

LOS DESAFÍOS DEL SISTEMA DEMOCRÁTICO PARA LA IGUALDAD DE LAS MUJERES EN AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE



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Your Excellency Gillian Bristol; honorable Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Arts and Multiculturalism, and Minister of Planning, Economic and Social Restructuring and Gender Affairs, all three ministers of Trinidad and Tobago; Your Excellency, Albert Ramdin, Assistant Secretary General; Your Excellency María García, President of CIM; President of CEDAW, Gladys Acosta—Madam Excellency; all of you very distinguished ladies and gentlemen, members of the diplomatic corps. I see with us, as well, former Prime Minister of Saint Lucia, Dr. Kenny Anthony, and former Deputy Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, our colleagues from the Caribbean; distinguished ladies and gentlemen all: I say good morning to you.

This is my second visit here, Secretary General. We were here last year when we addressed very distinguished delegates, and I am very happy that you have given me this privilege and this honor to, once again, speak in this very distinguished Hall. So thank you very much.

I see the theme of today's forum: "Women's leadership for citizens' democracy." Particularly, I want to speak on the topic "The challenges of the democratic system to women's equality in Latin America and the Caribbean." I want to do that by acknowledging, first of all, the heads of government in the Americas, the women heads of government, and so we salute Cristina Kirchner in Argentina, Laura Chinchilla Miranda

in Costa Rica, and most recently, Dilma Vana Rousseff in Brazil. I think there are four of us in the region now.

I remember saying to someone in London, recently, where I attended the Commonwealth celebrations, when we said that in the Commonwealth, the 54 member nations of the Commonwealth, there were, I think, three women heads. I was saying that to someone and they said, “Look, only three!” Once upon a time, there was none so at least we are getting somewhere and here, too, in the Americas, we are getting somewhere. We have a long way to go, but we have come a long way.

When we look at democracy in our region, a very distinguishing feature is the Inter-American Democratic Charter. This document represents a laudable achievement, and we look forward to the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Charter later this year in September.

The 2003 Declaration on Security in the Americas reaffirms this vision and it underscores that “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and good governance are essential for stability, for peace, and political, economic, social development of the states of the Hemisphere.” These are the fruits of democracy—political, social, and economic development, peace and security.

Let us look a little at some of the achievements of women in the Americas:

Gender equality and empowerment is an essential component of human development and basic rights, and we will all agree that advancement of women’s rights is a critical precondition for effective and sustainable development. Why is that so? Obviously, because women, as the Chinese say, hold up half the sky. As you cannot have half of the sky being held up, but the other half falling down, it has to go together, men and women, with that equality, if we are to have sustainable development. Indeed, we can look at the women’s agenda from where it started, what we’ve gone through, and where we are now. Whereas, once upon a time, it used to be that the women’s agenda had to do with women’s lib or the concept of women’s liberation, I think it is recognized more and more now that

the women's agenda is vital and essential for sustainable development. It is not just about women becoming liberated, but in order to carry our democracy forward, to carry sustainable development, we must have all our human resources and all our talents pooled together to work forward. And so, let me touch on a few of the achievements of women in our hemisphere.

The Americas has the second highest percentage of women in governance and national parliaments in the world after the Nordic countries. The percentages of women legislators in the region have jumped 35 percent between 2000 and 2006. Twelve countries in the Americas, including Argentina, Costa Rica, and Brazil, have adopted gender quotas, and they have done it either through national legislation or constitutional provisions, or both, since 1991 and that has contributed to the rise in representation of women in decision-making in these countries.

Women now compete against each other in national and local elections more so than ever before. Women now lead political parties, they serve in executive cabinets, in Parliament, and in local legislative bodies as mayors and as counselors. They serve at the helm of the judiciary in some places; they serve in key sectors of administration within the public sector institutions, the corporate and private sectors, as bank governors and heads of financial institutions. Yes, they do hold these positions but, again, not as many as there should be. We must do more to include indigenous and poor women, who remain systematically excluded from our democracies. These women have supported women leaders in their countries. They have been part of negotiating peace, they have been part of brokering trade agreements, they have contributed to the private sector, they have anchored communities, and they have been leading at the grass roots in initiating social change.

