



Regional Project Steering Committee Meeting

Build Back Equal Project (BBE)

Open Session

June 5, 2022

InterContinental Hotel, Commonwealth of Dominica

Remarks by

Ms. Jenny Karlsen, Deputy Director, UNFPA Subregional Office for the Caribbean

Thank you, Chair (Ms. Melissa Morgan, Director – Bureau of Gender Affairs, Ministry of Health, Wellness and Social Services, Commonwealth of Dominica).

Protocol

The Honourable Dr. Roosevelt Skerrit, Prime Minister of Dominica and Minister of Investment and Governance

The Honourable Dr Cassandra Williams, Minister of State in the Ministry of Health, Wellness and Social Services, with special responsibility for Seniors Security, Children at Risk, Gender Affairs and the Differently Abled, Dominica

The Honourable Dr. Orando Brewster - Minister of National Mobilisation, Social Development, The Family, Gender Affairs, Youth, Housing and Informal Settlement in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Senator The Honourable Gloria A Thomas - Minister of State with Responsibility for Social Development and Gender Affairs for the Government in Grenada

Ms. Veronica Charles, Permanent Secretary (ag.) with responsibility for Social Development and Gender Affairs, Ministry of Social and Community Development, Housing and Gender Affairs in Grenada

Ms. Sheila Lambert, Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of the Public Service, Home Affairs, Labour and Gender Affairs from St. Lucia

Chairperson: Ms Melissa Morgan, Director – Bureau of Gender Affairs, Ministry of Health, Wellness and Social Services, Dominica

Ms. Janey Joseph, Director of Gender Relations in St. Lucia

Ms. Jemima George-Richardson, Head of Gender Affairs in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Mr David-Éric Simard, First Secretary (Development) High Commission of Canada in Barbados

Ms Tonni Brodber, Representative, UN Women Multi-Country Office for the CO Caribbean, and co-Chair of the Build Back Equal,

Senior and all Government representatives and project partners

Representatives of the Media, all participants in the room and online

Good afternoon and a warm welcome to all! I'm extremely grateful that we are here during my first visit to the beautiful, lush island of Dominica for this inaugural meeting of the Regional Project Steering Committee for the "Build Back Equal" project.

This initiative is supported by UN Women and UNFPA, with the generous funding from the Government of Canada. I bring greetings to you also from Ms. Elizabeth Talbert, Director of the UNFPA Subregional Office for the Caribbean.

UNFPA extends special thanks to the project partners and participating project countries – our host today, the Commonwealth of Dominica, as well as Grenada, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

We extend additional thanks to allies like the OECS Commission and the national planned parenthood associations, who are engaged for the successful implementation of this landmark four-year project.

Allow me also to underline that this project would not be possible without the commitment of the Government of Canada to a feminist international assistance policy based on human rights and targeted approach to gender equality and defending the rights of women and girls, particularly their sexual health and reproductive rights.

Our collective ambition is to build the economic resilience of women in the Eastern Caribbean, by addressing the barriers they face; with the recognition that access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence services will be key to achieve this goal.

At UNFPA, we champion the right of every woman to bodily autonomy, the right to freely make decisions about the number, timing and spacing of children without discrimination and coercion and the right to achieve the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health.

UNFPA's commitment to zero unmet need for family planning, zero preventable maternal deaths and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices are founded on the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, which we are celebrating 30 years anniversary in 2024. Fulfilling the rights of women and girls is central to the achievement of the ICPD programme of action, which is essential to achieving sustainable development. As such the regional launch of the Build Back Equal Project is timely.

With our sights set on the achievement of the sustainable development goals by 2030, particularly goals 3 and 5, this work is more urgent than ever. We need to accelerate our progress and the only way to do this is by working together, across sectors, in a holistic and innovative way, based on evidence and data.

My key point today is that the Build Back Equal project will enable us to do exactly this. It enables us to catalyze and convene partners across sectors to work through a holistic approach, putting the rights of women and adolescent girls at the centre.

Our aim is to address key barriers of economic resilience and support women and girls exercise their sexual and reproductive health and rights thus empowering them. This will translate to enabling transformative change in the lives of women and girls, especially those furthest behind.

UNFPA is indeed pleased to be one of the partners in this initiative because the BBE enables us to bolster support to the four BBE countries on improving access to quality reproductive health and rights frameworks and services for women and adolescent girls. Issues on which UNFPA – the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency – has focused in the Caribbean as a trusted partner since 1969.

This is important, because while data demonstrates that we have made progress - Fewer women are dying in childbirth; more unintended pregnancies are prevented and young people's opportunities have expanded - more work needs to be done.

Importantly, data shows the teenage pregnancy remains high in the Caribbean compared to global standards, impacting on young women's potential to become fully empowered and economically independent to contribute to society.

It is crucial to understand the interrelation between early childbearing and low educational attainment and socio-economic development.

Many girls who get pregnant drop out of school. This negatively impacts the girls, their children, their families and the country at large. Therefore, delaying early child bearing has huge return on investment both at macro and micro level. I am pleased to hear the commitment among our conversations this morning in the Steering Committee for countries to address this.

Global and Caribbean level studies and data has also shown us why investing in family planning is a high return investment. A study published by UNFPA in 2021 covering SIDS, including 4 countries in the Caribbean (St Lucia), concluded that the investment of \$1 in FP and maternal health will have a pay off of \$27 in economic benefit by 2040. This confirms earlier findings which shows FP as a “development best buy”.

BBE is unique in that it gives us an opportunity to work jointly to support national priorities towards achieving resilience and sustainable results. It is grounded on pillars such as national ownership, civil society engagement and capacity strengthening.

To enable this, UNFPA’s interventions will focus on developing more robust health care systems, particularly sexual and reproductive health care services for women, youth and other marginalized groups.

Our partnership with the respective Ministries of Health and the National Family Planning associations are at the core of UNFPA’s approach. Our support will range from policy, technical support to civil society led empowerment activities with special attention to the most vulnerable women and girls, especially persons with disabilities and survivors of gender-based violence.

BBE also builds resilience by integrating the special context of the Caribbean of building resilience to shocks from climate change and natural disasters. Focus will be on ensuring that adolescents, youth, women, and those furthest behind are integrated into the national and regional emergency response plans and climate change adaptation and resilience-building strategies.

This is because we know that economic resilience of women can only be achieved if all women and adolescent girls, especially those who are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, are able to access sexual and reproductive health information and services including gender based violence services, and are able to manage what happens with their bodies, in both development and humanitarian settings.

Finally, let me once again take this opportunity to thank his Excellency Prime Minister Skerritt for the commitment to championing Build Back Equal, and for the longstanding partnership of the Government of Dominica with UNFPA. We are committed to supporting you and the people of Dominica to achieve your development priorities including those in the National Resilience Development Strategy 2030.

Ladies and gentlemen, partners, UNFPA is fully committed to this collaboration and strengthened partnership which will improve the lives of many women, girls and young people in the Eastern Caribbean. We will work with you to ensure the reproductive health and rights and protection needs of women and young people are addressed as a critical enabler for economic resilience and empowerment of women.

Our goals are ambitious; however together we are confident that we can directly reach and benefit over 100,000 women of reproductive age who will access quality sexual and reproductive health services in the four countries of Build Back Equal by the end of the project.

When women and girls can make the most fundamental choices about their bodies, they not only gain in terms of autonomy, but also through advances in health, education, income and safety.

Thank you all for your partnership in making the shared goals of the “Build Back Equal” project a reality.

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