



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

PERMANENT MISSION OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO TO THE UNITED NATIONS
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STATEMENT

by

**The Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar
Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago**

at the

United Nations Side Event

on

Women's Political Participation

**United Nations Headquarters
September 19, 2011**

My Journey

As a young girl growing up in a rural community in Trinidad and Tobago, my mother encouraged me to pursue higher education in the United Kingdom at a time when the pervading cultural norms relegated women and girls to the home.

I began my political career in local government as an Alderwoman. Subsequently, I contested and lost my first parliamentary elections at a time when the parliamentary benches were dominated by men. The acute disappointment I felt did not deter me, and I persisted because I believed that women politicians should contribute to decisions that improve the lives of women and girls.

I became the first woman Attorney General of my country. I served as Minister of Legal Affairs, Minister of Education, the first woman acting Prime Minister, the first woman of a political party, and the first woman Leader of Opposition. This gave me many opportunities to broaden and deepen my vision of how my political leadership should and could be used to provide equal opportunities for all. Now, as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, I see my role as pivotal in building a society that respects diversity, redresses inequalities, and promotes good governance that tackles corruption and addresses human and citizen security.

I tell my story in brief because the goals we are setting ourselves today will only be achieved through courage, commitment and conviction.

Women as Agents of Change

As the first woman Chairperson of the 54 member states that comprise the Commonwealth, I have been inspired to take forward its theme of 'Women as Agents of Change' in this the centenary year of International Women's Day. Starting with Commonwealth Day in March 2011, to the first Organization of American States' hemispheric forum on women's leadership in April 2011, to the Caribbean Regional Colloquium on '*Women Leaders as Agents of Change*' in June 2011, we have mobilised international support to convene this UN General Assembly Side Event on '*Women's Political Participation*', and I would like to congratulate and thank my fellow co-sponsors of this event. I also wish to

acknowledge the efforts of the Commonwealth Secretariat, the OAS, and the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership.

Women as Political Agents of Change

In the developing South, various strategies have been adopted to increase women's political representation. These include the zebra or zipper system which alternates equal numbers of female and male candidates on political party lists in local and national elections as practised in Namibia and South Africa, and affirmative action quotas as in India through the reservation of 33 per cent of seats for women in local government.

Since the 1970s, the United Nations, Commonwealth and other multilateral institutions have committed to achieving a minimum target of 30 per cent of women at all levels of decision-making.

However, it is my belief that we must do better. Where we have achieved 30 per cent, we must aim for 50 per cent.

Women's Transformational Leadership

Please allow me to introduce my vision of women as transformational leaders. I would like to see women comprising half of our legislatures, half of our local governments, half of our state boards and private sector board rooms, half of our leaders in civil society and community organisations, and half of our decision-makers in all other spheres.

This is not only about women's right as enshrined in international agreements, but it is about women's participation in decision-making at all levels being seen as an opportunity for us to make profound changes and transform our societies.

For example, it is not OK that 70 per cent of the world's poor are women. It is not OK that violence against women is perpetrated in our homes, in our public spaces, in situations of armed conflict and war. It is not OK that girls are victims of incest, sexual violence and bear the burden of teenage pregnancy. It is not OK that half a million women die each year during childbirth across the developing world. It is not OK that girls and

women have the highest incidence of HIV/ AIDS and bear the brunt of care. And I can go on

It is thus our responsibility to lead this change through legislation, policies and programmes that protect girls, promote the rights of women and advance equality between women and men.

Instituting Broad-based Participation

Women are not a homogeneous group. We must find participatory ways of engaging with the full diversity of women in our societies. We must also listen to and act upon the voices of young women who are eager to challenge and transform the status quo.

Strategies

Since assuming office, I have created a new Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development, as well as appointed women to strategic ministries, and envoys for Women and Children. I have set a target of 40 per cent of women on state boards, and encouraged women to stand for local government elections. All of this is aimed at transforming our governance systems.

In addition, I have implemented social protection programmes to alleviate poverty. And I intend to introduce a gender-responsive budget and enhance a gender responsive national development planning that will support the allocation of funding to all ministries and sectors, as a fundamental step to the achievement of gender equality.

I also intend to establish a National Commission on Gender Equality that includes women from the full spectrum of society to advise and support the Government in advancing women's rights in the society.

Mentoring Programmes

I would like to propose a strategy of political mentoring programmes which can be seen as an empowering tool for building women's political

skills. It provides a forum for women to “learn the system, use the system and change the system.” Such programmes identify and encourage women to stand as candidates - locally and nationally – and also build strategic alliances with civil society.

The new technologies and new forms of social networking offer a strategic mechanism for engaging young women, and sharing our knowledge and experiences. I would like to propose a global online mentorship programme targeted at young women leaders interested in a political career, who will engage with and learn from experienced women politicians.

Closing statement

In closing, I urge us all to summon the political and the financial will to honour our commitments. We must ensure that our generation leaves a legacy of 50 per cent of women in political and other spheres of decision-making, and delivers tangible policies and action programmes aimed at improving the lives of women and girls.