

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE CARIBBEAN



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Mia Amor Mottley es abogada de profesión y ha sido reconocida por la revista Essence como una de las 100 líderes emergentes del siglo 21. La Sra. Mottley sirvió como Senadora de la oposición en la Cámara alta de Barbados y luego como Ministra de Educación, Juventud y Cultura después de su elección al parlamento de Barbados. Sirvió también como Presidenta del Comité de Ministros de Educación del CARICOM y fue la primera mujer Fiscal General de Barbados. Se ha desempeñado también como Ministra de Asuntos Económicos y Desarrollo con responsabilidad para negocios internacionales y Gobernadora del Banco Caribeño de Desarrollo, del Banco Internacional de Desarrollo y del Banco Internacional de Reconstrucción y Desarrollo. Entre 2008 y 2010 Sra. Mottley fue la primera mujer a liderar la Oposición en Barbados.

I did not recognize myself in the translation, and I say that honestly and sincerely.

Bear with me a second:

I'm going to make a change for once in my life.
It's going to feel real good,
Going to make a little difference,
I'm going to make it right.
I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways.
And no message could have been any clearer.
If you want to make the world a better place,
Take a look at yourself and make that change.

I start there because we need to know why we are meeting and what we want to achieve. Are we trying to put women in politics or in positions

of power for the sake of doing it, or are we trying to make women's lives better? Are we trying to give women the right to be, the right to decide, the right to act, the ability to negotiate, the ability to protect themselves and to make choices, to live by a set of values that sees them honor each and every one around them rather than perpetuate the discrimination and prejudices of which they have been a victim for centuries?

How many people in this room, particularly those who are married, believe that they have to cater to their husbands in a particular way because of the manner in which you were brought up, because of the religion to which you subscribe, or because of the cultural beliefs of the society in which you live? How many people?

Inherently, that is what is at stake, first and foremost, before we reach the stage of political parties. How many people can look at the mirror and truly say that they believe that a woman is equal to a man, has the same rights to be, to decide, to act, to negotiate, to protect? How many, in so doing, can therefore say that they want to walk the walk rather than talk the talk?

I start from this position because it has concerned me, and I would be lying if I didn't say so, that even in the context of this meeting over the last three days, we would be at risk of being accused of a hierarchy of discriminatory conduct in relation to how we treat each other, as women, from different regions, without recognizing that it is not the blatant discrimination today that matters—because we can deal with that. Laws remove that blatant discrimination, but it is the benign neglect, the innocent ignoring, that causes the offense because it is insidious. It is like a tumor growing in us that is not visible to the naked eye, but offends, and offends in a way that if we don't pause and do something about it, then we will not be sincere in the battle we are trying to fight on behalf of women. I say so humbly but respectfully, on behalf of Caribbean women, who continue to feel marginalized in this grouping and who feel that their voices and their experiences are not the same, and who have different political systems, different realities but for whom consideration is not appropriately given.

Now, let me say why I talk about different realities. Cynthia Barrow Giles gave an excellent presentation this morning in relation to the reality of the Caribbean experience in respect of female participation. For the most part, in Barbados, we got the right to vote, as women, in 1944. We got universal adult suffrage in 1951. We've had patent steps of the removal of discriminatory legislation on the face of it. A Status of Women Commission in the mid-1970s dealt with the correction of the laws that were discriminatory in nature, and some opportunities were given.

The Commonwealth has just put out a report that says that if you are a girl, the best place to grow up in the Commonwealth—which is 54 countries—is New Zealand; the second best place in the Commonwealth is Barbados; and the third best place is Trinidad and Tobago.

But the reality of the existence of women in those countries is still that they fight a hidden discrimination in circumstances where, within the context of political parties—and my colleague, who is the Vice President of CIM and is a member of the Government (I am in the opposition) is here, and she can equally speak to it—that there is still lip service paid in respect to the participation of women in politics in our countries, in spite of the significant gains made at a certain level.

We have, for example, a situation where we expect two or three out of 30, four at most, in a cabinet out of 20 and a Parliament out of 30. But if you try to go beyond that, women are then chosen and put into seats where they are not going to win, and if they win, it is an extraordinary feat that usually arises from a landslide for one term, and then the system corrects itself.

We have a situation where the notion of affirmative action is treated as an offensive notion, simply because it is felt: “Well, women already occupy 80 percent of the places going into university, what more do you want?”, without realizing that the ability to decide and the ability to choose is the fundamental right, the ability to be—not to be selected, not to be agreed to. These are the fundamental rights that

will determine whether women in future, girls in future can protect themselves.

It is a staggering statistic that we in the Caribbean have, among 15 to 29-year-olds, the second highest prevalence rate of HIV and AIDS in the world. It is the leading cause of death among 15 to 29 year olds. Have we taken steps as governments to be able to address that as a foremost issue? No we haven't, because it is not an issue that sufficiently resonates with the governments that we have because it's not a hard-core issue, it's not an economic issue, it's not a tourism issue, it's not an international business issue. In the context of broader social entitlements, we will address it, but we will not say that it is an issue that recognizes that since it is women under 30 and men over 30 that we have a problem with transactional sex, that we have a problem with older men with multiple young partners, that people see this as a means of negotiating themselves in or out of various circumstances. And we're not dealing with it.

We have political parties that admit of equality of opportunity in the country, admit of democracy in the country, but are not prepared to admit of it within the political party. Now, there must be something fundamentally wrong when it is good enough for those outside, but not for us within. Once again, as I said earlier, the sincerity of the fight has to be reflected in all that we do.

