



SUB-REGIONAL CONSULTATION: CARIBBEAN

Building synergies for the implementation of the Global Strategy for Women's Children's and Adolescents' Health in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Session 1: *Global Strategy for Women's, Children and Adolescent Health.*

Topic: Linkages of the Global Strategy with Caribbean Priorities.

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to participate in this Caribbean Sub-Regional Consultation on the Global Strategy for Women's Children's and Adolescents' Health.

The Global Strategy as we are all aware builds on the Every Woman, Every Child Initiative, and I am pleased to share that a determined group of CARICOM Spouses of Heads of State and Governments have been working diligently over the past two years to translate this global initiative into a Caribbean reality.

Launched in 2015 as a derivative of Ban Ki Moon's global Every Woman, Every Child initiative, the *Every Caribbean Woman Every Caribbean Child (ECWECC)* initiative, is committed to addressing inequities through the implementation of the global strategy. It provides us with a platform for advocacy and action to focus on key social determinants of health that negatively influence the development of our countries. We are cognizant of the importance of intersectorial and mulitsectorial collaboration in meeting global targets.

However, it is imperative that we have high political engagement to support legislations and policies needed to solidify new and existing initiatives for vulnerable children and women in our communities.

The ECWECC initiative is in line with several international obligations and frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Sustainable Development and Goals, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD +4) and the 2016 UN Political Declaration on fast tracking the End of HIV; as such, this Caribbean initiative is intricately linked to the global strategies which aims to ensure healthy lives and well-being for all, at all ages through the global strategy's *Survive* elements. Through its *Thrive* and *Transform* elements it hopes to eradicate poverty, empower women and girls, ensure quality education for all, end violence and discrimination against women, and enhance global partnerships for sustainable development. Regionally, the ECWECC will contribute towards the achievement of the goals and objectives of several subregional undertakings including the Integrated Strategic Framework for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy in the Caribbean, the MOU between the CARICOM Secretariat and UN Women, the Regional Framework for Action for Children, and the CARICOM Youth Development Action Plan.

Ladies and gentlemen, as a mother, spouse of the Prime Minister of Belize and the Special Envoy for Women and Children, I am pleased to be a key member of the ECWECC action group. The agenda today is both dynamic and urgent as we have the opportunity to chart the way forward for our countries to address Caribbean priorities. Those include the reduction of teenage and adolescent pregnancy, cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS/TB, elimination of mother to child HIV transmission, and human trafficking. Far too many women, children and adolescents within or region still have little or no access to essential, good-quality health services and education.

On a daily basis they face violence and discrimination, are unable to participate fully in society, and encounter several other barriers.

Optimizing the health of women and children must be a “*public good*.” The adolescent population in the Caribbean is approximately 1.6 million; half of them are girls and young women. The Latin America and Caribbean region has the highest levels of adolescent pregnancy globally. It is estimated that around 20% of women in the Caribbean have had at least one child by the age of 19 with a considerable percentage of adolescent girls even giving birth before the age of 15. In Belize about 1 in 10 girls aged 15-19 years has had a birth. Unintended pregnancy and too-early childbearing within our region is still a worrisome trend given the medical, economic and psychological impact of pregnancy on teenagers. Young women are forced to discontinue their education when they become pregnant, greatly restricting their economic opportunities and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Risky sexual behaviors place women and adolescents in situations where they are not only likely to become pregnant, but are susceptible to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. In 2015, there were an estimated 100,000 new HIV infections in Latin America and the Caribbean and 50,000 AIDS-related deaths. Survey data from the Caribbean show that between 5 and 16% of young women aged 15 to 24 report that they became sexually active before the age of 15. In a 2015 study conducted in Belize, 44% of boys and 40% of girls aged 15-19 years have comprehensive knowledge of HIV transmission, but only 65% of adolescents reported using a condom during their last sexual encounter.

Though a vaccine-preventable disease, lack of information has led to a spike in the number of women with cervical cancer within our region. Current Caribbean estimates indicate that every year 43 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 17 die from the disease.

Cervical cancer remains a significant public health concern in the Caribbean where it is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women.

In addition to the aforementioned health issues facing women and adolescents, violence and harassment continue to plague Caribbean women and girls. Both women and adolescents may experience abuse in the form of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, and/or human trafficking. Not only are the human rights of victims violated, they are also physically, and psychologically damaged.

