

# **CARICOM TRIENNIAL AWARD FOR WOMEN, 2005**

## **ACCEPTANCE SPEECH**

**BY**

**MME. JUSTICE DÉsirÉE BERNARD, O.R., C.C.H, J.C.C.J.**

Mr. Secretary General, Distinguished Heads and Representatives of Government of CARICOM, Distinguished Opposition Leaders of CARICOM, specially invited guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Ms. Jacqueline Joseph for that over-comprehensive introduction and detailed citation of my achievements, and I cannot think of a more appropriate person to deliver it, having regard to our long and warm friendship over the years. At one point, I considered seriously just saying “thank you” and taking my seat. However it would be extremely remiss of me if I did not place on record my profound gratitude to the Regional Selection Sub-Committee for the Triennial Award for Women and to you, eminent Heads of Government of the Region, for selecting me to be the recipient of this Triennial Award for Women for 2005.

I am honoured to join a most distinguished group of women who preceded me and some with whom I interacted in earlier years in promoting the

development of women in the Caribbean. These women worked assiduously and continuously to remove discrimination against women in the Region, and I am proud to have made some contribution with them in this regard.

Over the past twenty-five years, much has been undertaken by the governments of the region to improve the status of the women of the Caribbean. Ministries charged with responsibility for women's affairs have been established in some instance with Cabinet status. One remembers the days when matters pertaining to women were dealt with within an existing ministry with a low profile. Commendably, this has changed and women's affairs ministries are properly staffed and operate independently. No doubt more needs to be done in some countries to raise the profile of these ministries.

Governments must be commended for taking issues pertaining to women more seriously than they were in the past, and the fact that the CARICOM Triennial Award for Women has been in existence over the last twenty-one years attests to the serious commitment that the Heads of Government of the Region have towards the women in the Region.

However, several important issues affecting women need to be tackled. There is the ever-present problem of family violence which though, all-pervasive, results in women being the main victims, with the numbers rising in alarming proportions in every state within our region. Several reasons have been advanced for this astounding increase in violence against women, but it must be viewed against the larger background of violence generally. We have to face the fact that violence has become the main medium for resolving disputes, and strong measures have to be adopted to stem the flood before we are swept away in a tidal wave of death and destruction.

Other problems which affect our female population is the continuing increase of teenage pregnancies attributable in large measure to the absence of parental control. Hand in hand with this is the poor performance of boys in the school system, and who opt for quick dollars engendered by the burgeoning drug trade in the Region. All of this is a spin-off of the fact that most households are headed by single females struggling to maintain a family without financial or parental assistance from recalcitrant fathers.

This is certainly not the occasion to embark on a detailed discussion of these problems which confront women on a daily basis, but it is hoped that they

will be noted and action taken to address them in each state within the Region. I am happy to have made some contribution towards improving the status of women in our part of the world, the highlight being my service both as Chairperson and founder member from the Caribbean of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women which was established in 1984 to monitor implementation by members states of the U.N. Convention of similar name. Over the years we have seen ratification of the Convention steadily increase, and at present nearly all of the Caribbean states have ratified or acceded to it.

Recently I have been given the opportunity to serve the Caribbean in another capacity, that of Judge of the Caribbean Court of Justice. Much has been made of the fact that I am the first woman to serve on this Court, but I am conscious that this carries with it certain responsibilities, chief among them being the ability to administer justice to the people of the Caribbean Region regardless of gender. The gestation period of this Court has been exceptionally long, but its birth is an indication that our independence is complete. It has seen the removal of the last vestige of our colonial past – the abolition of the Privy Council as the final court of appeal of some of the

territories of the Caribbean Community. It is hoped that others will follow later.

Over the past few months since the Court's inauguration I have had the opportunity of interacting with my judicial colleagues, and I hasten to assure you that the Court is in the safe hands of a team which is committed to the task, and will work assiduously to justify the confidence which most have demonstrated in the establishment of the Court, and to earn the respect of those who feel the Region has made the biggest mistake. The way will not always be smooth, but determination and dedication will ensure that justice for the peoples of this Region be dispensed fairly without fear or favour, and be based on an understanding of our customs, mores and traditions.

Again, please accept my heartfelt gratitude for honouring me with this distinguished award which I shall always cherish among my most enduring mementoes.