The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, who opened up this conference, is an example that I will use. She came to office last May, having won the leadership of her party in January of last year. She was able to do so because she contested an election against a founder leader in circumstances where her constitution admitted a one man, one woman, one vote. Her party's constitution is one of the more modern constitutions in the region because their party is a relatively new party, compared to the other political parties to which we belong and that exist in the region, that say that leadership and choices are to be made by the established members of the parliamentary party and not by the wider membership of the party. The reality of membership

is that more women are activists, more women are members, but fewer women have the opportunity to choose or decide anything, because it is a closed shop of decision-making.

Now, until you can democratize the political parties and the institutions in which these women participate, there will not be the opportunity for women truly to have an equal chance to be able to offer themselves in circumstances. Those women who come forward, have to be extraordinary, and those men who come forward retain the luxury of being mediocre in order to succeed, and that is the disparity that we have to confront.

In the absence of political party reform—and with the exception of my colleague, former Prime Minister Anthony, who is one of the few extraordinary men, but his presence at this conference should tell you that—the reality is that it doesn't only extend to membership in Parliament. The ruling councils of most of the parties in the region, in spite of the fact that women dominate the membership of the parties, the councils have very few women in the decision-making councils of the parties.

In my own party, which I led up until October last year, once I was removed from leadership, the party went from 50 percent female membership on the national council to four out of 60 members. So, you can do the mathematics for yourself. That is the kind of backlash that we are confronting. It is insidious, it is not in your face, it is very much below the surface.

Now, if you were to talk about quotas at the national level, you would have a backlash, but there is no battle worth fighting unless you're prepared to shed some blood and certainly some sweat. And, to that extent, I believe that the battles first and foremost in the Caribbean have to be fought within the context of the political parties. It has to be fought under the umbrella of one man, one women, one vote, because we constitute the majority, and it is not because we constitute the majority that that principle should obtain. It is because that principle is the right

principle for the majority to determine who it wants to guide them, what its policy should be, and how the country should go forward.

If Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar had to face the constitution of my party, or most of the other political parties in the region, she would not have addressed you on Monday morning as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. It is as simple as that.

In relation to other issues such as fairness of an opportunity to face the electorate, the bald reality is that unless we address fundamental matters of financing of political parties, financing of political campaigns, we are then equally going to not reflect the sincerity in our approach that ought to be there. There are many women who are strong, who are competent, who are capable, but who simply do not have the financial wherewithal to enter the political arena.

Unless political parties recognize that they themselves have become victims of a system of control in what we call democracy, determined by he who pays the piper calling the tune, we will not allow the system to breathe and we will not admit of competent people being able to come forward to represent people, irrespective of their background, irrespective of their race, irrespective of religion, etcetera. It is an issue that we're talking about for far too long. It is an issue, however, that has to be put on the front burner because all we have done is to recolonize ourselves in the era of independence by allowing those who have the power to determine, the influence to determine, to be able to call the shots in a way that runs counter to the independence battles that we thought we fought 30, 40, 50, 60 years ago.

So, I want to suggest to you that, concomitant with any system to admit of larger participation of women within the political decision machinery, must be a commitment to deal frontally with the issues of the funding of campaigns and the funding of political parties. Ninety percent of our populations did not have access to capital one generation and two generations ago. So, who are we fooling? Who are we fooling? Unless we therefore confront that as a major issue, and that is why I say that

there may be differences between the Latin American experience and the Caribbean experience that need to be reflected in the literature and in whatever action plans that come out of these consultations in which we are engaged.

I also say to you that we have to recognize that not only do we need to look at campaign finance reform but also reform of the parliamentary process and the systems of governance. They do not admit of prioritization of issues that mean something to our people, particularly those who are marginalized, of whom women and young people count most. They do not admit of persons being able to continue to have faith and confidence and belief in a system because they believe that the system is disconnected from them.

As former President Bachelet said this morning, that if people do not believe in the system, then the apathy and cynicism will arise and it will undermine everything that you are trying to do. If we go back to what it is we are starting to do, as I said at the beginning of my presentation, we are not taking action for the sake of taking action. We are not trying to make a few women feel powerful by letting them be members of Parliament, or presidents, or prime ministers. We are trying to change how a global civilization has treated one group of people for far too long.

The Bible has had to have been written in the way in which it was written because it was written at a time when those who were human transcribed that which was to have been divine. Those who were human, therefore, were products of their generation. Unfortunately, we don't have the ability to say to our young girls and young children that you have to be able to separate the essence of faith, the beauty of divinity, and the role in which women have been characterized in the book, unfortunately, that we all believe in, for those who are Christians, and I can say the same religion, by religion, by religion.

It is the fundamental issue that we have to confront in the empowerment of women and in allowing people to look in the mirror and be able to

say to themselves that they believe that they are as good, or better, than anyone else and that they believe that in having that belief, they are then able to treat every other person in the manner in which they would want to be treated. That is critical because at the end of the day, we are seeking to have a world in which equality of opportunity, solidity of values, transparency of action, and doing unto others simply as you would have them do unto you become the hallmark of our action. Political parties exist to attain that objective. Let us make that possible by giving people the opportunity to participate and by calling for those systems of transparency that give those who constitute the majority—whatever that majority is—the right and opportunity to say we can't change countries if we're not prepared to change the institutions that we belong to as engines and agents of change in our countries.

Thank you.