

International Women's Day presentation at St Joseph's Convent, St Joseph

Theme: Connecting Girls, Inspiring Futures. Leela Ramdeen 8 March 2012

My dear Sisters in Christ, it gives me great pleasure to be here with you today, a day when millions of people around the world will be observing IWD. I wish to address you on one of the themes for IWD: *Connecting Girls, Inspiring Futures*. The overall UN theme this year is: "*Empower Rural Women – End Hunger and Poverty*". The 2 themes are clearly linked. If we don't address hunger and poverty in our country and in our world, the future of our girls could be adversely affected. About 60% of chronically hungry people in the world are women and girls.



The first IWD events were held 101 years ago in March 1911. Celebrations in T&T started 54 years ago by Christina Lewis who protested for maternity benefits, equal pay and other rights. She died in 1974.

The UN Environment Programme states: "Its (*IWD*) origins in labour movements, protesting poor working conditions and low wages in the textile industry, are still relevant today. In many parts of the world women still struggle for recognition of their value to the economy, and for equal pay. Poverty rates are highest in female-headed households with children."

It must be noted that some men stood by women right from the start and were present with them at meetings, events and protests held across Europe in the early 20th Century. They spoke out for what we take for granted today – the right to vote, the right to work and to earn an equal wage; and the right to speak out in public. Do you know that black women in South Africa only got the right to vote 19 years ago? New Zealand was the first country to give women the right to vote in 1893.

We know from what has been going on in TT and worldwide, that over the last 5 years or so, IWD has been increasing in status. The United States even designates the whole month of March as 'Women's History Month'. Here in TT activities have been planned for the month and you should participate in initiatives such as the Art and Essay writing Competition which will be launched on Sunday 11 March, along with the launch of Young Woman of the Year Award Programme.

On 29 Feb, The Apostleship of Prayer at the Vatican announced that Pope Benedict XVI “will be praying this month that the contribution of women will be justly recognized...His general intention is ‘that the whole world may recognize the contribution of women to the development of society.’”

“IWD provides a common day each year for globally recognising and applauding women’s achievements as well as for observing and highlighting gender inequalities and issues. But not just on IWD, but all year round, many organizations and individuals work tirelessly to support gender equality through a multitude of initiatives, causes and actions.” <http://www.internationalwomensday.com/freestyle.asp>

We also remember today acts of courage and determination by women like our mothers, our sisters, our teachers.

UNICEF states, children have rights as human beings and also need special care and protection. In spite of instruments such as the Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and The Convention on the Rights of the Child (which defines a child as a person under the age of 18), across the world the rights of millions of girls are violated daily. TT is a signatory to both of these instruments.

The 1989 Convention sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children in 54 Articles and 2 Protocols e.g. “the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life” (UNICEF).

While we acknowledge that much has been achieved over the years, there is still much to do to ensure that girls and women are treated equitably. There are countries in which women are not allowed to own land or to work in certain jobs. “Girls and women are subjected to multiple forms of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination due to their gender.” (www.yapi.org/girlchild/). There is a saying that women hold up half the sky. As the Hunger Project states, studies show that when girls and women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits.

Since St Joseph’s Convent is a Catholic school, it is important for you to be aware of the teachings of the Church on this theme. Pope Benedict XVI has said (7 Nov 2010): “...*for the Christian, every man and woman is a true sanctuary of God, and should be treated with the highest respect and affection.*”

Our Church teaches that all human life is sacred and that the dignity of each person is the foundation of a moral vision of society. We must do more to promote the dignity of each person, including girls and women. We need strong role models so that you will “aim high”.



Through our baptism, we all have a vocation to live holy, virtuous lives. If we are to live by the tenets of our faith, there are certain qualities that we must have if we are to be true witnesses of Christ e.g. love of God and neighbour; integrity; honesty; Catholic morals and values, discipline; productivity; respect for self, for others, for our environment - for all God’s creation; a commitment to build the common good, family and community.

While each of you has rights, as I mentioned earlier, you also have responsibilities. We live in a world in which many people are only concerned about their rights while they fail to meet their responsibilities. Selfishness, individualism, and greed can lead us to ignore the plight of our brothers and sisters who are our neighbours. There is a saying that there is enough in our world for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed. It is human greed that has led to the current economic crisis in our world. It is the greed and corruption of a few that impacts adversely on the lives of many; that traps many in poverty for generations.

The greatest commandment God gave to us is to love Him and to love our neighbour. But if we are only concerned about our own well-being and not that of others, how can we say that we love our neighbour? Remember the theme for IWD: Connecting girls, Inspiring futures. We are all interconnected since we are one human family. That is why the Holy Father in his Lenten message for 2012 asks us to show concern for each other. (refer to CCSJ’s website for Message and see Newsletter. Read Cherisse’s poem and invite the girls to submit to CCSJ poems, essays etc on the theme: How I made a difference):

How I made a difference

The following poem was given to CCSJ's Chair Leela Ramdeen by a 10 year old girl in London in May 2011. **How I made a difference** by Cherisse Hawkins (10 years)

Somewhere in London
there's a child all alone.
A shade of grey outside;
a world of colour in her heart.

