



Inter-Parliamentary Meeting for ParlAmericas' Anglophone Membership:  
***Partnerships to Transform Gender Relations***

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Distinguished Parliamentarians, Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Friends and Colleagues:

It is my pleasure and honour to address you today at this important gathering of parliamentarians to discuss the topic ***Partnerships to Transform Gender Relations***, a topic that I am very passionate about and an objective that I fully endorse. Also, special thanks to ParlAmericas for inviting UNFPA to participate in this event.

Today, more than ever before, we are seeing stories on the most pervasive and overt evidence of gender inequality make headlines around the world. I am confident that in each of our respective home countries, your news feeds and news headlines have, in one way or another, shone light on the experiences of survivors of gender-based and sexual violence, over the past few months. It would be remiss of me not to speak to the phenomenon of this conversation and its outcomes, which many of us here have waited a very long time to see transpire.

The actions of powerful and influential male leaders across business, entertainment, enterprise and politics are being called into question, resulting in some instances in the termination of their employment; in a few instances, criminal and civil proceedings; but in all instances, their public exposure.

Emerging from this event are the voices of women, particularly young women, coming forward to attest to their experiences, and reclaiming some of the personal power stolen from them through acts of sexual harassment, sexual abuse and rape. The conversation around gender-based and sexual violence is grabbing global attention, through the dynamic power of social media and the hashtag #MeToo, through the influence of the celebrity of survivors and accused, and through the relentless activism of community-based female leaders who have worked tirelessly over many years to support and assist those victimized. In the midst of this broader social exposure, there is extensive discussion about the normalcy of sexual harassment, the frequency of violence against women, and the ways in which these acts are entrenched within cultures, workspaces and inter-personal relationships. Often through opposing lenses, the

voices in this discussion remain in sync in their characterization of an embedded normalcy to the experiences of women as targets of gender-based violence. Violence against women, many are now coming to realize, is very normal. And by that I mean it is commonplace.

However, for some, what we explicitly know and understand as violence, in its normalcy, is considered something that women should come to expect.

There are a number of reasons why some hold this position. To see violence against women as an aspect of the female human experience that should be expected, in some ways tolerated, and in other ways ignored. This position underscores the persisting reality of gender inequality across all aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life. That the norms, values and systems which uphold and reinforce these inequalities are real and ever-present, and sadly, quite normal. It is important to recognize that a number of men are also sexually harassed by women and that men's socialized behaviour makes it difficult for many of them to seek assistance in dealing with such behaviours.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen: I began by speaking to the pervasiveness and overt nature of gender-based violence in one of its many forms. But let us reflect for a moment on how pervasive and overt other forms of gender inequality are in our societies.

Let us look at the current participation of women in our economies. Among the nation-states represented here today, are there any in which women are recorded as making more money than men? Are there any examples where the salaries and wages of women are at the very least on par? Globally, the male dollar is considered to be the female seventy-five cents, but there is extensive variance in these numbers across all countries where this gap is measured. Alan Manning (2006) of the London School of Economics argued that women could continue to earn less than men for the next 150 years.

As startling as the gap is between male and female wages, so too is the challenge of the precariousness in the roles women play in the economy. Women continue to bare the lion's share of work for which there is no compensation. Across the globe we are yet to realize a paradigm shift in the role of women as the caregivers, as the homemakers, as the principal agents of social reproduction. And, among our countries, the acknowledgement of the macro economic impact of women's unpaid work on gross domestic product remains an infrequent and inarticulate conversation.

But violence against women, and women's role in the economy, are not the only overt and pervasive examples of gender equality we see each day.

Across the Americas, there are no countries where there are more women holding seats in parliament than there are men. In most countries of the Americas, the number of women in positions of political leadership at the national level fails to meet the critical threshold of 30 percent.

Some of our countries, including our beautiful host country of Jamaica, have had female prime ministers. But how many of our countries have had two female prime ministers? How many of our countries have boasted female Ministers of Finance, Ministers of Tourism, and Ministers of Public Works, or other high profile and revenue-generating economic profiles? How many countries have had female leaders in all of these roles, at the same time? How many women have been removed from Cabinet positions for infractions that have had no impact on the careers of seasoned male leaders? Distressing is the reality of the normalcy of the pervasive and overt gender inequality which pains the leadership of our democracies.

Through these examples, we see that there is something much deeper at play than some consideration that women's experiences are just normal. There is more than attitudes and opinions here; there are real and present cultural norms, systems and structures which all work together to reinforce these inequalities and inequities.

This brings us to the understanding of the importance of our role in dispelling myths, dismantling narratives, and acting as the driving forces behind transformative social change.

In Manning's assessment of the reasons for women's continued disadvantage in the economy, he cites an effective "punishment" of women for choosing to leave the workforce periodically to take care of their families. The policies which reduce women's wages whilst on maternity leave, which allow for women's wages to remain the same as they were upon their return, which value the continuous employment of persons rather than for the role of women in caring for the next generation and the one before, contributes to women's continued economic disadvantage. In addition to this, it is the supported notion that it is a women's role, and not a man's role to principally fulfil these functions which reinforces women's experiences. None of these processes are accidental, but a collective reinforcement of the disempowerment of women that then becomes legalized and regularized in a way that is so subtle, most of us come to see it as normal.

