**Speaking Notes**

**Announcement of CEDAW Extension**

**Honourable Tara Rivers, JP, Minister for Education, Employment and Gender Affairs**

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*8th March 2016*

**Panel:**

HE the Governor Helen Kilpatrick

Hon. Premier Alden McLaughlin

Hon. Tara Rivers, Minister for Education Employment and Gender Affairs

* Good afternoon and thanks again for being here. I want to talk a bit more about the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (or commonly known as CEDAW) and what the granting of the extension means for Cayman, as well as the meaningful work that the Government is doing to advance the gender equality movement here in the Cayman Islands.
* However, before I do that I would like to acknowledge the fact that today is International Women’s Day, and I would like to send my best wishes to all women in the Cayman Islands on this special day.
* The Cayman Islands Government is pleased to support this year’s International Women’s Day theme “Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up For Gender Equality”, as chosen by the United Nations, because it is one that speaks to action, advancement, building momentum, and acceleration towards gender equality.
* You may ask, “How have **WE** in the Cayman Islands stepped it up for gender equality?” Well today, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, I am excited to be here today to share with the country that the Cayman Islands Government’s request to have CEDAW extended to us was approved last week by the United Kingdom.
* But before I speak more specifically about CEDAW, I would like to take this opportunity to provide a bit of a recap of some of the significant work and efforts of the Ministry of Education, Employment and Gender Affairs over the past 2 ½ years to work towards promoting gender equality:
  + the **first National Conference on Women and Girls in 2014**;
    - In March and June of 2014, with the theme ***Inspiring Change*** and through an interactive agenda, the National Conference on Women and Meeting on Women and Girls in the Sister Islands was convened and discussions were organised around the Principles espoused in CEDAW. The Conference and Meeting sought to:
    - 1. bring awareness about the rights to which girls and women are entitled under CEDAW in order to improve the lives of girls and women in particular, and society in general;
    - 2. gather qualitative data in order to establish priority issues and identify any potential areas of concern in relation to CEDAW, which will assist in developing Government’s implementation plan; and
    - 3. create a space in which to educate, inspire and empower individuals to be ‘Architects of Change’ at a personal level and within society, and to promote messages of equality between men and women.
    - Small focus groups were utilised to create a participatory approach to discussing and addressing challenges and proposing sustainable solutions.
    - The response was overwhelmingly positive, with over 200 persons attending the events and others participating in the broader public consultation exercise that followed.
    - Dr. Glenda P. Simms – in attendance from Jamaica as the guest speaker for the National Conference – lauded our approach as a model for inclusive consultation that will lead to meaningful action. Dr. Simms is an expert on CEDAW and gender issues, having sat on the CEDAW Committee and travelled the globe as a consultant and advocate for gender equality.
  + for the first time, at the **2015 National Education Conference** – significant Professional Development conference held in the Spring of 2015, gender mainstreaming efforts for the Education System was introduced through the provision of workshops for educators to build their capacity in understanding and using basic concepts and tools related to gender mainstreaming and gender analysis in the classroom;
  + high level male officials in the Government- including the Hon. Premier and other MLAs- also participated in the launch of the 2015 global **#heforshe campaign**. HeForShe is inviting people around the world to stand together to create a bold, visible force for gender equality; and
  + most recently the Government has introduced a **National Minimum Basic Wage** (“MW”) for the Cayman Islands. MW is a first for the Cayman Islands in its comprehensive approach, and we anticipate that many of those positively affected by it will be women, and the fact that domestic workers (who are majority women) are included in minimum wage speaks to equally valuing the work that is traditionally done by women.
* (Turning our attention back to CEDAW) Described as an international Bill of Rights for women, CEDAW was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and has been ratified by almost every single member of the United Nations.
* As an administration, we are committed to addressing the most pressing barriers for women, issues such as increasing investment in gender equality, reaching parity for women at all levels of decision-making and disavowing and changing social norms that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women. And the imminent extension of CEDAW is a reflection of that commitment.
* The news of this decision is the culmination of a 12-year quest to receive the treaty, with the last application being made by this Government’s administration in December 2013 to the UK Government Equalities Office via Her Excellency Governor Helen Kilpatrick. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Her Excellency for the support that her Office has provided throughout this entire process.
* I would also like to thank this administration for its support of continuing our campaign to attain this human rights achievement. For over the years, the Cayman Islands Government has made commitments and participated in exercises to work towards having CEDAW extended to us. The passage of the Gender Equality Law in 2011 was a major step forward in the process of meeting the UK’s requirements. That law prohibits discrimination in employment and related matters and also serves as the local “enabling legislation” that upholds the principles of CEDAW.
* The extension of CEDAW is a pivotal and historic step in the advancement of women and gender equality in the Cayman Islands. As Minister for Gender Affairs, and a woman, I am delighted to have received this news, especially during Honouring Women Month, a time in the Cayman Islands when we honour women for their valuable contributions to society, the workplace and our country.
* As the Premier has said, the United Kingdom’s request to the United Nations for CEDAW to be extended to the Cayman Islands has been a long standing aspirational goal for the Government, and we have now achieved it. This imminent extension validates the work that we have already been doing to ensure equality between women and men and promote a culture of human rights in the Cayman Islands.
