WOMEN’S TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP: WORKING TOWARDS GENUINE DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

A joint winner of the Political Consultants Democracy Award 2013 alongside Prime Minister of Jamaica, Hon. Portia Simpson-Miller, MP, the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago is continuing her efforts, in achieving the objective of getting more women into leadership roles to help drive democratic and social progress.

Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, SC, MP

Mrs Persad-Bissessar is the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. She leads the United National Congress and the People’s Partnership coalition. A lawyer, she was a Senator in 1994 before entering the House of Representatives in 1995. She has held several senior political posts, usually as the first Trinidadian woman to do so.

I welcome this opportunity to connect with my distinguished Commonwealth parliamentary colleagues, through this forum, especially on the theme “Inspiring Change”, with the International Women’s Day 2014 celebrations.

Inspiring change among women, Caribbean women in particular, has been one of my guiding priorities since assuming the leadership of my country, Trinidad and Tobago, in 2010.

On the basis of statistics alone, in a world population of over 7 billion people, 49 per cent of which is female, it is easy to appreciate the wisdom of the late former leader of the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong, who once said “women hold up half the sky”.

With such historical wisdom, and the reality of today, the need to inspire change for women in leadership as drivers of democratic and social progress is not only appropriate, but also imperative.

Factors mitigating against women as leaders

As women leaders, as Parliamentarians and as social activists, we have a clear understanding of the factors which have in the past sustained a disparate balance of political power:

• Laws and institutions do not adequately ensure women’s equity;
• Financial resources are not adequate to meet the requirements to advance change;
• The politics of politics which make it difficult for young women to enter and rise in political structures;
• The need for sustained change and commitment to new politics which truly reflects the ideals of liberty and social justice;
• The multiple roles of women in the workplace, the family and the community and finding the right balance;
• The need for comprehensive rethinking of gender roles in society;
• The need to insist on inclusion and equality, because public business is women’s business; and
• The need for cultural empowerment for women, to change the prevailing thinking from “how do we bring change” to “I can be a change leader”.

Caribbean Regional Women’s Colloquium

These were among the top issues addressed at a forum I hosted in June 2011 in Port of Spain, Trinidad - the Caribbean Regional Women’s Colloquium on Women Leaders as Agents of Change. This forum was hosted in collaboration with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Caribbean Institute of Women in Leadership (CIWiL), the Organization for Women in Development (OWID) and the University of the West Indies (UWI).
Women political leaders, Parliamentarians and civil society representatives came together to share their experiences and challenges as women leaders; raise awareness of the gender equality commitments made in key international agreements and agree on priority goals and strategies for advancing women’s empowerment and gender equality in the political, public and private sectors in the Caribbean.

A number of key strategic goals emerged from this forum targeted to increase the numbers of women in political leadership acting as change agents, including:

- Increased women’s representation in Cabinet, Parliament and local Government to a minimum of 30 per cent, and where this has already been achieved, strive for parity or 50 per cent;
- A review of the criteria and processes for appointments to decision-making bodies in the public and private sectors to facilitate increased women’s representation;
- Gender-sensitive leadership training programmes for men and women, (including young people) who are preparing for or are in decision-making positions in the public and private sectors;

Above: The Prime Minister speaking at the opening of the 25th Intersessional Meeting of the Heads of Caricom.
• The promotion of shared family responsibilities between women and men to increase women’s participation in public life;
• Ensuring gender-responsive national budgets and development plans; and
• Undertaking economic diversification towards service sectors such as creative/technological industries, ensuring women’s equal participation.

In Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean, we still have a long way to go to achieve these goals, and this Regional Colloquium provides us with a strong consensus on the way forward and presented a blueprint for action for women in the Region.

**A New Ministry**
Prior to the hosting of the Colloquium, during a major re-alignment of my Cabinet, I introduced a new Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development partly charged with reviewing our country’s draft Gender Policy and the development of guidelines for Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB).

The Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development facilitates ongoing interactive training sessions on gender responsive budgeting.

Over 30 senior officials in Central and Local Government, and 75 policymakers, have already benefited from these events, emerging with a commitment to implement strategies and enhance current institutions.

**International intervention**
Achieving the objective of more women in leadership as drivers of democratic and social progress has also involved advocacy beyond borders.

Following the Regional Colloquium, I also co-hosted a high-level side event in the margins of the United Nations General Assembly 66th Session in September 2011, to formulate and structure implementation strategies to effectively increase women’s participation in representative politics.

