to believe that their domestic responsibility is seriously affecting production at the workplace. We should lobby for a change in perspective within our society, for the work at home to be seen as equally significant as that done in the workplace.

The reality is that “staying at home” is not an option for many women, most of all poor women who have a responsibility for themselves, their children and often other relatives including their parents. Yet Trinidad and Tobago, as noted by the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) - “is bereft of affordable childcare services, homework centres, day care centres, recreational after school facilities for children, and even basic, affordable, and safe transportation for school children. Though the average family is under stress from the lack of family support systems, it is the low-waged family that is most vulnerable, and it is these parents who make up the bulk of the service industry, with its long hours and shift schedules (CAFRA, 2008:2).

Public assistance legislation too is based on the assumption of the male breadwinner/provider such that only men incapacitated by illness and injury and women with no male partner in sight may be considered (Rowley,2003). This approach is particularly damaging as it reinforces in the minds of poor women that a man who for any reason - financial or due to illness or disability is unable to be a breadwinner is also unable to be a father. It also forces women to get rid of such men in order to be considered for public assistance. Masculinity therefore becomes inevitably tied to money, and access to money becomes the basis of men’s power and masculine identity.

- **Support for Women’s Work**

- *There should also be a call to put in place support systems available to ‘working’ women.*
- *Spousal/Partner/children’s Support for Working Women- Importance of Men’s/Father’s Contribution to the Household.* The work that you do as women is so important to society that men should be encouraged to actively participate in this type of work. Today many men are being praised for the ‘help’ they give in the home. This help, however is such that it must never interfere with work, career mobility or leisure.

The concept of men 'helping in the home' reinforces the view that housework and child-rearing is women's responsibility.

Changing men's and women's attitudes towards caring work; child support and the sexual division of labour in the family would require changes in all of our attitudes towards manhood, womanhood, fathering and mothering and as a result parenting. But governments also need to recognise that in bearing and caring for children parents are providing a great voluntary service to society which needs to be recognised, validated and supported.

Fatherhood requires more than money although that is an important starting point; this male breadwinner/provider notion may also cause women to limit children's access to their father, if he has no income, and therefore to the nurturing and caring which are also important components of good fathering.

- *Help from fathers in raising sons and daughters*- Today much of the blame for the increase in youth criminality and violence is placed on parents. There has even been a call for parents to be held legally responsible for the behaviour of their children. Women's involvement in work outside the home is also blamed for this situation. If women and men are to be allowed to develop to their fullest potential, then families need to be supported by society and state structures to fulfil their responsibilities;
- *The Destruction of the Sexual Division of Labour* is necessary for a change to take place in the home and in the workplace. It would mean that men too would be at risk for paternity leave, child illness, missing work because a child is ill or has to be taken to the clinic, worrying what to cook and noisy children on the premises. It would also mean that we have to rethink the issue of children and the division of labour in the home – how do we prepare our children to 1) value the work done in the home, to accept their responsibilities and 2) provide boys and girls with opportunities to grow and develop by doing housework.

It is important to stress the importance of housework for the future success of boys. Caribbean Scholar, Professor Mark Figueroa, speaking on 'male privileging' outlines that young males enjoy a greater freedom of public space and have the freedom to roam the streets, whereas girls tend to have greater confinement to the home, where today many of them still attend to the needs of males. Also, as boys grow older they are exempted from many household tasks—chores, as well as self-care such as washing, cooking, etc. Girls usually have responsibility for household tasks and boys for outdoor

tasks. All of these 'traditions' would need to be uprooted if we want our young men to be as involved in domestic responsibility as their future wives and partners. The evidence shows that this 'male privileging' negatively affects boys and young men who then do not require the skills of- organization, discipline, time management, deferred gratification, doing repetitive tasks (like cleaning) simply because they have to be done.

