STATEMENT ON TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO’S NAMING OF A MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND GENDER AFFAIRS

The Institute for Gender and Development Studies, the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, supports the call for the establishment of a Ministry of Gender Affairs in Trinidad and Tobago.

Naming of Government ministries is a definitive development function. The names of ministries identify Governments’ development priorities, they establish how a sitting Government understands and structures development as a process and they provide a lens into how Governments interpret the development needs of its population. They also structure the way a Government delivers services to the population. If the name of a Ministry is such a critical indicator of conceptualizations and modes of development then, what can a Gender Ministry represent?

For those of us engaged in working through multi-faceted, people-centred ordering of development, a Ministry of Gender signals an acknowledgement that people are the modes and the purpose of national development. Development cannot only be measured by infrastructural mega projects. Fundamentally, development is relational. People shape development and people’s lived realities are shaped by development. National development is never experienced equitably across any population. As income is generated and GDP rises, inequity and inequality is not necessarily eliminated. Eliminating inequity and inequality requires commitment at the highest levels of power and decision making, to ensure that development is equitable and people are positioned to participate in development without prejudice.
The movement for women’s equal participation in development and gender equity is one of the defining advancements of our time. From the World Conferences on Women held in Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing and beyond, the states of the Anglophone Caribbean have been global pioneers in this area. Our governments have been vociferous in campaigning for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls as an integral dimension of human rights; they have lobbied for the elimination all forms of violence against Women; promoted the economic autonomy of women and ensure their access to productive resources; and worked to ensure that the responsibility for the advancement of gender equity and equality is vested in the highest possible level of government, most notably at the level of a Cabinet Minister.

Ministries of Gender in Trinidad and Tobago are products of a long history of activism and governmental commitment to prioritizing the needs of women in development and integrating gender as a cross-cutting issue in how governments conduct business. This history straddles international, regional and national frameworks. In Trinidad & Tobago, work on establishing a national machinery dates back to the work of Parliamentary Secretary Ruby Felix in 1971. The work in collaboration with the then Minister of Labour, Social Security and Co-operatives, the Honourable Errol Mahabir, was initiated with a meeting with women’s organizations at the Ministry of Labour on July 17, 1971 and progressed through the setting up of a Women’s Bureau. This work came to fruition in 1974. In 1987, the portfolio ascended to a ministry status with the formation of the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and the Status of Women.

The issues of women and female as well as male gender constructions in development are constantly emerging. Representation of women and gender at the highest levels of decision making is not solely a product of party politics. It represents statements of choices made by people within a country to successive governments in power. The advocacy, technical input, bureaucratic investment, the voices of our diverse population and the funding provided by the tax payers of Trinidad & Tobago, across a number of administrations necessitates an open public engagement around a Ministry of Gender. Any sitting government, conscious of the need to build on consensus, and progress in the area of Women, Gender and Development has a responsibility to pursue a course of action that will facilitate Trinidad and Tobago’s establishment of a Ministry reflecting the integration of women and gender into our national development.

We at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS) consistent with our mission to advance social justice, promote gender-responsive human relations and development in the wider society remain committed to the ideals of a visible national machinery and will always be a partner in the process of achieving progress for this nation.