Here in Latin America and the Caribbean, when it comes to politics, in the 60s, our women were reserved for feminine stereotyped tasks related to education, social welfare, health, and cultural affairs. By the 70s, Latin American women entering the political arena were portrayed

as super-madres. Women took with them their traditional roles as wives and mothers and viewed their political identity simply as an extension of their roles at home.

Today, however, more women in politics are more self-confident, they are more ambitious, they are more competitive and are motivated not only by an interest in promoting women's issues and concerns, but also by the broader socioeconomic well-being of the society. This is where, Excellency from Costa Rica, when you mentioned that your President, being asked about gender as an issue in the campaign, she did not give that answer, but is talking about looking at assisting in the society as a whole.

Today, as well, female legislators are more likely than men to speak on behalf of women's bills and defend them during floor debates. Female legislators negotiate more strongly for very stiff penalties for sex crimes involving minors, such as pornography and the child sex trade.

These are just some highlights, given the time constraints that we have.

What are some of the challenges being experienced by women in politics in the region? First of all, we need to diversify our priorities such that we cannot be labeled as solely representing women. I am sure that your President has that challenge, as I do, and other women leaders, that when you advocate women's rights and women's issues, it's like, okay, you are just about women's issues.

Should we want to have more women in politics, we need to be able to balance that agenda for women and children with the agenda for our men and our boys. What does it mean? Our agenda must include, our priorities must include not only women's issues, but issues that touch and concern everyone in our society. We also need to be able to represent nongender concerns, and we need to gain access to traditionally male-dominated political arenas. This is where women have had the most difficulty in recent years. What does that mean? It means that, yes, we have women in our cabinets, they are ministers of government, but

they are relegated to the soft ministries. I want to see the soft ministries in education and welfare and in health. So that is an area in which we have to open some doorways.

Further, female legislators are less likely to prioritize issues such as economics, finance, employment, agriculture. They do not usually sponsor legislation in these areas. A similar scene is occurring for committee assignments. In Latin America, women are much more likely to sit on women's issue and social committees, and they are less likely to be represented on the more powerful, traditionally male-dominated committees. Women's issue committees and social committees allow female legislators to work on policies that affect women, but they also need to build a presence on committees that are not traditionally women's committees.

It is believed that the increasing numbers of women may be viewed by some as a threat to men's traditional political path, such that male leaders try to protect their interests by keeping women off of the power committees.

Secretary General, I see you are a very brave man. You are blessed, as Excellency said, but I think you are also the only rose amongst all the thorns at this head table. Thank you very much for being a brave man for promoting this particular forum here, today. Give him a round of applause please.

So, obviously, the Secretary General is not threatened, but there is that perception, as women progress further, as women come into the legislatures, as women go into the high profile positions, our male counterparts may feel threatened. But, more and more, that perception is also changing. This is why, for the first time in my country, you have a woman leading a political party—never happened before. This is why in your country, the same is happening, and in others, so we are climbing out and climbing on to the steps and joining our brothers on the top of the steps to do the best that we can for our nations, for our people, for our counties, and for our region.

But women are yet to make sufficient headway into legislative leadership in the region. The absence of women in chamber leadership means that many decisions about committee appointments, legislative leadership posts, and legislative agendas are still being made by male leaders. Nothing is wrong with that, but if we want true sustainable development then those male leaders must be joined by female leaders as well.

Cultural barriers sometimes make it difficult for women to be accepted because some men have not yet understood the relevance of gender policy. Some of us have difficulty in playing the triple role; that is, to combine family, management work, and social relations.

For the application of modern technology and software, the social media—Twitter, Facebook and so on—training is required by women to make use of these resources. If I may, let me share with you a project which, I think, is very important for us women and girls.

