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# Official Launch - Barbados’ Parliamentarians Community Dialogues

# on HIV Prevention, Stigma and Discrimination

# 18 July 2011 - Accra Beach Resort and Spa

## It is with considerable anticipation and optimism that I join the Speaker in welcoming you to the launch of the Parliamentarians Community Dialogues on HIV Prevention, Stigma and Discrimination Project. This approach which is being led by the Speaker in collaboration with the NHAC and the UN system under the technical leadership of UN Women is a first in the Caribbean.

The first in which parliamentarians across the political divide come together in a concerted series of actions to bring attention to the cultural changes that are needed if we are to continue to contain the spread and ensure the flourishing of life for all and in particular those especially affected by the virus.

Over time, and despite the extensive information and awareness of the disease, the modes of transmission and effects, Caribbean infection rates have not been reduced significantly and in some countries have grown even though levels of morbidity and mortality as well as mother to child transmission are curtailed dramatically.

And so we have a clearer understanding that really enhancing resilience to HIV will require profound transformation of the ‘deep politics of culture”. This process requires sustained community engagement and outreach; requires changes to gender socialization as we understand better now that it is stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity, unequal power relations between women and men that explain in great measure HIV vulnerability.

 We also understand better because the epidemiology tells us so, that some populations are at higher risk because of pre-existing complexities of discrimination. Simply, in societies where expressions of the diversity of sexual orientation between consenting adults is not seen as a right but rather as stigmatizing, this impedes universal access to prevention, to care and treatment.

Conversations with people across the Caribbean who are living with HIV tell us that notwithstanding all of our outreach to end stigma and discrimination, Caribbean people still judge harshly and yes, have little empathy, for what in the words of the South African Constitutional Court Justice Edwin Cameron, who lives with it “is just a virus, not a crime”.

Our work with women living with HIV in the Caribbean suggests quite strongly that stigma and discrimination constrains their lives much more so than the virus. People lose jobs, are thrown out of homes, have their privacy invaded and still have to deal with health workers who refuse the intelligent, empathetic approach to service delivery, who fail in their state obligations to treat people living with HIV in accordance to their constitutional entitlement to equal treatment.

And so while much has been achieved in particular here in Barbados given successive governments commitment to halting and reversing the spread of HIV, work still needs to be done to enhance the enabling environment for people living with HIV and to transform cultural attitudes.

This launch comes on the heels of the adoption on 10 June 2011 by the United Nations General Assembly of the

[Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS: Intensifying our Efforts to eliminate HIV/AIDS](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/65/L.77). This Declaration calls on all UN Member States to redouble their efforts to achieve universal access to comprehensive prevention programmes, treatment, care and support by 2015, as a critical step towards ending the global AIDS epidemic.

Let me draw your attention to three specific set of issues in the context of this project:

* HIV, women, and gender equality. Paragraph 53 of the Declaration focuses on the importance of eliminating gender inequalities and gender based violence; ensuring women’s right to control over matters relating to their sexuality; and strong support for strengthening women’s economic independence and the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.
* HIV, the law, and marginalized populations.   Paragraph 29 and a number of subsequent paragraphs specifically call for partnerships with marginalized populations, including with men who have sex with men and sex workers.  This is the first time that the General Assembly has agreed to explicit language on these groups, and is therefore a significant step forward.  Para 78 and following paragraphs then explicitly call on States to review HIV-related laws and policies, to protect human rights, and to challenge stigma.

This parliamentarian-led project therefore is quite timely. It is instructive that the first commitment of the framers of the Political Declaration was a commitment to “to seize this turning point in the HIV epidemic and through decisive, inclusive and accountable leadership to revitalize and intensify the comprehensive global HIV and AIDS response.”

Through community engagements across Barbados and in the participation in public service announcements developed for radio and television, parliamentarians will have an opportunity to advocate key messages such as:

*Responsible, respectful and equitable relations as the key to reducing HIV vulnerability*

* + *Human rights of all to lives free of stigma and discrimination*

I congratulate you Parliamentarians, on your visionary and pioneering agreement to work together to send a common and profound message on the need for all to act responsibly for self-protection and for the protection of the community.

Thank you.

**Roberta Clarke**

**UN Women Regional Programme Director**