

Opening of CHOGM People's Forum – Gender Assembly

Address by

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Monday November 23, 2009

Cascadia Hotel, St. Anns, Port of Spain

Theme: 'Partnering for a More Equitable and Sustainable Future'

Salutations:

Ms. Simone de Comarmond, Chair, Commonwealth Foundation

Ms Beverly Beckles, Chair Steering Committee, Commonwealth Peoples' Forum

Ms. Marlene Mac Donald, Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs, Trinidad and Tobago (Ms Hermia Tyson-Cuffie)

Mrs. Doris Bingley – Commonwealth Women's Network (CWN)

Dr. Ranjana Kumari – Centre for Social Research

Dr. Esther Byer-Suckoo – Minister of Youth, Family and Sports, Barbados

Mr. Stephen Lewis – AIDS-Free World

Professor Jane L. Parpart – Institute of Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

Ms Christine Plaatt, President, Commonwealth Association of Planners

Ms Hazel Brown, Network of NGO's for the Advancement of Women and the Commonwealth Women's Network.

Other specially invited guests, the media, students, ladies and gentlemen (partners towards achieving gender equality) good morning and welcome.

On behalf of the women's movement and movement for social transformation and gender justice in Trinidad and Tobago, it is my honour to welcome you to The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Our islands have a lot to offer, so for you visiting for the very first time I do encourage you to find time take good advantage of the learning journeys to learn more about our society, its joys, its challenges and efforts to address them.

I am honoured to welcome you women, men and young people to the CHOGM Gender Assembly and to pay homage to those who over the years have struggled for the establishment of the Peoples Forum and of particular reference to us here this morning - the Gender Assembly.

This event is timely as women continue to confront diverse challenges in the face of a global women's movement that is less strong than it was some decades ago. Additionally we are all confronting the challenges of the market fundamentalist globalised economy and its social economic and political effects. It is timely also as men in the Caribbean and beyond begin to respond more directly to women's changing reality and face their own challenges in re-imagining what it means to be a man.

According to the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015,¹ "Gender equality is one of the fundamental principles of the Commonwealth" and I quote from this Plan:

"... gender equality is viewed not only as a goal in its own right but also as a key factor in enhancing democracy and peace, eradicating poverty and violence against women, ensuring education for all, improving maternal health, reducing child mortality and combating HIV/AIDS. Advancing gender equality across the Commonwealth will contribute to development, democracy and peace" (CPoA, 2005:.6).

This statement reiterates what we already instinctively know; that attention to gender equality is important not only for women and girls but for men, boys and entire societies, countries and regions. We already know that countries with improved gender equality also tend to have improved indicators in a range of other areas. By gender equality I understand not sameness but the possibility for every girl and boy to develop to their fullest human potential, regardless of accidents of birth be that from – biological sex, sex/gender identity, economic status, caste, race and ethnic background, religion or belief system, geographical location, ability or any other marker of difference or inequity. This is what we are committed to and this is what we need to explain to all who misunderstand or have an incorrect understanding of what we are about.

This Assembly represents a symbolic shift by this Assembly in the approach to achieving gender equality. It emphasizes the need for partnerships between men and women. In his introduction to the Commonwealth Plan of Action CPoA), The Commonwealth Secretary - General Don McKinnon, observes that: "The PoA advocates that the achievement of gender equality should be undertaken in partnership with men and boys" and reflects a commitment to ensure that, throughout the Commonwealth, women are recognized as equal partners with men in shaping our common future (CPoA,2005:.7)." We should note here that in the Caribbean we have been leading the way where this is concerned. As early as in 1991, the men's group Fathers Incorporated, led by UWI-Mona Academic, Barry Chevannes was started among predominantly working-class males in Kingston, Jamaica². Since that time men's organisations have emerged in many Caribbean countries although with limited memberships. For example, Men against Violence Against Women (MAVAW) of Trinidad and Tobago, a small group comprising men concerned with violent male behaviour, was initially formed in 1994 as a caucus within the

¹. Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 (2005), Commonwealth Secretariat, London. http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/33902/38116/poa_2005_2015/

²Fathers Inc. emerged out of a parenting symposium hosted by the Caribbean Child Development Centre(CDCC) on the UWI, Mona campus in Jamaica(Brown,1999) .

National Women's Caucus, a local women's organisation but went on its own soon after, becoming incorporated in 1995. In 1996, the UWI Centre (now Institute) for Gender and Development Studies at St. Augustine hosted the conference – *Caribbean Masculinity: Towards a Research Agenda*. In this effort we partnered with MAVAW and another university based Men's organisation led by Jerome Teelucksingh a graduate of one of our Women's Studies courses. Jerome would later initiate November 19, his father's birthday as - International Men's Day. This day I understand is gaining recognition internationally and was commemorated last week in Trinidad and Tobago. There are already a number of regional initiatives in this regard including most recently the UNIFEM-supported Caribbean Network on Masculinity, Gender Equality and Social Policy, of which I was a founding member. We in the Caribbean region see partnerships with men who share a commitment to gender equality and social justice as central to the work that we do and look forward to the discussions which will take place in this regard at this Assembly.