Two weeks ago, I met with Cherie Blair in London and I was invited to join a program that was launched by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Cherie Blair last year and that program is the mWomen Program. This is a global public-private partnership between the worldwide mobile industry and the International Development Committee, launched by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, last year. The program addresses the barriers to women's mobile phone ownership and to deliver life-changing services. The program aims to close the current mobile phone gender gap by 50 percent over three years, increasing ownership of mobile phones for 150 million women and leveraging the mobile channel to provide value added services in women's health and education, finance, and entrepreneurship.

The current mWomen champions include Mrs. Cherie Blair; Helen Clark, of the United Nations Development Programme; Judith Rodin, President of the Rockefeller Foundation; President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia; Ambassador Melane Verweir, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Two weeks ago I was asked to join as a global mWomen Program champion.

All we want to do with this and I'll ask your help, is something very important, because if you have that mobile in your hand—and, of course, with women being mostly the poor category and so on—the access is greater. It's a computer in your hand. It brings the world into the hands of women, thereby assisting in education, in training, and in empowerment.

What we want to do is to raise awareness of the gender gap that exists in mobile phone ownership in most countries, to discuss the most effective strategies for closing this technology gap, and highlighting the most promising ways mobile phone technology can increase female access to services and business opportunities, promote the use of mobile technology as an affordable and practical tool to advance education, health, access to financial services and entrepreneurship, and to foster connections with potential partners and a broader network of supporters for mWomen.

I respectfully ask that, within your forum and your panel discussions, some consideration be given to ways in which we can take this program far. It is a very, very powerful tool for women to hold in their hands.

So, I was talking about challenges by women in politics, we're talking of mobile women and championing the mWomen Program.

I want to say, further, that the impact of issues of political participation, peace and conflict cannot be divorced from the broader goal of achieving democracy and peace for all. I recently took the opportunity to advocate that Commonwealth nations prioritize equal access to education for girls and support women in the entrepreneurial domain. Given the economic driving forces affecting small- and medium-sized enterprises, equipping women with the necessary skills should be a priority and should invest in women overall. This is a crucial step, in my respectful view, in closing the equality gap.

In Trinidad and Tobago, my Government proposes to adopt a gender budgeting strategy. We want to ensure that budgets and economic

policies equitably address the needs of men and women, girls and boys of different backgrounds, and attempt to close any social and economic gaps which exists between them.

The stark reality, friends all, is that the impact of inequality in our hemisphere has been stridently reflected by United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). And so, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, as the current Chair in Office of the 54-nation Commonwealth, I should like us to take note of the giant strides the Commonwealth is making towards mainstreaming gender. This is all the more significant as this year's Commonwealth theme is "Women as Agents of Change."

If I may turn briefly to Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality, the Plan of Action covers four critical areas: gender, democracy, peace, and conflict; gender, human rights and the law; thirdly, gender, poverty eradication, and economic empowerment; and fourth, gender, HIV, and AIDS.

Priority area one, gender, democracy, peace, and conflict, seeks to strengthen democracy among member countries, particularly through the promotion of the minimum 30 percent target for women's participation and representation in government and decision-making processes. I will return to that as I close in a short while.

In the "Road Map for Development—Time for Equality: Closing Gaps, Opening Trails," which was launched at the Commission's 33rd session in Brasilia last year, the Economic Commission positions equality at the center of our region's development, with deeper democracies being contingent on greater equality and access to basic services, education, health, employment, environmental quality, and social security.

In respect of women's equality in our region, an important element requiring attention is the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, in keeping with Millennium Development Goal 3, which

calls for progress in the workplace, education, and in national legislatures. In our region, women remain significantly underrepresented among legislators, senior officials, and managers - and Secretary General did mention for us in the Caribbean that we have the lowest number of women in our legislatures. The CIM's Strategic Plan for the period 2011-2016 notes that women are under represented in political institutions, given the percentages they represent are citizens and voters. Accordingly, I strongly endorse the CIM position that such a reality, "translates into one of the most significant challenges to democracy-building and good governance."

