

“Eliminating Gender-Based Violence - Changing Culture, Protecting the Human Rights of Women.”

Feature Address

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Good Evening everyone, it is an honour for me to have been invited to address you at this signature event - The UNFPA Annual Population Awards Ceremony for the Caribbean region. Although these awards are no longer primarily media awards, their existence as with other awards directed at media practitioners testify to the recognition of the centrality of media and communication to contemporary life and to the programme of transformation and change that is still ahead of us. UNFPA'S broad mandate identifies areas of focus which go beyond traditional population issues such as population measurement such as censuses and surveys, vital statistics and migration, population policies etc. which continue to be central and important. But it also includes issues related to the everyday lives of the members of populations, and the recognition that population issues are in many ways people issues and people issues are gender issues as gender is intricately woven into all aspects of our lives. UNFPA's mandate therefore includes issues such as -



urbanization, ageing; sexual and reproductive health including family planning, safe motherhood; and Gender Equality of which programmes to eliminate violence against women are a key component. In addressing you this evening therefore, I hope to comprehensively address the issue of gender-based violence highlighting its complex and multifaceted character, impact and influences.

One of the most important achievements of feminism and the women's movement during the last three decades of the 20th Century was the de-legitimation of violence against women. As I have argued elsewhere, violence against women was the one unifying theme around which in the 1970s and 1980s women of all classes, political persuasions and ethnic groups with the support of progressive men, were able to organize collectively and collaboratively (Reddock, 2003; 2008). While growing up it was common to hear jokes about women being beaten, calypsos about women being raped and the audience laughing, and we all know of the famous Sparrow calypso – “Every now and then cuff them down they love you long and they love you strong”; or my personal favourite chorus (because of the sweet melody and because I love Lord Kitchener) “Ah going to beat you”. Today this would not be possible. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a country in this region which still unquestionably accepts the right to batter women (or willing to say so publicly) without having to provide some form of explanation.

In our region, almost every country has passed legislation against domestic violence and new legislation on rape and sexual offences. Shelters, crisis centres and hotlines were established throughout the region, although today many are no longer functioning effectively. Model Legislation on domestic violence was developed by the CARICOM

Secretariat and in Trinidad and Tobago I was part of the struggles and actions leading to the passing of the historic Sexual Offences Act of 1986 and 2000 and Domestic Violence Act of 1991 and 1999 and despite their shortcomings, we were proud of our movement and this country's achievement.

These developments were not limited to this country or region: indeed although to varying degrees, this was a global achievement. The success of the campaign to de-legitimise, criminalise and eliminate violence against women was the result of an overwhelming degree of collective action by feminist women activists, pro-feminist men activists and their organizations, as well as officials of international, regional, and national state and quasi-state agencies. This in many ways is the struggle with which we have been involved over the last four decades, a struggle for the re-definition of our culture and of women's and men's location within that culture. As noted by UNFPA in the introduction to its 2010 publication *UNFPA Programming to End Violence Against Women: 10 Case Studies*

“In the last four decades, the ‘culture of silence’ that has surrounded all forms of violence against women has begun to erode. Women activists, civil society groups, international organizations, governments, artists and the media have joined forces to move this sociocultural phenomenon from a private space, in which it is often cloaked in shame, into the public sphere. With this exposure comes the possibility to explore its impact—on women, the family, communities and society at large, and to take action to address this gross violation of women's human rights (p. iv).

The term de-legitimization, mentioned earlier, brings us squarely and directly to the issue of culture as the process of de-legitimization was in fact a challenge to the gender system and gender ideologies then existing in our cultural context. As we all know, the term *culture* is one that is widely used and misused in everyday life. It is often used

with reference to the arts e.g. music, dance, painting, sculpture and theatre. However this is only one aspect of the meaning of culture. Culture is actually a very broad term used to refer to virtually all the things we do and the ways in which we do them. Culture in the broadest sense, celebrates a people's ability to create knowledge, lifestyles, meanings, symbols, images and material objects, out of their multiple and diverse experiences. In seeing culture as many-layered therefore, we also need to recognise that within cultures there is diversity in the ways in which people understand and experience culture and cultural change.

