

Former Gov't Minister captures Woman of the Year Award

A new *Belize Woman of the Year* has been chosen. She is former Government Minister Sylvia Flores. She was awarded during a lovely ceremony marking the 4th Annual event held on Friday, March 8, International Women's Day at the Ambassador's Residence in Belmopan.

She won the award from among nine other outstanding Belizean nominees; namely- Yolanda Murray, Dacia Crawford Tillett, Joan Burke, Cristina Coc, Sharon Pitts, Mapye Smith, Victoria Hernandez, Adele Ramos and Cynthia Ellis Topsey.



Woman of the Year, Sylvia Flores receives citation from U.S. Ambassador, Vinai Thummalapally on Int'l Women's Day.

Flores was chosen for her outstanding contribution to the country of Belize in Promoting Human Rights, Strengthening Democratic Institution, Women's Empowerment and Community Involvement, having been credited with many firsts along the way. She was the first woman Mayor of Dangriga Town, twice over, in 1988 and 1992. The first Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1997 and the first woman to represent her home town, Dangriga at the national level when

she stood for elections under the PUP banner. She was victorious and was named Belize's first woman Minister of Defence. Nonetheless, her tenure was short-lived as a Cabinet reshuffle stripped her of her Defence portfolio in 2005. At that time she took on the Ministry of Human Development and Women until 2008 when the PUP lost to the United Democratic Party.

Flores was also President of the Senate. Third only to June Garcia and Elizabeth Zabaneh.

In welcoming the gathering which comprised mainly of outstanding women leaders and emerging leaders, Ann-Marie Williams, Executive Director of the National Women's Commission gave the day some historical context. "The idea of an International Women's Day celebration emerged at the start of the 20th century out of the early socialist movement", she recalled, that "such a celebration was unheard of at the time, as it wreaked of pure radicalism however, today it's anything but".

Williams said that although Belizean women have come a long way, there's much more to be done with the gender agenda in order for it to gain the momentum it really needs. She used OAS Secretary General, Jose Miguel Insulza's address to the 49th Roundtable of the Inter American Commission of Women (CIM) to bolster her argument. Insulza told the women gathered at the March 1, meeting that women are facing a lot of issues including their lack of political representation. On this issue he noted, **"the only way to achieve real equality is through affirmative action laws" that are accompanied by effective implementation in reality. "It is no longer enough to simply proclaim these laws, because there is always some excuse or another for not having enough female candidates in various elections and the numbers are not good,"** he added.

Insulza opined, **"there is no democratic society when all citizens do not exercise the same rights; that is the opposite of democracy." "A society which, in practice, denies rights to certain individuals**

because of their status, their gender or their race, certainly is not a sufficiently democratic society. Therefore, our obligation is to ensure that these rights exist not only in law but also in practice."

In introducing the award, U.S. Ambassador to Belize, Vinai Thummalapally, recalled that the *Belize Woman of the Year Award* was established by the U.S. Embassy in appreciation of the achievements of remarkable Belizean women and the causes to which they devote their lives. He continued by saying "the award represents a larger U.S. effort. "To promote gender equality and empower women and girls in America and abroad. It is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do. As President Obama said earlier this year, "you unleash the power of everyone, not just some". That's why the U.S. Government has launched a multilateral initiative to expand women's political and economic participation, to develop a strategy to prevent and respond to violence against women, and to promote the inclusion of women in conflict resolution and peace processes.

Public Affairs Officer, Eric Heyden who co-ordinated the program wrapped up the brief but impressive ceremony by thanking all who attended the event and have supported it over the past years.

Flores receives as part of her prize, two airline tickets to the Continental U.S.A. along with a visit to the Sisters of the Holy Family, headquartered in Louisiana, U.S.A. to further her community work, as part of the International Visitor's Leadership Program sponsored by the U.S. State Department.