**REMARKS**

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**On The Occasion Of the**

**Caribbean Regional Consultation of Parliamentarians**

**on gender-based violence prevention**

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Acknowledgements:

Chairperson, Esteemed Parliamentarians of the Caribbean, Representatives of CARICOM, Colleagues of the International community and the University of the West Indies; my UN colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me also add my welcome to you on behalf of the United Nations and its organisations that are serving the wider Caribbean.

This is a very important consultation that constitutes the basis of equitable development.

Nearly 1 billion people globally live in extreme poverty of which two-thirds are women.Three-quarters of the poor population lives in rural areas that depend overwhelmingly on natural resources for their income. And, it is the women who devote a large portion of their time on accessing energy and water for their families. Women and young girls spend upwards of 6 hours a day gathering fuelwood and water, cooking, and agro-processing.

You may have also seen the results of an earlier UNFPA study - A Passage to Hope: Women & International Migration- that for the first time highlighted the fact that women constitute half of the estimated 190 million international migrants worldwide and are responsible for the largest amount of remittances. While those figures pertain to 2005, I am fairly confident that the current figures for 2010-2011 would make the case even more substantively in favour of empowering women as the core for ensuring achievement of sustainable human development. At the same time UNICEF’s work constantly and rightly reminds us that the health of women and children go together and elimination of all kinds of discrimination and violence against women is the basis to have healthy families - and therefore healthy communities.

Yet, indirect discrimination is pervasive impacting all areas that are crucial for healthy lives and livelihoods. Such discrimination is evident in unequal gender relations, access to basic goods and services, in the gender segmentation of the labour market, and continued low levels of women’s participation in political decision making. To worsen this evidence of unkindness, the prejudice further extends to high levels of gender-based violence and in the unequal burden of care that exacerbates poverty for many women and their families. It is the worst kind of poverty where an individual loses even the semblance of hope.

Looking at the unusually high mortality rates for women in comparison with male mortality rates, Amartya Sen coined a very poignant expression – “Missing Women”. While not as stark as in some regions of the world, domestic violence leading to women’s death is a growing concern in some countries of the Caribbean. Indeed, in several countries in the Region progress on protection, punishment, and prevention of violence against women is being hampered by sharply increasing levels of violence and insecurity as well as detrimental gender relations.

To illustrate the possible impact of gender discrimination and violence on sustainable human development let me take an example from the South Asia region that has some of the greatest gender disparities in the world. In that region, young girls have a 30%-50% higher mortality rate and are 30% less likely to receive treatment for common illness. The ratio of male to female enrollment in school is 70% and representation in managerial and professional jobs is 2.3%.

AUNESCAP Report informs us that the costs of restricting women’s job opportunities in the Asia Pacific ranges from US$42b-$47b annually. These would rise significantly if the costs also included violence against women.

If we review the Caribbean data pertaining to the Gender Equality Index and indicators provided in UNDP’s 2011 Human Development Report – Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All, shows:

* Most of the 13 countries in the Region, viz. 9 ranked in the **high** human development range for gender equality when based on education and health indicators. This is excellent.
* However, of the 13 countries listed, only **3**countries have between 20 and 30 percent of Parliamentarians that are women. Guyana is at 30 percent. Cuba, has the highest percentage - 43 percent, outpaced only by Sweden among the 187 countries ranked in the HDR at 45%.
* In the 11 countries for which there were data, females have 10 – 20 percent lower levels of participation in the labour force. In some countries in the region it is as much as forty percent lower. This has significant implications for women’s access to earned income and by extension access of children and the elderly to adequate household incomes.

Modest rationality would dictate that sustainable and therefore equitable development is unachievable if fifty percent of the population is excluded from the decision making processes, deprived of the full range of human freedoms, choices and rights and subjected to unequal access to resources and services, all of which is then overlaid by physical violence.

The incidence of physical (including sexual) violence is an added, worrisome burden. As UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon said

*There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable.*

Freedom from violence is a fundamental human right and entitlement of all citizens who look up to the state for its obligatory enforcement.

It is with this in mind that the UN Secretary General in 2008 launched the Campaign “UNiTE to End Violence against Women by 2015”. We recognize that the countries in the region are adapting national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls. The Caribbean, in fact is distinguished by its leadership among nations for ratification of international agreements that aim to eliminate violence against women and girls.

While ratification is a vital and necessary first step, it will only become sufficient through strengthening State accountability and its efficient and effective enforcement. While this would require political will and engagement of men as provocative partners and agents of change, it would necessitate a social strategy that empowers women in achieving comprehensively a high quality life, sustainable livelihoods and equal opportunities to eliminate all facets of discrimination.

There have been notable steps in implementation in the Region, I know for instance, that the Jamaica Constitution was amended to include a Charter of Rights in April 2011. It spells out the human rights framework and filled a significant gap in the post-independence constitution by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex.

You, Parliamentarians are vital leaders to make the theory of change a reality.

I am positive that this consultation will lead to innovative ideas and out of the box thinking to a renewed commitment by the countries in the Region to make the Caribbean an example to be followed by all in the area of gender equity and a high quality of life for all with a total absence of violence against women and girls.

The UN in Jamaica and I am confident that you will receive the same message from my counterparts in the other countries of the Region, are your committed partners.

We are also committed to strengthening our own teamwork and working with greater effectiveness with local, national and regional partners, including all development partners, to achieve gender equity, peace and equitable development in the Caribbean within the framework of MDGs and sustainable development beyond 2015.

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