

**Welcoming Speech by
Mrs Indranie Chandarpal,
Minister for Women's Affairs, Guyana**

Madame Chairperson, Honourable Justice Desirée Bernard, Chief Justice of Guyana; Honourable Justice Cecil Kennard, Chancellor of the Judiciary; Honourable Attorney General Mr. Bernard De Santos; Distinguished Members of the Head Table, Chief Justices, Judges, Honourable Ministers; other distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen:

It is my pleasure and honour to welcome you here to Guyana to discuss this very necessary and vital agenda to further our commitment to ensuring a world safe from fear and violence for women and girls and a world which respects and upholds their rights as human rights.

The roles of all in society are important if we are to ensure not only the safety of women and girls, but also their right to participate equally in all aspects of national life. The role of the judiciary cannot be overstated, and, in particular, the roles of senior judges, to send a powerful message that women and girls are entitled to the same rights as the other half of humanity. Gender does not in any way diminish this right.

The impact of this message, coming from such distinguished bodies, has the potential to have a positive impact on the lives of women and girls and equally so, on the attitudes, behaviour and action of the larger community.

I am particularly pleased with the pace of change and the action that is being taken globally and locally to further this agenda. Of course, at times it seems slow, but we are struggling with changing patterns of social relations and behaviours that are centuries old and deep-rooted. The last decades, however, have seen an unprecedented move to put right these unequal social patterns. With the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (the CEDAW Convention),¹ referred to as the women's bill of rights, has come the awakening to the problems of the unequal and discriminatory status of women and the need to take action.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, solidifies this commitment by stating that the "rights of women and the girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights".²

¹ 1249 UNTS 13, adopted 1 March 1980, entered into force 3 September 1981.

² Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, June 1993, UN Doc A/CONF.157/24, at 33, para 18

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The Platform for Action adopted by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing³ called for action by all governments to uphold women's human rights and to develop plans and action at the level of the nation to support women's human rights.

As we deliberate on our agenda over the next few days, it is important that we bear in mind a few of the principles reaffirmed in the *Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles for Promoting the Human Rights of Women* adopted in Zimbabwe in 1994.⁴

1. That "all too often universal human rights were narrowly perceived as confined to civil and political rights and not extending to economic and social rights, which may be of more importance to women. Civil and political rights and economic and social rights are integral and complimentary parts of one coherent system of global human rights."⁵ Women's lives are such that all issues are interconnected, therefore their rights cannot be perceived in a piecemeal fashion. Poverty and the right to equal pay for work of equal value are interconnected issues for women.
2. The attempt to separate violations of human rights in women's lives into those in the private sphere and those in the public sphere, with those rights violated within the privacy of the home being deemed to be outside the domain of national human rights mechanisms. But we know now of the continuum and the interconnectedness of violence and inequities in women's lives – that the devaluing of women outside the home impacts on how she is treated inside and vice versa. We cannot afford this separation. The human rights of women are as important in the private sphere as they are in the public sphere.

Our challenge is to ensure that our commitment embodies the upholding of these rights in both spheres. Our particular agenda took its first steps in the form of the *Victoria Falls Declaration of Principles for Promoting the Human Rights of Women*. At the Fifth Meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women gave a few samples of random statistics which explained why the international community reacted in the way it did to the problem of violence

(1993), 32 ILM 1661.

³ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, in *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing September 1995, UN Doc A/CONF.177/20 (17 October 1995), 35 ILM 401.

⁴ *Victoria Falls Declaration on the Promotion of the Human Rights of Women in the Commonwealth Secretariat*, Report of the Commonwealth Judicial Colloquium on Promoting the Human Rights of Women, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, August 1994 (London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995) at 8. The text of the *Declaration* is reproduced in this volume.

⁵ *Id.* at para 2.

why the international community reacted in the way it did to the problem of violence against women. She reported that every six minutes a rape occurs in the United States of America. In Bangladesh, malnutrition was found to be three times more common among girls than boys. In Africa, 80 million women have undergone female genital mutilation. In Pakistan, 99% of housewives are beaten by their husbands and in South Africa, in every one and a half minutes a female is raped, which amounts to about 380,000 each year. These are just a few statistics, but they are enough to cause us to become quite alarmed, especially when statistics show how vulnerable women are in relation to sexual harassment, trafficking, sexual slavery, bonded labour, dowry-related murder, genital mutilation and forced prostitution.

The issues are well documented and the awareness programme, started previously, is now intensifying. In 1988 the Commonwealth Secretariat undertook a number of judicial colloquia to encourage wider application of international and regional human rights standards at the national level. The Beijing Platform of Action⁶ and the Commonwealth Platform of Action⁷ identifies violence against women as one of the areas of grave concern.

The Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) and the CARICOM Plan of Action also reiterated the need for an integrated approach to deal with the violation of the rights of women and girls.⁸ Significantly, as of April 1997, 16 countries of the Americas and the Caribbean have ratified the Convention of Belém do Pará dealing with violence against women.⁹ Guyana is a signatory to a number of conventions including the CEDAW Convention,¹⁰ the Convention of the Rights of the Child,¹¹ and the Inter-American Convention on the Protection, Punishment and Eradication of

⁶ *Supra* note 2.

⁷ Commonwealth Platform for Action on Gender and Development 1995 in *The 1995 Commonwealth Platform for Action on Gender and Development: A Commonwealth Vision* (London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1995).

⁸ For information on the Inter-American Commission of Women see <http://www.oas.org/>, and for information on the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) see <http://www.caricom.org/>

⁹ Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women 1994 (Convention of Belém do Pará), 33 ILM 1534. For the text of the Convention see the Internet web site of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States, at <http://www.oas.org/cim/homecim.htm> and for related information see the University of Minnesota Human Rights Library web site at <http://www.umn.edu/humanrts/>

¹⁰ *Supra* note 1.

¹¹ GA Res 44/25, UN Doc A/44/49, at 166 (1989), adopted on 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990.

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Violence against Women.¹² We believe that lip service should not be paid to these conventions and as such initiatives were taken to give them effect.

In Guyana, two pieces of legislation, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and the Domestic Violence Act 1996, are still very new in terms of implementation. Initiatives already undertaken have included the resuscitation of the Legal Aid Centre and the creation of Help & Shelter, a non-governmental organisation, to give counselling and training to people working in their sector.

Also, the Guyana Association of Women Lawyers played a very significant role in educating women about the laws that are in place to protect them. We still have a long way to go, but we believe that the state has a responsibility to its people, therefore it is absolutely necessary to enact appropriate laws and procedure to give women redress.

As we approach the new century we are faced with enormous challenges and possibilities that will demand from us a genuine commitment to work on behalf of those who are burdened daily with inequities ranging from poverty to terror, which denies them the freedom and opportunity to take their rightful places in society. Think of this great potential, of freeing up half of humanity from their shackles in search of a new world built upon equity, justice and freedom to enjoy the common human rights basic to all humanity. Together we can all make this dream a reality. I am sure the subjects that will be covered during the next four days will be of great benefit to the promotion of the human rights of women and the girl-child through the judiciary.

I wish the participants and sponsors of this Colloquium our very best wishes and sincere appreciation in their quest to further advance the cause of women and the world over.

Finally, to all our friends who are in our country for the first time, please enjoy our famous Guyanese hospitality and do come again.

I thank you.

¹² Convention of Belém do Pará, *supra* note 9.