Ladies and gentlemen, we recognize the need for country led priorities, informed policies and alignment to the development agendas of the CARICOM region. The rolling out of the ECWECC template is more important than ever. With the results from the unfolding pilot project in Jamaica, we hope to obtain policy recommendations that will act as a roadmap to achieving sustainable development goals. The work is daunting and organizing ourselves as a Region is critical if we are to make progress. How do we reduce adolescent pregnancy by 20% by 2019? How can we improve access to cervical cancer screening and utilization of the HPV vaccine in all CARICOM countries by 2019? What are those factors that can impede the elimination of mother to child transmission of HIV in the Caribbean by 2019? And how can we as a Region reduce violence against women and children, inclusive of a strong legislative platform?

In Belize, the national response to women's children's and adolescent's health and gender inequity has been ongoing. Belize has added the HPV vaccine to their vaccination schedule.

In 2013, Belize's National Gender Policy was revised to address the systemic socio-cultural, economic and political inequalities in gender. Belize has several pieces of legislation aimed at ensuring the social, psychological, and economic health and wellbeing including gender equality and the protection of children from all forms of violence.

I am pleased to share that my office has carried out a variety of projects and activities geared toward eradicating inequality and protecting the rights of women, children, and adolescents in Belize. The establishment of a national referral center for children with disabilities, The Inspiration Center, provides a variety of therapy services and aims to ensure the rights of children and youths with disabilities, enabling them to be full participants in their society. The Center is unique due to its merging of two health service delivery models— Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) and medical services. Our services prioritise children from poor and vulnerable families.

Another project I executed through my office was the establishment of a state of the art dedicated Pediatric and Neonatal intensive care unit which is housed at Belize's National Referral hospital.

This unit meets international standards and is equipped to offer optimum care to babies coping with birth complications including premature and poly-traumatized children, children with complications from cancer treatments, trauma, post cardiac surgery, HIV, tuberculosis, pneumonia, meningitis and other conditions.

Throughout the Caribbean, creative efforts are needed to ensure full and equal access to health, education and recreational services for children in order to uphold their dignity, promote their self-reliance, and facilitate their active participation in the community.

In October 2016 my office in collaboration with UNICEF Belize hosted a regional conference for children with disabilities to assess the state of the region as it pertains to access to care and services for children with disabilities, and to develop a roadmap that will pave the way forward as we strive for a more inclusive society.

With the revitalization of the Caribbean First Ladies Network, we can harmonize efforts to combat this and other issues that touches across Caribbean priorities.

Despite all the efforts and progress that have been made in ensuring gender equality and equity, there are still barriers to achieving the parity between men and women that is essential to true development. In contemplation of this, my Office has undertaken an ongoing women's empowerment movement which includes a bi-yearly 20,000 Strong Women's Empowerment Rally. This Rally serves as a platform for a collective approach at finding solutions to the issues that affect the lives of women and demonstrates the power, influence and significance of women.

I continue to implement strategies to ensure the growth and development of the people of my country. Recent initiatives include negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency and PACT for support in establishing a comprehensive cancer center for Belize.

Through the newly established SHE for BELIZE Foundation, I hope to highlight the need for health and family life education in our schools and in the media, the need for information on sexual and reproductive health, the need for creative means of distributing contraceptives, the development of an educational campaign around HIV/AIDS prevention through the use of prophylactics and the need for universal health coverage and access to integrated health and social services for citizens infected and affected by HIV /AIDS.

Ladies and gentlemen, the voices of our women, children, and adolescents should not be ignored. The investments we make today in women's, children's and adolescents' health and wellbeing will help build peaceful, sustainable and inclusive societies for future generations. We must ensure that we pursue a coordinated approach for sustainability by acting in solidarity both locally and internationally, by identifying sustainable financing and by initiating and strengthening partnerships.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and everyone else who has worked tirelessly to make this event a reality. I also want to thank First Ladies and Spouses of CARICOM Heads of Government who champion this cause through their continuous work at national and community levels; GILEAD Sciences Inc. for its vested interest in the health of persons within our Region, and anyone else who has advocated for gender equity to improve the lives of women, children and adolescents.

Thank you!