* CEDAW is one of several core international human rights treaties, and you may be thinking, “What does the extension of CEDAW exactly obligate the Cayman Islands to do?” Put simply, by accepting the Convention, it means that the Government will commit itself to take appropriate measures to promote gender equality and eliminate discriminatory practices against women in all forms. CEDAW is not a self-executing document as it is up to local policymakers and stakeholders to work together and determine the best way in which to achieve the core 16 principles of CEDAW.
* Within one year of the extension, the Cayman Islands Government will then have to submit information to be included into the UK’s country reports to the CEDAW Committee in which to document our progress in achieving the aspirational goals set out in CEDAW.
* Thereafter at least every four years, the Government will be provided with an opportunity to report on the legislative, judicial, administrative or other measures which we have adopted to give effect to the provisions of the present Convention and on the progress made in respect to priority areas of concern.
* Our desire to have CEDAW extended to the Cayman Islands is a reflection of our mission to create a more positive and equitable future for our sons and daughters, and a healthier and more productive society. On behalf of the Government, I would like to congratulate the team from the Gender Affairs Unit and the Attorney General’s Chambers who over the years have tirelessly worked towards completing the necessary requirements of the UK’s Government Equalities Office.
* Next week, I will be travelling to New York to attend the 60th annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the United Nations. The Commission on the Status of Women is the principal global inter-governmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.
* The themes for the 2016 Commission on the Status of Women meeting are:1) women’s empowerment and the link to sustainable development; and 2) the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.
* While at the CSW, I will be on hand when the UK delegation deposits the instrument on the 16th March which formally notifies the United Nations Secretary- General that the UK requests the extension of CEDAW to the Cayman Islands through the United Kingdom. I will also be attending the Ministerial sessions and the UK led side events on such topics as girls and STEM and the gender pay gap.
* Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary General said “Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men, girls and boys. It is everyone's responsibility,” and we agree. Responsibility is key and as a country, we must continue to work together, assuming equal responsibility for ensuring that the laws, the workforce and opportunities in the community exist for the use and the betterment of ALL persons, both male and female.
* On behalf of the Government, I also take this opportunity to commend the members of my Ministry’s Gender Affairs Unit and the dedicated staff of the Department of Counselling Centre’s Family Resource Centre, the Crisis Centre and other government and non-government entities, who work not just during Honouring Women Month but on a daily basis promoting gender equality in our society; assisting women during difficult periods of change or crisis; and empowering girls, women, young parents and families with information and education.
* Today, thousands of events are being held throughout the world to inspire women and celebrate achievements. In the Cayman Islands, we are using International Women’s Day as a platform to inspire women and men alike to make a difference in their communities, stand up for justice and change, and be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. We also want to show appreciation for those women in the community that continuously strive to better our islands for all who inhabit it.
* Tonight at the Harquail Theatre, the Family Resource Centre will be hosting a screening of the film *He Named Me Malala,* the amazing, true story of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Malala (*mah-LAH-lah*) Yousafzai (*yoo-sahf-ZIGH* as in sigh), who was targeted by the Taliban and severely wounded by a gunshot when returning home on her school bus in Pakistan’s Swat Valley.
* Then 15-years old, Malala was singled out, along with her father, for advocating for girls’ education, and the attack on her sparked an outcry from supporters around the world. She miraculously survived and is now a leading campaigner for girls’ education globally as co-founder of the Malala Fund. I cannot think of a better way to honour women and recognise their accomplishments than to spotlight the courage, determination and sacrifice of this young lady who embodies so much of what it is to be a strong woman in today’s world.
* Society cannot change overnight and minds do not change organically. With the advancement of technology and social media, the power of corporate, social and grassroots initiatives, and the voices of supportive men and women willing to speak out on issues concerning gender equality, everyone can be an advocate for change. Indeed a collective effort is necessary when striving towards gender equality, and the mutual benefits that it yields will ensure that the future for our girls is bright, safe, rewarding and valued as equally as our boys.
* It was also UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon who said, "Let us devote solid funding, courageous advocacy and unbending political will to achieving gender equality around the world. There is no greater investment in our common future."
* This Government concurs and pledges to do our part to achieve gender parity in the Cayman Islands. I encourage you all to do your part as well and participate in the variety of activities taking place throughout March to celebrate Honouring Women’s Month and help us advance the cause of gender equality.
* In closing, I too would like to acknowledge the contributions of the various female Parliamentarians and Members of the LA that proceeded me, and the strong courageous women who stood up for equality and demanded the right to vote in 1948, women like Mrs. Georgette Ebanks, who made it possible for me to aspire to be and become one of our Countries leaders in a time such as this.
* As Minister and as a Government, we will continue to do our part to advance the cause of gender equality to work towards a more positive and equitable future for our sons and daughters, and a healthier and more productive society.