➤ *State support for Working Women – Family Responsibility as a Social Responsibility*

The reality of the situation is that women continue to be torn between work at home and at the workplace. So how do we address this? The first step in the development of an alternative is the recognition of the value of housework to individuals, the society and the economy and the continuous pressure on men, the state, employers and managers to accept and share this responsibility.

The state, employers and managers would have to take more responsibility for child-care by creating spaces where children would be supervised and mothers and fathers would feel comfortable to do their work knowing that their children are being well taken care of. Facilities such as nurseries and day care centres at the place of employment for both women and men and time-off and spaces for breast-feeding at the workplace are necessary to help support parents. This, however, will not only benefit parents and their children but also produce economic benefits to employer and society in the long run. For example, breastfeeding yields important immediate and long-term health benefits for infants and their mothers, including positive impacts on children's brain development and their health as adults. Research has shown that allowing mothers to breastfeed has been linked to higher productivity and lower absenteeism due to having to care for a sick child, as breast milk reduces a baby's risk of many illness and diseases such as colds and infections, middle ear infections, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), food allergies and asthma and diabetes. It also translates to less strain on the public health care system.

- *Examples of State Support in the Nordic Countries-* We need to support parents, families and households in a gender-sensitive way – whatever their shape or composition to meet the increasingly difficult challenges of parenting in a globalised world. The Nordic Countries, for example have incorporated gender equality and family-friendliness into their socio-economic paradigm and governance system and guarded this jealously during the period of economic

liberalism, with little loss to economic growth or competitiveness as observed by *The Economist* in 2006:

“The Nordic region [...] has the world's highest taxes and most generous welfare benefits. And yet Sweden, Finland and Denmark (Norway's oil sets it apart) have delivered strong growth and low unemployment, and rank among the world's most competitive economies. Nordic companies are strong in technology and research and development. Their health-care and educational systems are much admired. And, unlike other European countries, most Nordic states run healthy budget and current-account surpluses. Sweden, whose 9m people make it by some way the biggest Nordic country, is a particular favourite. A year ago the *Guardian*, a British newspaper, said it was the most successful society the world had ever known.” *The Economist* (2006).

In these countries, the burden of care is shared with the state, all of which have instituted non-judgmental national parenthood policies, which are monitored and updated as changes in the parenting situation emerge. Ellingsæter and Arnlaug note that:

“From the 1970s, the Nordic countries have set new standards for ‘good’ motherhood and fatherhood, facilitating caring fatherhood, working motherhood and a more equal sharing of breadwinning and caring...Welfare policies have advanced and facilitated the sharing of earning and caring, forwarding a model of the “citizen-parent” – mothers and fathers who combine employment and childcare (Ellingsæter and Arnlaug, 2006:47).

The creation of family-friendly work situations demands a change in the mind-set which separates income-earning work from family and household. Providing adequate support to both parents can be challenging both in the private and public sectors; however, it requires creativity and long-term commitment.

- *What is the importance of the work you do in the URP programme, how is it important? What is your contribution?* I must commend the URP Women’s Programme for empowering women not only through employment but through training so that women can advance in the world of work and set you up for more sustainable employment. As I understand, these training/ working hours are 9.00am to

2.00pm to allow women to fulfil their other commitments, which most likely entail domestic responsibilities and child care. Women of the URP Women's Programme, as you work in the various jobs, show yourselves to be productive members of society, contributing in your own way, to the development of our nation.

- **Conclusion**

- Women continue to have major responsibilities for housework and child care while simultaneously managing paid jobs. You should not see your work- in the home or in the workplace- as inferior, but be proud that as a woman, you are able to handle these tough tasks. Be proud also of your contribution to your family's household income and thankful that you are able to make this contribution.
- Be strong and brave to break with negative traditions to insist on new ways of thinking about work in your households, communities and workplace. All good work is valuable and should be shared by all.
- Enjoy your work, be creative, innovative and do the best that you can, see your work as an expression of yourself and of what you can do. At the same time, we must work towards the recognition of the value of the work that is done.

References

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