Gender ideologies therefore, can be defined as - culturally specific attitudes, identities, norms, and symbols associated with social constructions of masculinity and femininity. In other words they refer to, for example, notions of appropriate behaviours, attitudes, mannerisms, etc. for women and men; for relations between women and men; and among women and among men. Gender ideologies are not fixed, although some aspects can be extremely pervasive and difficult to change. They vary from society to society and from one era to another and are dynamic and constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated due to changes taking place in society at various levels.

Gender ideologies operate through both hegemony and dominance in shaping our behaviours. They are *hegemonic* - that is they are so generally accepted that people are not even aware that they have been shaped in that way, or that we are forced to act in these ways through rewards and sanctions. In other words people, often unconsciously, collude in and consent to their own subordination or the subordination of others. But they are also *dominant* for it is through violence or the fear of violence that we conform or agree to certain behaviours and practices. In de-legitimizing violence against women

therefore, a major shift in the hegemonic gender ideologies and understandings of legitimate gendered power relations was and continues to be necessary for while this cultural change has taken place at some levels, it was not accepted at others and in some cases actively resisted.

This year the UN Secretary General launched the UNITE Campaign to End Violence Against Women, why was this necessary after the past four decades of activism and social programming?

So far this year in Trinidad and Tobago there have been at least 50 murders of women, the majority by “male relatives”. Murder/suicides are definitely part of the domestic violence culture in this country. During the 2006-2007 law terms, there were 10,788 domestic violence cases filed in the country (Pargass, 2010). While the Police statistics report a decline in reports and detection of rapes between 2003 and 2009 (no doubt because of dissatisfaction with the system), the Rape Crisis society report increased reporting of stranger rape and gang rape and note the failure of the legal system to detect and deal adequately with the situation (RCS, 2005). Pargass also reports a conviction rate for sexual offences by the Trinidad and Tobago Police service of ranging between 1% and 3% between 2003 and 2009 but deplored the absence of adequate systems of data collection and reporting on violence against women generally (Pargass, 2010).

Not surprisingly therefore once again in 2010 the United Nations Secretary General had to launch the UNITE Campaign to End Violence Against Women to reinstate once again as an international priority an issue that we thought we had addressed at least two

decades ago. At the regional meeting to launch this campaign last month in Barbados, there was a feeling of *déjà vu*. Many of us were thinking to ourselves, something seems familiar here, haven't we done this already. What went wrong? Why are we here once again?

In a recent publication I described the current context in these words:

“The international climate has become more antagonistic towards women, feminism and progressive movements generally through the rise and alliances of political conservatism, religious fundamentalism and economic neo-liberalism. Moreover, male victimhood discourses have served to turn the tide against the movement and to rationalize male violence against women in many parts of the world. The combined impact of economic neo-liberalism and the gains of the women's movement combine to create a very unstable situation for many men who increasingly perceive of themselves as victims. In such situations, women's personal security becomes once again at risk (Reddock,2008:).”

In the rest of this presentation, I examine some of the developments over the last two decades that have brought us to this place. Hopefully by the end of this discussion we may have some insight of where we should place our emphasis if we are to once again move forward.

The Early 21st Century Context of Gender-based Violence

Today at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century the social and economic climate has changed exponentially. Our Region along with the rest of the world is coming to terms with the collapse of the neo-liberal paradigm of economic, political and social governance. It has come after a close to 20-year period where the forces of free trade and the free market described by some as - “The Washington Consensus,” were

paramount. As I remarked two years ago¹ – “ Who could have predicted the rapid collapse of this paradigm that held almost total sway for the last two decades, two decades when it was almost considered heresy to question or challenge the primacy of the “market’ resulting in what economist Kari Levitt (2005) called “ Market Fundamentalism.” Policies emanating from this worldview facilitated the dismantling and removal of the many of the social and economic safeguards which had been established in the Anglophone Caribbean in the aftermath of the labour disturbances of the 1930s and World War II (although not to the same extent in all countries). They also opened up local and regional markets by insisting on the removal of subsidies on local agriculture and manufacturing while commensurate removals have still not taken place to the same extent in North America and Europe.