The side event was co-hosted by other women leaders including the President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff; the former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham-Clinton; Administrator of the UNDP Helen Clark, and the UN Deputy Secretary General Asha-Rose Migiro.

A key outcome of the side event was the signing by all co-sponsors of a joint declaration with concrete recommendations on...
ways to advance women’s political participation. From this we made a
tough call for increasing women’s political participation and decision-
making across the world.

As women leaders we:

• Re-affirmed the human rights of women to take part in the govern-
ments of their countries, directly or through freely chosen representa-
tives, on an equal basis with men, and that all States should take
positive steps to respect and promote women’s equal right to participate in
all areas of political life;

• Stressed the critical importance of women’s political participation in all
contexts, including in times of peace, conflict and in all stages of political
transition;

• Re-affirmed our commitment to the equal rights and inherent human
dignity of women enshrined in the United Nations Charter, Universal
Declaration of Human Rights, and other international human rights
instruments;

• Called upon all States to ratify and fulfill their obligations under the
UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against
Women (CEDAW) and to fully imple-
ment Security Council resolution
1325 (2000) on women and peace and
security and other relevant UN
resolutions; and

• Called upon all States, including
those emerging from conflict or
undergoing political transitions, to
eliminate all discriminatory barriers
faced by women, particularly margin-
alized women, and we encouraged
all States to take proactive measures to
address the factors preventing
women from participating in politics,
such as violence, poverty, lack of ac-
cess to quality education and health
care, the double burden of paid and
unpaid work, and to actively promote
women’s political participation, includ-
ing through affirmative measures.

Even as we stood united in
defense and support of women
worldwide, we acknowledged that
to a large extent discrimination
continues and women in many parts
of the world remain significantly
marginalized from decision-making,
often as a result of discriminatory
laws, practices, and attitudes, and due
to poverty disproportionately affecting
women.

Further perspectives from
Trinidad and Tobago

In this regard I continue to make every
effort to ensure that in Trinidad and
Tobago our girls and boys are given
equal opportunities from the outset
placing particular focus on education.

Intense efforts are underway to
expand and deliver universal access
to pre-school education, even as
Trinidad & Tobago now has universal
primary education as well as universal
secondary education. Successful
efforts are also ongoing to increase
the amount of persons accessing
tertiary education.

I must highlight that while our girls
and young women are surpassing
their male counterparts academically
at all levels, this is still not yet
translating into a stronger presence
into the political arena.

I believe that in Trinidad and
Tobago that “crisis of confidence,”
noted before, may be at play.
Questioning of self, perhaps a
reluctance to be in the glare of public
scrutiny and that all too present
“burden of care” remain major
disincentives to taking that step into
politics.

This reluctance was particularly
evident when I assumed office.
Several women were approached
but were reluctant to join State and
Statutory Boards, despite their clear
capabilities and skills in specific areas.

I only know too well that for a
woman a career in politics is not an
easy choice to make.

I entered the political arena in
1987, some 27 years ago, as an
Alderman in the local government
system and it has been a long, often
grueling journey but one which has
now afforded me the privilege to serve
my country as Prime Minister.

With that background
and experience, in our recent
consultations on local government
reform, we asked our citizens to
consider, among other reforms, the
election (or appointment) of three
special representatives in each
local region – namely male and
female youth representatives and
a representative for women and
children.

Such an initiative is directly linked
to our aim of increasing women’s
political participation.

We want to start to get our
women-especially young women-
involved from the community level,
so they may gain a better understanding
of democratic processes, while
honoring their skills and leadership
qualities, in preparation for higher
leadership roles.

Save for one of 14 Municipalities,
the 2013 Local Government
Elections saw women achieve just
about the 30 per cent representation
suggested by the Regional
Colloquium.

My government will therefore
continue to support the mentorship
and leadership programmes offered
by local and regional NGOs and
institutions, working to advance the
conversation on women in leadership
and empower potential women
leaders with the tools for success.

I strongly affirm that the voices of
our women must be heard to ensure
that our policies and programmes are
meeting the needs of all our citizens.

Even as I urge our women
and girls to step out of their comfort zones
to embrace greater leadership roles,
I also understand that human need
for appreciation of effort and indeed
the universal principle of expressing
gratitude.

To this end, in 2011, I introduced
another category to our country’s
National Awards. The Medal for
the Development of Women became
another accolade in our Nation’s list
of honours to deserving citizens.

As women leaders we:

• Identified women’s particular
qualities, in preparation for higher
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