



PRESS RELEASE

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OPENING REMARKS BY DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL

CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM)

AMBASSADOR MANORMA SOEKNANDAN, PhD

AT THE

WORKSHOP TO MARK 'GIRLS IN ICT DAY 2014'

CARICOM SECRETARIAT HEADQUARTERS

24 APRIL 2014

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to welcome you today – both to the Secretariat and to the first Secretariat observance of Girls in ICT day.

In observing this day with you – we show continued solidarity with the United Nations and the International Telecommunications Union's (ITU's) call for action to empower women and girls to meet their goals and aspirations by using and also becoming an active part in delivering success in Information Communications Technology.

Many of you are aware that Gender equality is a basic human right enshrined in the United Nations Charter and it is one of the main objectives of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGS). ICTs are powerful tools that can help accelerate progress towards achieving this target, and it is for this reason that the International Telecommunications Union Council

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proposed that the world focus more efforts on women and girls, using the power of ICTs to provide new digital opportunities in the hope of ending unfairness and empowering the female half of the world's population.

Many of you here today are at the point where you are thinking about your future and the careers which will help to guide that future. Our hope at the CARICOM Secretariat today, is that we will 'trigger' many of you into taking up ICT studies and careers. So we choose to observe this day under the theme 'Celebrating Girls in ICT' to recognise those girls and women already in ICT and for those of you who will join this ever growing field of study.

I don't need to convince you that we are living in a digital age. You know that better than I do. Almost everything we do and every gadget in our lives is driven by technology,. There are more goods and services associated with the digital era than any other era in history. You are part of the Generation fondly referred to as the 'iGeneration', 'Generation Tech', 'Digital Natives' or 'Generation Next'.

ICT is the fastest growing sector around the world. Yet, we find that many girls are not attracted to this vibrant, dynamic sector. There is a perception that ICT is for 'geeks', ICT is boring or for males.

There are different fields in ICTs that women can play key roles in and succeed. For example, teaching ICT, software development, telecommunications, computer engineering, space development, Electronic and Electrical Engineering.

More women and girls need to come into the ICT field to aid the development of the countries of our region and by extension the world. *We have all heard the Ghanaian proverb: If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation).*

Statistics continually show us that men and boys dominate the STEM and ICT fields. To any or all of you thinking about entering the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) field, my advice to you is to seize the opportunities laid out in front of you and create your own future. Your education is a privilege, and the knowledge you're obtaining everyday, including today, is power. You can use it to help yourself, your family and others. You bring a special perspective to the STEM field and any field as a female.

From all corners of the earth, we hear stories of women and girls doing new, meaningful things with ICT – In India we hear of a story of women making laptop bags out of old saris

and who are interested to learn how to develop an application so that they can sell these bags on the Internet. In Africa, women have developed simple applications with the help of other women to track the progress and development of cows in their flock or the cows in the collective 'pool' of a village.

In the larger developed countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden – several studies and reports support the fact that when more women and girls join the workforce in sectors supported and dependent on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – there is accelerated social and economic development.

Although, these are new stories – the history of women in ICT goes all the way back to one of the first computers called the ENIAC which stands for Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer. ENIAC is described as the first electronic general-purpose computer. It was digital, and capable of being reprogrammed to solve "a large amount of numerical problems" according to Wikipedia. When ENIAC was announced in 1946 it was heralded in the press as a "Giant Brain". The first programmers of ENIAC were young women since it was considered 'not sufficiently manly' to do that type of work.

There are also success stories in our region- ranging from software and application development including having a Caribbean application which featured on the bestseller list of the Apple iTunes store in the first weekend of February this year, to having many women business owners with ICT businesses. However, there are not as many success stories as we would like.

This is mainly because access to ICTs is not always easy in our region. There are several reasons for this state of affairs which include issues of persons and families not being able to afford a computer, no ICT curricula in schools, computer literacy, limited number of computers per student, power challenges among others. We need more role models, more persons willing to be mentors, we need to encourage companies and businesses to open more opportunities for internships; we need increased positive messages about ICT and the role of girls in ICT in primary and secondary schools.

The good news is – that at the regional level many organisations such as the CARICOM Secretariat are working hard to improve this situation. It is also important for you to know that the issues which I mentioned above and others are being discussed by your Heads of Government.

At their recent Meeting, in March of this year– Heads of Government agreed to many plans which will have impact on the Education programmes – to ensure that they can really equip you for the digital age, offer alternate paths to graduation and which also have positive impact on the Labour sector to ensure that there are jobs available for the skills you acquire in the course of that education.

It is also important that I share with you that at the global level:

- ✓ Jobs in the ICT sector are lifting women out of poverty;
- ✓ Job opportunities in the digital economy continue to grow growing demand for qualified personnel with mathematics, science, engineering, and computing skills;
- ✓ Companies across the world are looking to increase the number of women in the sector;
- ✓ ICT solutions more and more require a human touch and the communications skills that are specific to women.

Science and technology continually have significant positive impact on the world. You can choose to contribute to that positive impact. There is always something new, and there are always more problems looking for solutions. There is always more that can be done. The scope of opportunity is limitless.

In closing, I want to assure you that it is great but at the same time very challenging to be a girl in the world. It means for most of you- you are young woman and you have many useful, productive years ahead of you. I encourage you to strive to be the best that you can be in any field or career you choose. You must be diligent in your learning, curious about everything and strive to remain positive whatever the circumstances. Have dreams, walk together and support each other. Parents should steadfast support the young generation to fulfill their dreams.

I know that you are eager to get into the exciting programme planned for you today. Some of you will no doubt make new discoveries. I hope all of you do. I also encourage you to take the time to make new friends.

Have a great day!

I thank you.