We also welcome the focus on Climate Change an issue of special significance for us in the Caribbean with so many small island states who are particularly vulnerable. The centrality of this to the Heads of Government meeting brings home to us the importance of the peoples sector. The issue of environmental degradation and the negative impacts on humanity is one in which women's organisations have been at the forefront for close to four decades. As early as 1977 Dr. Wangari Maathai (2004 Nobel laureate) founded the Green Belt Movement determined to replace the trees being lost in Kenya. As a university professor, she recognised the challenges facing Kenya with deforestation, soil erosion and limited water resources. She mobilized women to work together in planting trees, both helping the environment and providing women with a generated income and self-sufficiency.³ Today, some decades later, climate change is no longer an issue only for the People's Forum but is now the central issue of the Heads of Government Forum, unfortunately when the situation is upon us. It has historically been the role of progressive social movements including women's movements to raise issues that governments do not yet find it necessary to address and bring them to public attention. It is often after this, sometimes too long after this, has taken place that governments come on board. But it is also the role of the peoples sector to ensure that these issues remain current even after they are no longer the "issue of the day" for international funders and by extension for national governments.

The Current State of the World

This CHOGM Peoples Forum is taking place at a critical time in the history of the world. It is a time where despite the current economic challenges facing many, extreme wealth continues to be concentrated in too few hands. The Commonwealth remains home to 80 percent of the world's poorest people; more than two-thirds of them women and children". Writing in 2005, The Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender Equality had observed that:

While globalisation and trade liberalisation offer new opportunities for economic growth and poverty eradication, they

³ http://social-activism.suite101.com/article.cfm/overview_of_green_belt_movement#ixzz0XbpBNORk

also pose critical challenges related to loss of livelihoods and employment, particularly for women. Multilateral trade processes need to be engendered, with women participating fully in the negotiations towards fair and just trading agreements and systems (CPoA, 2005:12).

Here in the Caribbean we are not completely convinced about the first part of that statement, as through trade liberalisation the region has lost most of its agricultural and manufacturing industry. For the majority of the region including its women, the tourism industry often on a scale totally out of place for our small island territories, has become our only hope – that is in addition to remittances from abroad which have now been reduced due to the financial crisis in the North. Here as well the region has had to deal with the large scale migration of women – mothers often leaving their children behind in search of better fortunes. But back to tourism -

The Caribbean tourism industry according to Guyanese scholar Kamala Kempadoo has benefitted from a world where “There is a growing world population that desires and demands, and has the possibility to command, new leisure and pleasure activities that involve sex, and that makes its presence felt in the Caribbean.” (Kempadoo, 2004:3)⁴ sex therefore is an important component of our tourism product. In addition, this sector, often uncontrolled, has had many negative environmental effects, producing tons of solid waste from large hotels and cruise ships, polluting the seas, destroying protective reefs and wild sea life and destroying rivers, mountains and other natural resources. We have already begun to feel the effects – flooding, frequent hurricanes and sea level rise.

It is interesting that while Caribbean countries along with others in the Economic South are feeling the negative effects of this removal of protection for agricultural commodities, the United States and the European Union continue to protect their agricultural producers with large subsidies, often to the tune of \$1billion per day” (Watkins, 2003:6)⁵. Local food security therefore continues to be a major concern of this region and of course for women of this region. Four years after the PoA, the Commonwealth Heads today acknowledge that the global financial crisis has ‘triggered a wave of domestic recession in 2008 and 2009’ across the world. The 2009 Heads of Government Concept Paper⁶ echoed sentiments shared by most if not all of us here when they observed that our world is in crisis. A crisis no doubt the result of the policies that preceded it and of which many women’s movement activists alerted us.

Also as a result of trade liberalisation our airwaves – radio and television have been totally opened up to what is described as a globalised media. We therefore look forward to continued

⁴ Kamala Kempadoo(2004). *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race and Sexual Labour*, New York and London. Routledge.

⁵ Watkins, Kevin (2003). “Farm fallacies that hurt the poor” *Development Outreach*, July. World Bank Institute.

⁶ Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Concept Paper,
<http://www.chogm2009.org/pdf/OctoberConceptPaperFinal.pdf>

collaboration with the Commonwealth Foundation and Secretariat to strengthen indigenous cultural and artistic production and more importantly making such production as easily available on radio, television and the World Wide Web as the globalised non-Caribbean media is. We would also like to see more of the artistic work and media production of our commonwealth sisters and brothers especially those in the Global South instead of as one of my interviewees said to me in relation to a paper I was writing – “the monotone coming from the North”. Many of these media images have specific influences on young women and men – normalising violence, especially gun violence and pornography as everyday life.

The Commonwealth Secretariat has supported a number of initiatives around Gender and Trade, I hope that at this meeting we can evaluate the extent to which these efforts of the Commonwealth Gender Programme, global women’s networks such as DAWN, AWID and others have affected the workings of for example - the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund which has been given the funds of the G20 to assist countries in addressing the challenges of the Crisis not to mention our own governments who have to navigate this international trade environment including the new Economic Partnership Agreement with Europe, and still win elections ? My question is what has been the impact of our research and advocacy and therefore where do we go from here?

