

**International Women's Day 2018 Theme: "Press for Progress"**

**Statement by: The Honourable Samantha Marshall, Minister of Social Transformation and Human Resource Development**

The world economic forum 2017 global gender gap report reveals that gender parity is over 200 years away. Although International Women's day is a time to celebrate the extraordinary women who have made significant contributions to their communities, it is also an opportunity to reflect on progress made towards achieving gender equality and parity, and to agitate for change in the areas that have become stagnant. We must press for progress, especially as it relates to goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals: to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

The global theme for International Women's Day is "Press for Progress" and while we have made significant gains in the history of the women's rights movement, there is still a long road ahead. We are at a point in history, where our societies, our men, women and children alike are pushing back and exposing the historical and systemic inequalities that continue to cripple our progress and development.

The United Nations Secretary General in his address for this year's International Women's Day reminds us that "Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world."

The government of Antigua and Barbuda, particularly, my ministry, the Ministry of Social Transformation and Human Resource Development have demonstrated our commitment to press for progress to achieve gender equality and our zero tolerance to the oppression and discrimination of our women and girls.

Globally one in three women and girls either has experienced or will experience some form of violence, discrimination or harassment in her lifetime, and Antigua & Barbuda is no exception from this startling statistic. Through partnership with the United Nations Trust Fund and the UN Women Multi-Country Office Caribbean, the government of Antigua and Barbuda has made significant strides in the prevention and response to gender-based violence.

My Ministry has surpassed all targets to ensure widespread public education and prevention campaigns to eliminate gender-based violence from our society. We have also made significant gains in local legislature. The government of Antigua and Barbuda

through my Ministry continued to press for progress with the passage and full implementation of the 2015 Domestic Violence legislation, offering greater protection under the law for all victims of gender-based violence.

While Antigua and Barbuda has prioritized its commitments to the 2030 sustainable development agenda, the Beijing Platform for Action, Belem Do Para Convention and the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Violence against women, it is evident that most importantly, we have prioritized our commitment to you, our people.

The Ministry of Social Transformation accelerated progress with another landmark achievement in improving the quality of care and services we offer to women and to all victims of gender-based and sexual violence. The Support and Referral Centre remains the only one-stop location providing immediate care and psycho-social support to victims in the Caribbean region, and has already emerged as a best-practice for neighbouring territories.

Addressing gender-based violence is a pre-requisite to achieving gender equality. Since the launch of the Support and Referral Centre last June, we have provided services to over 100 survivors of abuse and sexual assault. We have strengthened our collaboration with the Royal Police Force of Antigua and Barbuda to improve state accountability, and advocated for the recently established Special Victims Support Unit within the Police Force.

Despite all the progress made in some areas, there is much more to be done as we move towards ensuring women and girls in Antigua & Barbuda have full, free, and equal participation in all areas and at all levels of public, and private life. The Beijing Platform for Action calls for the increased participation of women in decision-making. The government of Antigua and Barbuda, recognizing the significant gap in women in leadership, has appointed a plethora of women to serve in the upper of house of parliament, as ambassadors, and in other key positions within the public sector. We remain steadfast in our commitment to increase the number of women in leadership roles across our nation. We also recognize the increase of women in private sector leadership positions and continue to advocate for the complete elimination of the structural barriers that prevent their equal participation in decision-making.

While we look on at international and regional movements focused advancing on gender equality, we have a responsibility to create our own movements locally to create the society that we all want. One that is free from violence and discrimination, fair, and inclusive. The government of Antigua and Barbuda, pressed for progress by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Women and girls and those living with disabilities can now enjoy a legislative framework that supports their right to live a quality life.

The government of Antigua and Barbuda continues to mainstream gender within our national poverty reduction strategies. We are determined to leave no one behind. The Ministry of Social Transformation and Human Resource Development has taken measures to introduce and implement programmes, subsidies and grants to meet the needs of our most vulnerable; which includes single mothers, the elderly, those living with disabilities, and adolescent girls and boys.

The financial empowerment centre within my Ministry, the home advancement and repair-HAPPY programme, the support to women in agriculture for increased production and productivity- SWAPP programme, the second chance programme, electricity subsidy, elder care assistance, transportation and mobility services for the elderly, and the recent development of a multi-sector action plan to reduce adolescent pregnancy are examples of such ground-breaking initiatives aimed at promoting an equal society for our men and women.

We are blazing the way within the region, recognizing that the time is now to act. We cannot become complacent. The nation of Antigua and Barbuda is poised to achieve the many targets and goals set for sustainable development. While reaching these targets is desirable, the true goal is our ability to improve the overall quality of life for our people and we are committed to doing so.

Let us not forget as we celebrate women today for all the achievement and gains we have made that there are still some persisting gaps that prevent us from realizing our true potential. There continues to be a lack of sex-disaggregated across all sectors. This data is vital to informing public policies and to ensuring that the rights of men, women, boys, and girls are adequately represented. There is still need for the ratification of the ILO Convention 189 which would ensure that domestic workers, the majority of whom are women, have the legally enshrined right to decent work and to decent pay. We are also still without national legislation that specifically addresses sexual harassment.

It is evident that the government of Antigua and Barbuda has assessed the current gender gaps across our social, economic, environmental and cultural sectors. We are committed to closing those gaps through dedicated and unwavering actions. We cannot roll back progress. Let us continue to press for progress together. It will take the creativity and energies of all of us to erode the historic power imbalances that exist within our society. Gender equality means a more resilient society and economy. A win for women is a win for all of society.

At this time in our history let us commit to standing together; men and women; let us commit to learning from each other and let us resolve to create equal and equitable spaces for women and girls to contribute to the development of our society.

As the Minister responsible for Gender Affairs in Antigua and Barbuda, I am proud of the progress we have made collectively and I look forward to continue working with you, the people of Antigua and Barbuda, to make even greater gains as we press on for further progress.

Happy International Women's Day! Thank you for listening and God Bless.