Where is her mother?
Where is her father?
Nobody knows.

When did she have her last plate of food?

Question existing.

Innocent creature
unknown danger.

A purple envelope on the floor.

She picks it up with
delicate fingers,
wishing she could read
the writing on it.

Cautiously she opens it.
Money! There is money in it
and a note that spells:
"F-o-r y-o-u".

Tears roll down her cheeks.
She can afford to buy food.
World of pure colour in her heart.
Money from a donor.
She is safe... for now.

Last Sunday, as an honorary member of The Inner Wheel of St Augustine, I attended the Interclub of TT's 11th Annual IWD Celebration. What a wonderful occasion. There are 18 Women's Organisations that come together under the umbrella of the Interclub of TT. And later today I will attend the IWD celebrations organized by The Association of Female Executives of T&T. Like many others in our society, women who belong to these organizations are committed to empower our people so that they can realise their potential.

You may know that here in T&T we have 2 special envoys for women's and children's issues Mrs Hazel Brown and Mrs Brenda Gopeesingh. We also have a Minister for Gender, Youth and Child Development – Hon Verna St Rose-Greaves. Our Country is still to set up a functional Children's Authority.



The well-being of each of you; of all girls and your families is of paramount importance. Each of you can make a difference in your family, in your school, in your community, in the world. You can play your part “to ensure that the future for girls is bright, equal, safe and rewarding;” that girls are given the respect they deserve and that their God-given talents are valued by society. You can play your part by striving for excellence in all that you do and by working diligently to build God's Kingdom of justice, peace, truth, love and freedom on earth.

Let your participation in your alma mater, this wonderful school, bind you together in sisterly fraternity, so that you will connect with each other and motivate each other to stay on the right path. It was Martin Luther King Jr. who said: “The time is always right to do what is right.” As we say in TT, “bad house” will always be calling you. The challenge you face is to avoid evil and do good. Stay focused; keep God at the centre of your lives, have confidence in yourself and you will achieve your goals.

There are many wonderful examples of our girls and young women who are achieving great heights in TT. You will have read of Candel Cuffie's historic achievement recently. Congratulations to Candel who topped the world in the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) examinations. 424,000 students from 170 countries wrote the final-year examination and our TT student achieved first place. Together with her father, Pastor Cuffie, and her family, she is involved in a number of charitable initiatives.

Vera Bhajan, a young woman who was born without arms, is now an Attorney-at-Law and has been recruited by one of our Government Ministries to deliver motivational speeches to young people involved in crime.

I referred earlier to the Inter-Club event that I attended at the Hyatt Hotel. Part of the programme included a Fashion Show with some amazing designs. At the end of the show, the designers were introduced. Among them was a differently abled young woman who was brought in in a wheel chair. Let nothing put a damper on your dreams.

Even though girls in TT are out-performing boys at all levels of the education system, their achievements are not always reflected in professional life. And there are still too many girls who either drop out of the education system or who are forced to miss a lot of school in order to assist their parents e.g. in agriculture or in their family's business.

And then there are girls who are being socialized right here in TT to believe that they should accept violence from their partners (give example of girl at UWI panel discussion – “If yuh love de man, yuh go take de licks.”)

I urge you to respect yourself. Remember that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

There are also some girls who are lured into thinking that by giving themselves freely to the opposite sex for money, they will progress in life. (Give example of girl with maxi taxi driver).

In our drug and gun culture, some young girls believe that it is a badge of honour to have a boyfriend who has a gun. I can assure you that honour comes from abiding by the tenets of your faith. Violence begets violence. In his encyclical, The Gospel of Life, Blessed John Paul II urged us to build a culture of life. I urge you to reject violence and the culture of death that threatens to overwhelm us.

As you seek to “connect” with other girls and motivate each other, remember to pray for the millions of girls and women in TT and around the world who are unable to pursue their dreams because of poverty and social exclusion. Exclusion creates dis-harmony. An inclusive society will help us to create a harmonious society.

“According to UNICEF, **22,000 children** die each day due to poverty. And they die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death.” (<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>).

“**At least 130 million** girls alive today have undergone Female Genital Mutilation, and 2 million more are at risk every year (UNICEF).

It is reported that at least **5,000 women and girls** are murdered each year by members of their own families – ‘honour’ killings (Wikipedia).

“United Nation statistics, national reports and studies initiated by non-governmental organizations repeatedly show that girls, as a group, have lower literacy rates, receive less health care, and more impoverished than boys.” (www.yapi.org/ppgirlchild.ppt).

The Hunger Project states that: “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...The current world food price crisis is having a severe impact on women.”

“**Almost 100 million girls "disappear" each year**, killed in the womb or as babies, a study has revealed. The report, "**Because I am a Girl**", exposes the gender discrimination which remains deeply entrenched and widely tolerated across the world, including the fact that female foeticide is on the increase in countries where a male child remains more valued... Almost a million girls fall victim to **child traffickers** each year compared with a quarter that number of boys.