The promise of trade liberalisation and globalisation has not been realised as the challenges of poverty eradication and economic empowerment are still with us. The Concept paper for this CHOGM is aware of this when it states that:

While the more competitive and resilient economies may be able to manage the crisis without much long-term dislocation, other nations may experience deeper recessions and the reversal of many developmental gains. This is particularly true of small and vulnerable economies of the Commonwealth. ... The challenge is for the Commonwealth to mobilise the financial resources needed to address the crisis in the weakest and less-resourced countries, while acknowledging that these can also provide home-grown culturally relevant solutions to global problems (CHOGM 2009:2).

We endorse therefore the Plan’s concern with peace and conflict issues which are not separate from past and contemporary economic practices and interests. We note the continued challenges of conflict and the resultant relocation and resettlement in Africa; war and growing militarism in Asia and the Middle East; narco-trafficking and drug-related gun violence in Latin America and the Caribbean, a major challenge for us here in Trinidad and Tobago, all of which impact the lives of men and women but especially on young men who are often the ones who take up arms and often die by them. We need to identify the relationship of this violence to the dominant forms of economics, trade and global governance, dominant ideologies of masculinity and to the powerful media messages beamed especially at young people and the powerful pull of hyper-consumerism with which we are all implicated.

HIV/AIDS continues to be a challenge in many parts of the Commonwealth. Programmes in this region promote education about safe sex practices on the assumption that people will change their behaviours once they have knowledge. In the Caribbean as most of us are aware, prevalence is increasing more rapidly among young women. What is clear is that we need a deeper

understanding of the social, political, and cultural mechanisms that shape people's sex-gender identities, sexual behaviours and sexual and gender expression. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has paradoxically opened a space for more public discussion, research and analysis of issues of gender and sexuality and even for the tentative consideration of decriminalising formerly illegal sexual practices - many of them a legacy of our colonial past e.g. British buggery laws. I am therefore happy to see representatives of organisations of people of alternative sex/gender identities and expressions here today. This must continue but young women and men must be empowered to make sexual decisions that are in their interest and to withstand the powerful peer pressure that confronts them every day.

Finally sisters and brothers this Forum's focus on gender is the result of consciousness and action by the Women's Movement and the Movement for Gender Equality over the 20th Century in particular. Indeed the Caribbean women's movement has a history going back to the late 19th Century. We are reminded of Caribbean Women activists such as Audrey Jeffers of Trinidad and Tobago and Una Marson of Jamaica who were active in the British Commonwealth League in the 1930s and 1940s before the Commonwealth as we know it actually existed. I would like to take some time to reflect on the achievements of these movements both globally and in this region and where they have brought us at this time. We must also acknowledge the work of women of the Commonwealth including the Commonwealth Women's Network which over the years has worked to ensure that gender advocates – women and men have a place at CHOGM.

Today the global women's movement faces many challenges. For some it is irrelevant, while for others it has gone too far. This is not surprising as social movements on a whole have been affected by neo-conservatism and the retreat into fundamentalisms of various kinds. But today as we prepare for November 25th The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women we are faced with a situation where recent statistics in T&T suggest that the numbers of women dying from domestic violence is once again increasing; it is clear that we need a renewed movement for gender and social transformation, prepared with the skills, knowledge and insights needed for the 21st Century. Each generation has to recreate the movement in its own image and we look towards a new generation of women and men willing and able to take on this important struggle. In doing so they must be mindful to protect the gains already made but also to recognise the shortcomings and the areas where work is still to be done. Meetings such as this therefore allow us to meet and to learn from each other, to compare notes and to develop new strategies and networks for collective action.

So as we look towards a strengthened and renewed women's movement, so too we look forward to a strengthened men's movement open to partnership with women on an equal level recognizing that changes in femininities are inextricably linked to changes in masculinities. The global men's movement is about hearing these things from men, giving voice to men. It involves a level of consciousness on the part of both men and women that "... the present patriarchal order of things (also represented in our economic paradigm) does not serve the long term interests of men. An important component of this order is violence, physical and psychological, at individual and institutional levels, emanating largely from men, but also targeting them. It is no surprise that men are the majority of the victims of male violence and so they stand to gain much from transformations in ideologies and practices of masculinity.

In conclusion, I am grateful for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you as we begin the serious work of the Gender Assembly at CHOGM 2009. There is much work to do and we must commit ourselves to doing it with respect, love, courage and artistry. For those of us from the Global South and indigenous communities let us regain confidence in our own abilities to re-imagine, analyse, understand, appreciate and transform our societies to become the places where we want to live and to bring up our children. Thank you for your attention and I hope that CHOGM 2009 in Port of Spain would be historic in its impact on the lives of Commonwealth peoples who we have the privilege to represent at these deliberations.

Rhoda Reddock
Port of Spain
23, November 2009