We are all familiar with the characteristics of this paradigm which was adhered to with almost religious orthodoxy by many – unregulated markets opening up to unrestricted international trade, privatisation of almost all sectors, reduction in public spending on health and education, economic deregulation including deregulation of the media, the ‘ngoisation’ of the social sector and the privatisation of services - even essential services like water and sanitation. This period was also characterised by a sharp culture change characterised by increased individualism, greed, consumerism and selfishness with money and wealth becoming the most important indicators of value and worth. This consumerist ideology was transferred and made normative through the globalised US media, with specific effects in the Global South. In Trinidad and Tobago someone came

¹ W. G. Demas Memorial Lecture, Caribbean Development Bank annual Meeting, Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands, May 2009.

up with a humorous phrase to describe the culture that emerged – A for Apple, B for Bat and C for yourself.

In a 2006, television interview, social anthropologist and men's studies scholar the late Prof. Barry Chevannes expressed his frustration at the negative impacts of neo-liberalism on male youth in the Caribbean region. He could have been referring to a number of factors including the influence of globalised images and musical representations of male violence in particular black male violence; the proliferation of small arms and light weapons through the globalised drug trade and arms trade; the generalisation of conspicuous consumption such as “brands” and “bling” as markers of social status and bases of ‘respect’ and a ‘get rich quick or die trying’ mentality, which is directly linked to the consumerist imperatives mentioned before.

In an openly homophobic popular cultural context, there is also an increased pressure on young males to demonstrate their heterosexuality by having visible access to young women as a representation of their status and gender identity. With access to money, even from an early age being one way to achieve this. For this reason some young men may even leave school but this is a topic for another day.

The economic and cultural changes mentioned above have coincided with the ongoing movements and struggles for gender equality, which has had the effect of increasing men's feelings of insecurity. One example of this is women's' increased access (especially lower and upper- middle class women) to higher educational opportunities and to senior employment positions, especially in the public sector. This increased visibility of women in urban and white-collar employment and in public life; as well as

their predominance in institutions of higher education is seen as a threat to men, at a time when men's employment may be becoming less secure. This sense of impotence brings into sharp focus men's feelings of reduced economic security which challenges the legitimacy of their presumed identity as 'provider' and head of household. This has resulted in serious tensions in gender relations as men perceive a loss of control over women and a loss of traditional markers of masculine gender identity. This has contributed to the increased violence against women and other men and more recently, a backlash against the women's movement where women's perceived advancement is blamed for the problems faced by men.

With the decline in agriculture and manufacturing however, local economic opportunities for the majority of poor women have also significantly declined resulting in increased poverty and regional or international migration. Today many of the options available for women (and sometimes accepted by their governments) to address this situation either explicitly or inadvertently e.g. tourism; casino development, involve the use of their bodies and their sexuality. As noted by Kamala Kempadoo:

Not only has the erosion of older economic bases for Caribbean peoples and the proliferation of survival strategies that involve some form of sexual labor become important to many women and men, but today Caribbean colonial and postcolonial states are increasingly incorporating sexuality into their national strategies for competing in the globalized economy. There is a growing world population that desires and demands, and has the possibility to command, new

leisure and pleasure activities that involve sex, and that makes its presence felt in the Caribbean.” (Kempadoo, 2004:3)

So while with economic restructuring the economic possibilities for many poor women decline their consumption demands increase not only for food, shelter, and essentials for family and children but also for a wider range of consumer items and beauty products - hair, wigs, weaves, nails etc. For women in low-income contexts the choices are either – low-wage employment, migration, leaving their children behind or a relationship with a male partner or child father who is economically viable, whatever the source of that economic viability may be. Caribbean men’s gender identity often includes both the need to be ‘respected’ as a man and the ability to use money to access women and/or to economically support them.