“Of the 1.5 billion people living on less than 50p (less than \$% TT) a day, 70 per cent are female, with **96 million young women aged 15 to 24 unable to read or write** - almost double the number for males. ..Statistics show that **62 million girls are not even receiving primary school education** while an estimated 450 million have stunted growth because of childhood malnutrition. "Why, in an era that saw the term 'girl power' coined, are millions of girls being condemned to a life of inequality and poverty?" the report asks.

(2007 report - <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/discrimination-against-girls-still-deeply-entrenched-448901.html>).

You will note in yesterday's newspapers a report that highlights the fact that more teenagers are running away from home. Another article quoted Yasmin Solitahe Odlum, gender specialist, Inter-American Commission of Women in the Organisation of American States. She said “trafficking is a huge problem in countries like Jamaica, Suriname, Belize, the Dominican Republic and T&T, a problem exacerbated by the confusion in the region about what exactly is trafficking.” She said that Caribbean women are being lured into sex trade. Our Government has accepted that there is human trafficking in T&T. I urge you to be aware of this grave issue.

I ask each of you during Lent to pray for our girls, in TT and around the world, whose dreams are being dashed because of e.g. rape, domestic violence, child marriages, genital mutilation, honour killing, forced/bonded/child labour, dowry abuse, foeticide linked to gender selection, incest, and human trafficking.

In a study conducted last year by the Royal Commonwealth Society, TT was voted the third best country in the Commonwealth for girls to be born in. However, as was acknowledged by the then Minister of Gender Affairs, “women still have a way to go in participating in political and decision-making processes.”

In 2010, TT ranked 21 out of 134 countries in the Global Gender-Gap Index ranking. Many of our girls and women in TT are not comforted by these statistics as they remain on the margins of society.

Sarah Morrison's report (4 March, 2012) on The UK's Independent newspaper's investigation entitled: *Revealed: The best and worst places to be a woman*, is worth reading. Note that for women, the best place for economic participation is The Bahamas. The best place to be a journalist is in the Caribbean, and the best place for high-skilled jobs is in Jamaica. "Iceland has the greatest equality between men and women, taking into account politics, education, employment and health indicators."

See Wikipedia for information on the 2011 Study of the status of women by country: In the 26 September 2011 issue of Newsweek magazine a study was published on the status of women in countries around the world. The factors taken into account were legal justice, health and healthcare, education, economic opportunity, and political power. According to the study, the top 10 nations were:

1. Iceland
2. Sweden
3. Canada
4. Denmark
5. Finland
6. Switzerland
7. Norway
8. United States
9. Australia
10. Netherlands

Let us respond to Pope Benedict XVI's call to promote integral human development, that is, the development of each dimension of a person, and of each person – no one should be left behind. God has placed us in this world for a purpose and has given each of us unique gifts. The challenge for us is to determine what that purpose is and to realise it; to use our gifts from God to build the common good.

People are our greatest asset. There can be no development without the development of our girls and women. We must all play our part to promote girls' and women's full participation in our country's/world's economic, social, cultural and political life.

You can be agents of change e.g. by writing letters to government officials to raise your concerns about issues relating to girls. You can get involved in grassroots organizations such as the Youth Commission, CCSJ, SVP, LWC, ELC etc. Working with these and other organizations can lead to local, national, and international improvement for girls. Get involved in your parish and practise the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. God wants us to do good works.

The role of women in our world will be enhanced if we work towards equity and equality for all God's children. Girls and boys, women and men all have a role to play in building our nation and our world. God made men and women to complement each other, not to dominate each other. Let us work together to build a just world; to improve the quality of life of all our people.



Remember the importance of strengthening family life. A lot of the problems we face in today's society is as a result of the breakdown of family life.

In closing, I encourage you to connect with each other; stand in solidarity with each other; affirm each other; inspire each other. Use this opportunity on IWD to pause and reflect on where your life is going as a young woman. But remember God's commandment to love Him and to love our neighbour. Our concern to promote women's empowerment cannot be reduced to striving only for our own success but also the collective well-being of all girls and women.

Blessed John Paul II said in his homily to those gathered at World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado, USA in 1993: "Offer your youthful energies and your talents to building a civilization of Christian love . . . commit yourself to the struggle for justice, solidarity, and peace."

I wish each of you happy IWD. Let my presentation today be a call to action. You are our agents of change for a better world. As St Teresa of Avila said: "Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on Earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world."

We can learn much from the lives of the saints e.g. about building right relationships.

Without justice for girls, there will be no peace in our world. Go forth and break the proverbial glass ceiling and let your light shine like a beacon in our troubled world. Stand

up for your dignity. I affirm each of you and thank God for the gift that you are. Remember, we can do nothing without God's grace. Pray for God's grace to achieve your goals. May He bless you all and keep you in the palm of His hand as you journey on in life.

I thank you.