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ERC engages women in National Conversation

The Ethnic Relations Commission hosted a National Women's Conversation on August 9 at the National Cultural Centre as part of the Multi-Stakeholder Forum project. The Conversation was held with the support of the UNDP Social Cohesion Programme.

In opening remarks Chief Executive Officer of the Commission, Ms. Christine King, gave an overview of the multi-stakeholders programme, which included bringing together women from various parts of the country to benefit from their various experiences and forging a sense of sisterhood.

She said the day's session would look at personal transformation, with a pledge as to what women could do to improve their own lives, and ultimately, the quality of all life in Guyana.

Ms. Colleen Harris, Director of Strategy and Communication, UK Commission for Racial Equality, addressed the gathering of 361 women from regions around country, representing social, religious and other organizations.

In her presentation, Ms. Harris posited that inequality was the greatest single obstacle to a unified society, and that reconciling estranged groups was not easy.

She said the challenge in Guyana was to make its ethnic mix play a positive role in realizing social cohesion, and there should be a vertical link between the people and the government to ensure justice and respect for all.

She expressed the view that women are particularly adept at building relationships, and they are usually not behind the anger and violence, rather they work at finding solutions outside of the box.

"Women are expert at crossing conflict lines, and they play an important role in cohesion, getting warring groups together," she said.

She advised that politicians ensure that more women are involved in key positions in the decision-making process. "And we cannot afford to wait for these measures to be put in place," she said.

She exhorted that our women participate in the election process, move against any racial hostility as soon as this becomes evident, and press for change to make politicians accountable. "You have the power," she said, "use it wonderfully".

Later, a panel presentation dealt with poverty among certain groups of women, the need for greater opportunities in Amerindian communities, and the need to preserve their indigenous culture

Soundings from the Women's Conversation

By the end of the session, the women had forged the following document of their concerns:

Personal Power

We realize the need for a better understanding of the factors which shape us as women and which currently affect our functioning in society. We recognize that our point of view is absent from major discussions at the national level. We are aware that issues such as domestic violence and child protection are considered women's concerns, when, in fact, they are everyone's concerns.

We know that we are often unsupportive of each other as women. We are involved in the reproduction of the anti-woman culture. We acknowledge that we need to take responsibility for equipping ourselves to play a leading role to bring about change and development.

*We shall pursue education for development as individuals as well as a collective of women.

*We shall engage in ongoing dialogue and form or strengthen networks of women and women's organizations in and across communities to support women's development.

*We shall work to improve life within our families, including the nature of communication between and among men, women and children.

*We are prepared to work alongside men to increase understanding of the complementary roles of women and men.

*We shall hold women in leadership positions in women's groups accountable with respect to our goals and their responsibilities.

Violence

Women recognize that violence occurs in the home, in institutions and in the society at large. We know that violence takes many forms, with women and children being the most vulnerable. We recognize that we are ourselves perpetrators, particularly with respect to child abuse. We realize that the institutions that are responsible for addressing the safety and security of women and people in general are not working effectively.

*We want the Domestic Violence Act revised for greater effectiveness, particularly as it applies to the hinterland.

*We want the institutions such as the Magistracy, the Guyana Police Force and schools to improve the system to deal sensitively with reports and cases of violence in all its forms, and to provide ongoing training for their members.

*We want increased police patrols, fully equipped and staffed, in our communities.

*We want a well-equipped and staffed Family Court established expeditiously.

*We want increased services for victims of violence in the communities, such as counseling, hot lines and safe places.

*We want the increasing psychological stress leading to suicidal behaviour among young people acknowledged and support services provided.

- *We want a Sexual Offenders register to be established and made public
- *We want a new Sexual Offences Act enacted as a matter of urgency.
- *We want an agency to address child protection comprehensively.

Decision-Making

Women are neglected despite their significant role in carrying the political campaigns. Women are voting on the basis of race and not on issues affecting women. Women and their concerns have been ignored by the major political parties. Women in Parliament and other leadership positions have failed to address issues of concern to women, despite the support given many to accede to those positions. Women have been shown blatant disrespect by elected leaders who practice nepotism, poor judgment and self-interest. Recent events show a complete lack of accountability by the government to the public, women and children. Personal and moral behaviour of ministers and senior officers are found wanting.

- *We want each political party to state how it will address the concerns prioritised by women.
- *We want the political parties to justify and account for their track record while in Parliament.
- *We want the political parties to state what they understand to be the issues prioritized by women, indicate what they will do to address them and when.
- *We want women and men in Parliament to understand that women have the power to put them there and take them out.
- *We want each woman on the list of party candidates to provide a platform on issues of interest to women on which they could be held accountable.
- *We want a code of conduct for ministers of government to be monitored by a network of women and women's organisations.

Education and Training

Women recognize the need to receive relevant education to improve their chances at self-sufficiency.

- *We want education and training opportunities to be provided for women in the hinterland.
- *We want information on skills training to be widely available to women.
- *We want an information bank available to women; this should include material on legal affairs and women's rights. The Women's Affairs Bureau should disseminate information on training to communities and organisations.
- *We want day care centres to afford women the space to participate in education and training activities.
- *We want more adult education courses in all the regions.
- *We want the provision of educational TV and taped programmes for women in all regions . With taped programmes, women can meet in groups in their own time.

Poverty

Women have a desire to be gainfully employed. Many lack the qualification and skills needed for the limited availability of employment opportunities. Many employed women find that their wages and salaries are insufficient to sustain their livelihoods. Women have primary responsibility for managing households, often including members with disabilities, the elderly and children.

*We want an increase in wages and salaries, including the provision of at least a minimum wage for domestic workers.

*We want adequate social assistance for persons with disabilities and the elderly.

*We want a reduction in taxes to ensure a decent take-home package.

*We want the land distribution system to be equitable and transparent.

*We want financial and social support for vulnerable mothers and caregivers.

*We want at least affordable, but preferably free, daycare centres established to allow women's participation in the labour force.

Health

Women are largely responsible for caring for others in their network, often ignoring their own health status until a crisis occurs. Women encounter a pervasive health culture which is hostile to sharing information with patients. Women in the hinterland are particularly vulnerable due to the inequitable distribution of health services and personnel.

*We want basic medication and services at all health centres.

*We want access to cancer diagnosis, and care provided expeditiously, with specific measures implemented for women in the hinterland.

Friday, August 11, 2006