Our countries must work assiduously to ensure the elements associated with MDG 3, with respect to women's participation in national legislatures, is achieved. Indeed, the concept of a citizen's democracy stipulates participation of all sectors of society.

And lest we forget, the documents governing the conduct of the OAS provide for such participation. Article 34 of the OAS Charter records the agreement of member states that equality of opportunity, the elimination of extreme poverty, and the full participation of their peoples in decisions related to their own development are, among others, basic objectives of integral development. The Inter-American Democratic Charter also reinforces this in Article 6 which states: "It is the right and responsibility of all citizens to participate in decisions relating to their own development. This is also a necessary condition for the full and effective exercise of democracy. Promoting and fostering diverse forms of participation strengthens democracy."

And so, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making and existing gender inequalities must be addressed if we truly yearn for that level of democracy that will support and sustain the true economic and social well-being of our peoples. UN Resolution 1325 (2000), in recognition of the important role of women and the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, that landmark UN Security Resolution 1325 of October 2000 called on all member states to ensure increased representation of women at

all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.

Madam Chair of the Permanent Council, ladies and gentlemen: I want to assure you that Trinidad and Tobago will do its part. Already, females constitute 20 percent of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, 26 percent of the Upper House, 27 percent of the Lower House, and women constitute 26 percent of decision-makers appointed to state boards. Women feature predominately among microentrepreneurs and, in recent times, account for 50 to 60 percent of microenterprise loans.

My government remains committed to obligations undertaken under regional and international agreements, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women. In respect of the latter, we will continue to contribute to the mechanism to follow-up on implementation. Trinidad and Tobago also plans to be an active member of the Executive Committee of the CIM, through our Principal Delegate, the Honorable Mary King, Minister of Planning, Economic and Social Restructuring, and Gender Affairs. This was very interesting. When I formed my cabinet last year, I decided that if we wanted to go through with gender budgeting, it was important to have the Gender Affairs Ministry, in my respectful view, placed within the Ministry of Planning and Restructuring, which is where the gender budgeting process can take place.

At the international level, seeking to build on the foundation laid by Security Council Resolution 1325, which I referred to earlier, Trinidad and Tobago introduced a draft resolution on Women, Disarmament, Arms Control and Nonproliferation in the First Committee of the 65th Session of the UNGA last October. We look forward to the support from your countries, as well, for this resolution because the proliferation of arms, whilst it affects the entire society, impacts most heavily upon women and children.

We respectfully ask for your support for this resolution before the UN later this year. We believe that broadening the understanding of women's roles and the attainment of sustainable peace and recognizing the value of women's contribution in this important field is vital.

As I close, allow me to share with you just some suggestions because we need to have more women, we need to empower women, we need to train and educate women, and so on. I respectfully have some suggestions which may be considered during the course of your forum in the next couple of days.

I would like to first indicate that Trinidad and Tobago is keenly supporting the convening of a high-level colloquium for world female leaders in September this year in New York on the margins of the UNGA. I respectfully ask and urge full support and high-level participation of the countries represented here today, OAS member states as well as permanent observer states. It is my sincere hope that Her Excellency Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica and Her Excellency Dilma Rousseff of Brazil will bring their invaluable perspectives to this colloquium.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, you can probably sense my passion on this issue, which stems from my deep conviction that women's leadership is pivotal for progress in the interdependent areas of democracy and development. It was with immense pleasure, therefore, that we in Trinidad and Tobago, as elsewhere, welcome the launching of UN Women, which combines the four UN bodies and represents what has been described as one of the most ambitious efforts ever to achieve gender equality.

Under the sterling leadership of Her Excellency Michelle Bachelet, the accomplished and distinguished former President of Chile, we do believe that UN Women is in excellent hands, and we ask her representative to take our greetings to Her Excellency Bachelet.