Globalization and Sexualization of Media Images and Messages

Global media, new information technologies and telecommunications have enabled many people in the world to become instantly connected to others and this has had positive and negative results. With an expanded and globalized US media there is also much more open representation of particular ideologies of gender and sexualities, sexual behaviours and discourses in a market-oriented context. With access to over 100 US cable channels and the liberalisation of local radio airwaves with the subsequent intense market competition, the content of a great deal of the popular youth music including local genres of music has been significantly altered. In my paper “Bling, Brands and Hypersexuality: Globalisation and Caribbean Masculinities and Femininities”, I noted the resounding impact of US media images on the shaping of the

lives of Caribbean young women and men. What is interesting about this turn of culture has been the complex intertwining of sex and money, the continuation of an old story but in a new an intensely market-oriented way. As I observed:

Therefore while much of Caribbean popular culture – calypso, soca, dancehall, etc, involves a negotiation between the demands of the Caribbean audiences and the hegemonic interest of the US market including US based Caribbean communities, what we witness is more than simply a hybridization of forms and content. We are witnessing the clear reflection of the new market fundamentalist ideology that is – if it sells its worth it, and of course “Sex i.e. women’s hyper-sexualized bodies, sells” hence the extreme hyper-sexualization of Caribbean music videos and local music channels such as MTV Tempo, CVM Plus and Synergy in a style similar to that in US music videos and music programmes on BET and MTV (Reddock, 2006).

The web-site Women, Girls and Media presents the results of a study by the American Psychological Association (APA) on *The Sexualization of Girls* which concluded that: virtually every media form studied provides ample evidence of the sexualization of women, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising. They concluded further that:

Girls are major consumers of media and receive and engage with these messages every day. According to Nielsen Media Research (1998), the average child or teen watches 3 hours of television per day, and the numbers are higher for Black and Latino youth. When various media are combined, children view 6 hours 32 minutes per day. The Kaiser Family Foundation (2003) reported that 68% of

children have a TV in their bedroom, that 51% of girls play interactive games on their computers and video game consoles, and that girls, like boys, are on their computers about an hour each day visiting Web sites, listening to music, frequenting chat rooms, playing games, and sending messages to friends (D. Roberts et al., 2005). Massive exposure to media among youth creates the potential for massive exposure to portrayals that sexualize women and girls and teach girls that women are sexual objects .²

The research reports on the sexualized representation of young girls from as young as five years old and the pressure on girls to be sexy; it also suggests that this early exposure to sexualized and objectifying media images can contribute to body dissatisfaction, depression and lower self-esteem in girls and also sexual objectification which can contribute to notions of women and girl's sexual availability and eventually to sexual violence by males³. What is also important to note is that that this sexualization of young girls and increasing exposure of young boys to a sexualised media takes place in a context where sexuality education does not take place in schools.

Religious Fundamentalism and Conservatism

Among the global impacts of the increasing consumerism and the excesses of the media imagery has been the emergence of sites of cultural resistance even in the Economic North. This is often reflected in a refocusing inward to elemental religious or ethnic identities resulting in new forms of xenophobia, religious intolerance, heightened ethnic tensions and new racisms. One of the most important of these has been the heightening of religious fundamentalism of all kinds and indeed a competition among these fundamentalisms which have negative impacts at global

² <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-summary.pdf>

³ As well as eating disorders and more violent types of self-harm.

and local levels especially for women's rights and autonomy. Peggy Antrobus has argued that the growth of religious fundamentalisms – Christian, Muslim and Hindu are all related to neo-liberal global restructuring. For example, religious institutions become spaces where the poor, especially women can go for food and sustenance in periods of economic deprivation; religion also becomes a site for ethnic and cultural identification against the homogenising impact of globalisation, while for young women in many societies the alternatives presented are between covering themselves completely through for example Islamic veiling or representing themselves in the hypersexualised way characteristic of the 'video hos' of US music videos. As I have noted earlier therefore, the gendered performance of piety becomes an alternative to the gendered performance of hypersexuality.