The solution should not be the requirement for women to concentrate more heavily on mathematics or sciences. Or to pursue other work fields that were historically male dominated. Or to make different choices around family planning. Or further, to accept that this is expected, tolerable, or to be ignored.

The solution requires, in part, that more men participate more in social reproduction, value human contributions that go unpaid, and work in effective partnership with women to reshape attitudes, laws and policies which are void of gender considerations.

To serve as agents of change, to redefine gender relations, to right historical wrongs, calls for more than women working harder or smarter to bring attention to gender inequality, or to cross the floor in their engagement with culture, politics and the economy. It is important for us to acknowledge that the road to gender equality should be paved by strategies which redefine how women and men work in partnership to address the norms and attitudes that are the driving

force behind social inequality, and work together to transform the harmful systems which reinforce this inequality.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen: permit me now to highlight some examples of UNFPA's work on partnership to promote gender equality in the Caribbean.

At UNFPA, we place great importance on the partnerships with the implementation of the ICPD goals and the 2030 Agenda. We work in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders working together to achieve gender equality and harness innovative ideas. We employ a collaborative approach to the delivery of technical assistance by engaging with local partners and sharing responsibility to implement gender interventions that are responsive to their needs and interests. Specific strategies include multi-sectoral collaborations involving diverse stakeholders - civil society organizations (CSOs), men and boys, community groups, coalitions and networks.

UNFPA in collaboration with CARICOM has led the CariWaC initiative which was developed in response to a series of critical problems that confront women, girls and adolescents in the Caribbean. It aims to enhance their health and well-being and embraces the Global Strategy for Women's Children's and Adolescents' health (EWEC). It is structured around four priority areas: reducing adolescent pregnancy, reducing cervical cancer, eliminating violence against women and girls, and eliminating mother to child transmission of HIV. This initiative utilizes a comprehensive, collaborative and integrated multi-sectoral approach addressing health determinants and the framework of equity, sexual and reproductive health and rights within a life course perspective. The initiative promotes interventions to address public health threats throughout all stages in life, as a critical public health priority in the Caribbean.

Partnerships, collaboration and coordination among international donor partners as well as representatives from regional and national organizations, and private and corporate sponsors through the establishment of a structured platform (CariWaC Action Group) to plan regional and national programmes are important to achieve synergies, avoid duplication, and monitor and evaluate projects, so that programmes are sustainable and our goals are realized. This collaborative approach working with a diverse group of partners allows for the sharing of responsibilities to implement gender interventions that are responsive to their needs and interests. Other partners in the CARIWaC initiative include the Spouses of CARICOM Heads of Government as champions promoting interventions addressing good health for women and children in the Caribbean.

Another example of UNFPA's work in the region is the Regional Gender Equality and Diversity Seal for the Caribbean, which was developed and rolled out in Belize in 2017. The Seal aims to promote gender sensitive and inclusive practices in the public and private sector in line with the SDG's objective of "leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest first."

UNFPA continues to support the Caribbean countries affected by hurricanes Irma and Maria through partnerships with other agencies working to respond to life saving sexual and

reproductive health needs of women and girls and also provide comprehensive and multi sectoral care for GBV survivors.

At UNFPA we recognize the importance of effective responses to gender inequalities that require coordinated, inclusive and broad multi-sectoral collaboration. To eliminate gender discriminatory practices, gender-based violence, and adolescent pregnancy, the social norms that support these practices and behaviours need to be changed. Social norm change entails working through multiple channels to create a social movement and mobilizing groups and other individuals to make decisions.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen: what we will witness if we advance an agenda for transformative social change that builds upon the work taking place in this regard, is a reimagining of what it means to acknowledge gender inequality in this lifetime. Not only will we feel more empowered by public revelations of inter-personal and systemic manifestations of gender inequality, or by the solidary building which results from coming together to articulate our opposition to these realities. We will see ourselves as the ones who will be principally responsible for their redefinition. In working together to advance this aim, we will disrupt what it means to be normal, and what we do to challenge the norm.

This is an effort to abandon our collective complacency. It is also an effort to take full advantage of our roles in parliament, in private enterprise, in academia, in civil society, in grassroots movements – to re-write policies, to change corporate cultures, to teach and sensitize others, to engage in social programming, and to highlight the issues which plague our generation.

As we engage in a critical conversation about gender equality over the next few days, and discuss our roles and responsibilities to make substantive changes within our respective spaces, I encourage you to ride the wave of energy that has come from talking about inequality in its most overt and pervasive forms. Let us work together to take off the blinders which shield all other forms of gender inequality from seeing the public light. This need not amount to mere “naming and shaming,” but the building of ally networks, the emergence of collaborative spaces for learning and sharing, and the articulation of efforts to make our society a more just, harmonious and equitable one, where all have the opportunity to participate and live in peace and freedom. For a “new day” to truly be “on the horizon,” as was famously said a few weeks past, this is our time to change what is normal, and work together to redefine what is possible.

Thank you.