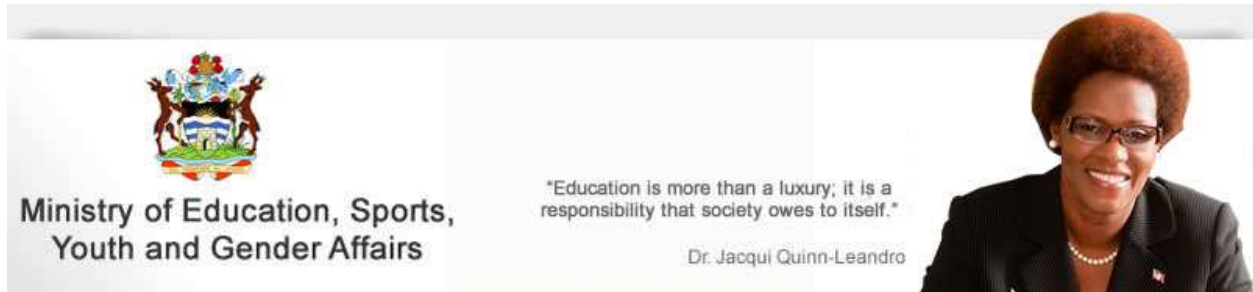


International Women's Day

A speech by Dr. Hon. Jacqui Quinn-Leandroⁱ
Minister of Education, Sports, Youth & Gender Affairs
Antigua and Barbuda



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It is always a pleasure and an honour for me to speak on the occasion of International Women's Day, and each year that we attempt to raise awareness and to bring women's issues to the fore; one gets a sense of euphoria for the day; and a sense of falling back into the 'same-old-same-old' after March 8th. But I am buoyed by the Scripture found in Galatians 6:9 which admonishes us "*Do not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.*"

It's hard to believe that it's been an entire year since we all met at this very venue and celebrated womanhood in a manner which has left a lasting impression on many of us. Many experiences were shared. Moving encounters of health challenges; of being the lone woman in an industry dominated by men; of being thrust suddenly into positions of single parenthood and breadwinner; of mental and emotional survival after rape. The stories were varied but the common thread running through them all was the indomitable strength and spirit of a woman.

I reflect on last year's celebration because it's good to hear stories which inspire us but it is if and how we use that inspiration in our own lives that truly make the difference. It is important that when such a fire of inspiration is lit within us that we pass it on. It is how we bear each other up; it is how we continue the movement of gender equality and equity; the movement of empowerment for our girls and women; the movement for the eradication of gender based violence and all the issues that affect women.

The gathering of women together, particularly on International Women's Day, ought to be more than only a celebration of womanhood. What we celebrate are our milestones; our battles won; our continued causes because while we celebrate, countless women across the face of this earth have nothing to smile about. They are subjected to a life of sub-humanity for the sheer fact alone that they were born female.

When I was asked to speak this morning, I thought about the possible themes which I would like to share with you sisters; and before me flashed a multitude of these issues which haunt us every day, every month, every year. And one which jumped out at me which is a significant stride we have made since the last IWD is the passage into law of the Human Trafficking legislation and the very first cases which are now before the courts of trafficking in women, one of the most despicable violations of humanity and womanhood.

Whether we want to believe it or not and whether we want to accept it or not, we have in this country and throughout the Caribbean, women who are forced into the sex trade because of poverty and their economic demands. We have women who are promised jobs as domestics for instance but upon arrival in the country, their passports are taken from them and they are told of the requirements of their quote on quote "Job". While we also know that many women voluntarily enter the sex trade, there are still large numbers who are forced into it. Poverty and inequity are root causes of trafficking.

Gender discrimination within the family and the community, as well as a tolerance of violence against women and children, also come into play and we implore you to support the Directorate, the Police and Immigration authorities in their collective efforts to end human trafficking.

In 2012; in this 21st century we are thrilled to have more women in the boardrooms across the globe, greater equality in legislative rights, more visibility of women's issues; more impressive women role models in all walks of life.

Indeed if we were looking just at the surface one could easily be fooled into thinking that women have gained true equality. And we hear the snickering and the *off the cuff* remarks about "*what more do they want?*" The unfortunate, deeper, unvarnished truth is that women are still not paid equally to that of their male counterparts, women still are not present in equal numbers in business or politics; and globally women's education, health and the violence against them is worse than that of men.

The vast majority of the world's poor are women. Two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female. Of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls. And today, HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's disease. In several southern African countries, more than three-quarters of all young people living with HIV are women. Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient.

I just want to remind you that Goal Three of the Millennium Development Goals promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women as a global reaffirmation of women's rights and gender equality as core values of development. MDG Goal #3 includes:

- Women's right to own and inherit property;
- Equal access to productive assets and resources including land, credit and technology;
- Eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and the girl child;
- Increased representation of women in government decision-making bodies and;
- Universal access to reproductive health.

These remain the global policy framework for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Today, we continue to celebrate our commitment to a cause. The Directorate of Gender Affairs champions many causes with a staff of fewer than 20. Imagine if each of us partnered with the Directorate to further the cause of women and girls. Just imagine!

Let our presence here today be worthy of something. Ask yourselves what you have done for another woman lately. Ask yourselves if you are worthy of being here today celebrating International Women's Day? These questions may not be considered nice questions but they are an attempt to encourage you to leave your consciousness open to the plight of our sisters.

I am happy to see the young students of the AGHS in our midst today. Your being here will give you insight into a world of experiences you may be oblivious to. There are scourges which plague humankind which unfortunately you will not escape; for even if those experiences are not yours personally; you will bear witness to them by association. However, there are other things you won't experience thanks to those who have come before you who fought and sacrificed to pave the way for you.

Imagine that there was once a time when women were not allowed to vote. That was fought for by *women then* for *women now* and *women to come*. Imagine that in Antigua and Barbuda up to seven short years ago a wife had to have her husband's signed permission before a doctor would perform tubal ligation on his wife. Reversing that was fought for by women here in this very room; not for themselves but for other women and women to come. Imagine that two short years ago it was left to the discretion of the principal or the Director of Education if a pregnant student could return to school to finish her secondary education. Women right here in this room agitated for that to change so that female students now and female students to come are afforded their right to an education *like student fathers*.

You are young and I celebrate you being here because you must know the significance of the sacrifices made in your honour and the importance of your involvement and commitment to the causes of girls and women. You are not less than anyone because you are female; it is one thing to hear it and another thing all together to believe it and make sure others believe it too. Thank you so much for being here today my little sisters.

As women and girls we are thankful for the distances God has brought us. We are aware however, of the journey that lies ahead. We are cognizant of the challenges, *not insurmountable*, but real challenges nonetheless, that continue to greet us in our everyday lives. The challenges of a professional woman, always needing to prove her worth. The challenges of a mother raising children in a society that seems designed to work against her. The challenges of a woman both mother and professional who successfully walks the tightrope of a balancing act.

As a nation; as a people; as a Christian society there needs to be an understanding and appreciation of the invaluable work and worth of our women. Today, International Women's Day 2012 let's celebrate those who've gone before and encourage and celebrate those to come. Let us stick together and be careful with each other so we *can be a force together*. Let's make this a great day!

ⁱ Jacqui Quinn-Leandro was educated at the Holy Trinity School, Five Islands Primary School, Pilgrim High School, Ottos Comprehensive and The Antigua Girl's High School. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Arts and Mass Communication (First Class Honours) at the University of the West Indies, a Master's degree in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Cambridge University (England) and a Doctor of Philosophy in Communications from McGill University in Canada.