The romance with the silver screen has also provided many of the heroes and role models for working-class Caribbean males for decades. Media and now internet violence has intensified resulting in a normalisation of violence as part of everyday life. The majority of video games and music videos are directed at men and present a distorted view of women and girls who may often be the victim of verbal and physical abuse.⁴ One of the main characteristics of the US media has been the normalisation of physical violence and hypersexuality as entertainment and it has also served to normalise the gun as the weapon of choice for people, especially men worldwide. The de-regulation of imports have also increased opportunities for the importation of guns in unprecedented numbers or as part of the drug trade which has now overtaken our region. Before 2000, firearms were responsible for less than one-third of all homicides. By May 2006, this percentage had risen to 74 percent. The percentage of homicides attributed to firearms in Trinidad and Tobago lies well within the range of rates of 60 percent to 93 percent seen in Latin

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America (Guerrero, 1998). For many countries of the English-speaking Caribbean, the majority of assaults and homicides, including murders of and violence against women, were committed in past years with blunt or sharp weapons.

Expanding our Notion of Gender-based Violence

As we move forward to address these new challenges it should be noted that our understanding of gender-based violence has also been transformed in many ways.

Violence against Women has traditionally been equated with gender-based violence and this continues to be a significant component. This however cannot be seen as the only aspect of gender –based violence. If we understand gender as the social construction of masculinities and femininities and gender-based violence as the violence that results from the inequities and unequal power relations inherent in existing gender ideologies, then men’s violence to themselves, to other men and to women, what Michael Kaufman calls The Triad of Men’s Violence must also be considered a form of gender-based violence. School for example we have found, is also a violent place for boys and young men although they would not always admit it. As with young girls they run the risk of rape and sexual assault, but they also run the daily risk of physical violence and the need to continuously prove his masculinity through acts of personal risk and violence to others. Today young men in this country and in other parts of the region are dying daily in another kind of gender-based violence. A gender-based violence that is derived from destructive ideologies of masculinity that are no longer effective even in the limited ways in which they may have been in the past. They are not dying because the status of women is improving or because of our work on gender equality..

In seeking to eliminate gender-based violence we must do so with the recognition that liberating men from their own destructive gender ideologies and gender-based violence would also contribute to the elimination of violence against women. I refer here not primarily to women's violence against men but to the much more predominant men's violence towards themselves and to other men, which includes relations between fathers and sons.

But our understanding of gender-based violence has also been transformed by the increased visibility and activism of what I shall call for want of a better term – non-normative sex/gender identities and practices. This refers to what others call LGBTQ persons but which I prefer to understand not only in relation to their sexualities but in relation to their full humanity like everyone else. The issue therefore of violence towards such individuals and groups is also now on the agenda.

The issue of child sexual abuse is also now more than ever on the table. We are aware of its prevalence in the region but have only just begun to study and seek to understand it. What we do know is that many of the factors that have been addressed here also apply.

In closing we have to admit the enormity of the task that we have set ourselves. The elimination of gender-based violence in all its complex manifestations and forms requires in many ways a total transformation of our society one step at a time. Each of us in our particular ways has a contribution to make – the school teacher, the researcher, the parent, the government official, the economist, the media practitioner, ordinary men and women. Our societies cannot afford the continuation and escalation of gender-based violence. Transforming the gender ideologies and the practises that

emanate from them in our existing cultural context is the task ahead – media practitioners your role will be especially important in this 21st century world.

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