Some recommendations and why: in order to achieve sustainable development, in order to have a true democracy, the participation

of women is indispensable for the socioeconomic development of our nations. The numbers of women in decision-making bodies in the Americas has increased; yet, numerous obstacles still remain to achieving parity with men.

If I may be allowed, here's **Recommendation 1:** we need to prioritize women's education and economic independence. Increasing the proportions of women in higher education and the work force will broaden the pool of female candidates with qualifications and experiences needed to run for and win political office. Further, diversifying the fields in which women get degrees and the sectors of the work force they enter—engineering, political science, economics, et cetera—this, too, will help to increase women's access to the candidate pool. In this way, women can hold strategic and technical portfolios in finance, defense, international affairs, and so on.

Recommendation 2: Adopt effective agenda quotas. I mentioned that twelve of the nations in the Hemisphere, in the region, do have gender quotas, which has caused an increase in the number of women legislators. Gender quotas are a key tool to increase the number of women in office if they are implemented fully. They need to specify a moderately high proportion of women, 30 to 40 percent. I think in Trinidad and Tobago, we have 26 to 27 percent, so we still have some ways to go to reach. And this is not the maximum, this is the minimum, and I'll talk about it a minute. There should be 30 to 40 percent women represented on party ballots. Mandate that women must be placed in electoral positions and ballots and include strong enforcement mechanisms as well.

There is a perception by some that gender quotas are highly divisive among women themselves because some feel that the quotas can hurt women's election by serving as a ceiling, rather than a floor, or that women elected under quotas are simply tokens, rather than highly qualified and capable politicians. But in those countries where you do have those quotas, there has been a marked improvement, and this is one step to go. As I said, 30 percent is not to be the ceiling, but it should be the start of the stepping.

Recommendation 3: Decrease advantages for incumbents. While election is good for creating more professionalized legislators, it can hurt women's ability to enter the political arena. Pursuing electoral and constitutional reform will enable the mainstreaming of women into politics. Measures that encourage the equal footing of women and men at election time should be encouraged, as well as provision of special training for women on election campaigns and financial accessibility for advertising to newcomer candidates.

Recommendation 4: Training and educational programs for women. If not enough women consider running for political office, then political parties, NGOs, and government agencies could offer training and educational programs to women to encourage them to get involved in politics. I know that some political parties in Latin America have already created women's divisions to carry out these kinds of activities in an effort to attract female candidates to the party. Networking and exchange of experiences at the regional and international levels is very critical for women's empowerment.

Recommendation 5: build on past successes. Women's groups, political parties, and governments need to continue to promote women's equality and develop more effective ways to increase women's access to the political arena. The path to political equality is long, and while women in the Americas have made significant progress, this must be tempered with recognition of the work still ahead.

Recommendation 6: Sensitization of gender policies. In countries where the gender policy is not yet understood, women need to be proactive, in order to defend their interests by creating awareness through public education programs and media productions. Collaboration with civil society, the private sector, corporate sector, and UN agencies could garner support for existing initiatives and urge women to participate in decision-making positions at all levels.

Recommendation 7: Finally, maintain communication with electors. It is necessary to set up permanent communication mechanisms between

elected officials and the electors so that planning should be based on the real needs of men and women. This can be achieved by promoting training on new technologies to connect with their constituents and meet obligations to the electorate.

In concluding, I say respectfully that these recommendations are not new. What I've done is put them together for us to consider because we can speak here for the next two or three days, we can speak until we are blue in the face in terms of our percentages, in terms of the disadvantages we face, in terms of the obstacles and challenges on our pathway, but if we do not zero in on specific action-oriented suggestions, then we would have lost valuable time over the few days of this forum.

In concluding, I want to take the opportunity to congratulate the OAS, CIM, the Ibero-American General Secretariat, and UN Women for organizing this forum. I thank you all, my best wishes to you all for a continued successful meeting. May God continue to bless each and every one of you. May God continue to bless our nations.

Thank you very much.