

**High Level Multi-stakeholder Meeting on the
Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy in the Caribbean**

9 December 2013

President of the UN General Assembly

H. E. John W. Ashe

Honourable Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago,
Honourable Ministers

Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director United Nations Population
Fund,

Ambassador Irwin Larocque, Secretary General of CARICOM,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. The President of the General Assembly expresses his sincere regrets that he cannot be here today, but he has asked me to read the following statement he prepared.

Let me begin by thanking our gracious host country, the UNFPA and the CARICOM Secretariat for organizing today's meeting on this important issue about which all of us as parents and from this region – my home region- are deeply concerned.

Let us be clear about the magnitude of the challenge we are here to face today. On one hand, we are here to address the challenges of motherhood during childhood, and its far-reaching and often devastating consequences. On the other hand, we are also here to speak about how our adolescent girls hold the key to a world without poverty and a world with greater human dignity for all.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If we can figure out the right tools to empower our young girls, we can be well on our way to rectifying a lapse in basic human rights, and have a positive impact on the development trajectories of our communities and countries. For this complex issue of reducing adolescent pregnancy not only affects the lives of millions of young teenage girls, but also has broader and serious impacts on families, health care systems, and our communities and societies as a whole.

In its latest report on the State of the World Population, the UN Population Fund's (UNFPA) has provided us with stark figures - every year in the developing world, 7.3 million adolescent girls give birth; 2 million of them are under the age of 15. In the Caribbean, about one in five women under 19 has been pregnant at least once. For the Caribbean, where the rates of adolescent pregnancy are among the highest in the world, this is a very serious concern. The consequences of early pregnancy are long lasting and sometimes dire. Adolescent pregnancy carries significant health risks for both mother and infant. Every day, 200 teenage girls die in childbirth or following pregnancy complications. Their babies are also at higher risk of still birth and death in their first year.

Distinguished Guests,

Let us not forget the price that is paid both to the health of these young adolescent girls and to their families and communities. For young, poor parents who are already struggling to eke out a living, each additional child puts further strain on an already small budget to raise their families. It affects a mother's ability to complete her education and find employment, and in turn, restricts the future opportunities of her children. This lost potential has a significant cost for societies; the annual income foregone by teenage mothers can run as high as 30% of a country's GDP.

If we are to tackle this difficult issue, we need to understand the root causes of adolescent pregnancy. Time and again, young girls are blamed for making

bad choices. However, as UNFPA highlights it in its report, early pregnancies often reflect an absence of choices.

Everywhere in the world, poverty is a key risk factor. Poor girls, particularly in rural areas, are less likely to stay in school and tend to bear children earlier. Further, they lack access to family planning resources. Tragically and with despairing consequences, many pregnancies of young girls are also the result of sexual violence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on Ending All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provide a framework to protect adolescent girls' rights. They affirm the rights to education, health and protection from sexual abuse; the right to enter marriage with full consent and to freely choose the number and spacing of children. But if we want to empower adolescent girls, we need to turn these rights into reality, not only in national policies, but right down to each family.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) prioritized improving female education and maternal health and reducing infant mortality, and there have been some significant strides. However, the MDG target to reduce maternal mortality is off-track. In particular, we need specific programmes for very young adolescents who face the greatest health risks associated with pregnancy. Further, adolescents and youth need age-appropriate sexual education in order to protect their health throughout their lives.

Preventing adolescent pregnancies is both a development and a human rights issue. To address it effectively, we need a holistic approach to promote girl's and women's rights and rectify pervasive gender inequalities and discrimination. As we now open a new chapter in development history in setting the stage for the post-2015 development agenda- which as some of you may know is the theme of the 68th Session of the UN General Assembly –

we need to build on the success of the MDG's. In September, Member States adopted an outcome document that sets the roadmap for the post 2015 development agenda. They recognized that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls underpins and advances progress across all development goals. The vital role played by women and the harnessing of the future potential of young girls is vitally important to the future we want, and in recognition of this, I will convene a High-Level event on the contributions of women, the young and civil society to the post-2015 development agenda to be held in March 2014.

I would like to close with a short story about a recent experience I had as President of the 68th session of the General Assembly. Not long ago, I had the good fortune to speak with a group of youth who grew up in an impoverished urban slum in Nairobi, Kenya. These young people had gone to university and then returned home to try and improve the unacceptable and inadequate conditions they know all too well. I can say without hesitation that speaking with this group of young men and women – and witnessing their commitment and selflessness - was one of my most moving moments as President of the General Assembly. There were a number of bright young women within the group and I noted how their education had empowered them with knowledge and confidence. It is not lost on me that early and risky pregnancies would not only have likely robbed these women of their opportunities in life, it would have robbed their communities of the benefit of having empowered young women in their midst as well. Likewise, the group included articulate young men, one of whom remarked that for true gender equality to take root, we need more than tokenism and empty gestures. He knew, as I'm sure we all do, the issues of reducing gender discrimination and improving access to girls education belong to all of us because they better all of us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply concerned that pregnancies amongst girls under age 15 are on the rise in the Caribbean region, which makes this meeting all the more urgent. With each young girl child who is robbed of her youth, or her health, or

her educational opportunities due to an early and risky pregnancy, one dream is lost in the world. Let us do everything in our power to ensure that the rights – and the dreams – of our young girls are protected and honoured.

Empowering today's young girls – tomorrow's women – is not only just, it is an investment in our shared future.

Thank you.