



SAINT LUCIA

Statement by

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**Before the Special Session of
The General Assembly
For the Review and Appraisal of
The Implementation of the
Programme of Action
Of the International Conference
On Population and Development**

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Mr. Chairman,

St Lucia joined the rest of the international community in Cairo in 1994, to adopt the historic Programme of Action, and also participated in the Hague Forum and the Preparatory Meeting to this Special Session.

We are a small island of approximately 238 sq miles and a population of approximately 145,000 persons.

Our government is relatively young, but in many concrete ways has demonstrated and reaffirmed our commitment to Cairo. The portfolios of my Ministry are Health, Human Services, Family Affairs and Gender Relations.

These were neither created or combined by accident but by design, as we recognised then, as we do now, that a natural nexus exists between issues of gender, health (including reproductive health), family life and planning, older persons, the poor, and human services in general.

Like other Caribbean Countries St Lucia is faced with economic and social challenges which we must surmount with the limited financial and technical resources at our disposal if we are to improve the quality of life of our people.

My colleagues from the region who spoke before me, alluded to the vulnerability of our islands to natural disasters and unfriendly economic environments .

In 1994, and prior to Cairo, like many other Caribbean countries we were faced with an unacceptably high prevalence of teenage pregnancy, poverty (especially among women), underrepresentation of women in decision-making, violence against women, etc.

Mr. Chairman, a high prevalence of teenage pregnancy has long been a feature of St Lucian Society. In 1996, a comparative review of adolescent fertility among islands of the region revealed that St Lucia's rate was 50% higher than that of our neighbouring island Barbados for example, and more than twice that of the United States (whose rate was highest among that of industrialised countries for that period).

Cairo gave us a new impetus, a firmer resolve to seek and find solutions to the problem. The job ahead of us was a tough one with no easy solutions, one which required a multi-faceted approach.

Among our programmes to tackle these problems are:-

- (1) Incorporating topics on reproductive health in the Health and Family Life Education curriculum at the primary level;

- (2) Expanding Sexual and Reproductive Health Services to include counseling on human sexuality, responsible parenthood, effective prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD'S) and HIV/AIDS, and the promotion , supply and distribution of high quality condoms;
- (3) a policy on continuing education for all teenage mothers;
- (4) increased opportunity for vocational skills training;
- (5) Programmes specifically designed for teenage mothers for the time being at least one of our general hospitals;

Attempts to deal with the problem have met with some success. **There has been a steady decline in** the rate of teenage pregnancies **from** that period until now.

Today, five years after Cairo, and on the threshold of the new millenium, teenage pregnancy is still too high. It was recently described as “one of the leading social and public health problems facing St. Lucia.

Approximately 25% of our population lives below the poverty line - women are more affected than men . Overall unemployment among the poorest is also higher among women than men.

At the primary and secondary level although girls continue to outdo boys in performance standards, we are faced with the problem of “drop outs” particularly by girls who become pregnant while at school, or girls who do not move on to tertiary education because of an unplanned pregnancy. For the most part, they remain unskilled and are forced to take up low paid jobs, or remain unemployed, dependent on a male partner and are caught up in the vicious cycle of poverty.

A Poverty Reduction Fund recently launched by the government has been quite successful in addressing poverty particularly in the rural communities. Projects which have been undertaken include the provision of water and sanitation facilities, employment and income-generating projects. A Social Investment Fund has also been created to tackle poverty particularly among young persons in deprived communities. It is expected that this will impact directly on unemployment among women and the youth.

In 1995 The Domestic Violence (Summary Proceedings Act) was enacted, making not just physical but emotional and verbal abuse in the domestic setting a criminal **offence**. Hitherto victims, most of whom are women, relied on the general provisions of our Criminal Code.

Two Crisis Centres were formed - one in the North of the island and the other in the South, to work hand in hand with other Women's Organisations, the Police, the Courts, and other government agencies to fight against domestic violence. A temporary shelter for Women escaping violence is being purchased and will soon be opened.

Today, for the first time in our history, St Lucia has a female Head of State. Two young women have been elected to Parliament. They are both Ministers of Government. Prior to and since 1974, only one woman had ever been elected to parliament. Ours is a significant achievement as we believe that the most sincere demonstration of our commitment to women's rights in all its aspects and forms is to ensure women's full representative participation in decision-making at all levels, particularly at the highest levels.

Increasingly, pursuant to our efforts at gender mainstreaming, women are more significantly represented on statutory and other decision-making bodies.

We have been able to maintain universal access to primary education, and have been able to reduce unmet demand for secondary education by increasing access from 54% to 60% in the last five years. Our goal is to guarantee secondary education for all. Steps are being taken to address the unacceptable rate of illiteracy among the adult population. In this regard human resource development remains the cornerstone of human development for St Lucia.

At the primary, secondary and tertiary level girls continue to outdo boys both in numbers enrolled and in performance standards. Our task, while addressing the issue of male marginalisation (increasingly becoming a feature of our Caribbean societies) is to ensure that the progress of our women in the educational sphere is also reflected in the political and socio-economic environment. For this reason, and in order to achieve the correct balance, we have engaged ourselves in a process of gender mainstreaming in all our sectors..

Mr. Chairman, among other things, the main constraints we face in accelerating progress on all fronts are the lack of critical financial and physical resources and institutional capacity. At the same time certain trends and developments are posing serious challenges to us.

At the national level these **include:-**

- increasing incidents of HIV/AIDS
- environmental degradation caused by natural disasters and human action
- family disintegration
- high teen fertility
- disenchantment among the youth
- the fragility and vulnerability of the small island economy
- a youthful population and an aging population

The External circumstances which also impose challenges **include:-**

- the prospect of low prices for bananas upon the withdrawal of preferential access to the European Market

dwindling development assistance in the form of grant resources from traditional donors
stringent conditions on multilateral loan funding, and
increasing competition on the international market as a result of the trends towards globalisation in all respects.

Mr. Chairman, St Lucia is taking steps to address these challenges. We will soon encourage the testing of all pregnant mothers for HIV and will make AZT available where needed.

While we continue to expand tourism – our main income generating sector, efforts are being made to diversify our agricultural-based economy to take on board financial and information services.

We will continue to embrace regional integration as a means of facilitating economies of scale through functional co-operation in areas such as health, education, telecommunication and trade with our Caribbean counterparts .

Increasingly, government is moving toward playing a facilitative, rather than an operative role in the development process. Our efforts at Public Sector Reform are an integral part of this philosophy.

Steps are continuing to foster and maintain strategic partnership and functional linkages with NGO's, youth, women's, religious groups, and the private sector. Consensus building is being advocated in an effort to keep population and development issues on the front burner.

Appropriate policy in all our sectors guidelines are being developed to guide programme implementers. These include:

- A National Youth Policy
- A Health Sector Plan
- A National Population Policy
- A National Poverty Reduction Plan
- A National Disaster Plan

A Social Reform Commission will advise on further reforms to improve the status of women, children, address growing concerns regarding male youths, the family, older persons, and other socially marginalised groups in society.

Mr. Chairman, St Lucia remains committed to pursuing and achieving the goals on the ICPD Programme of Action. We are at a threshold in our development. Certain trends both at the national, international level (referred to earlier) are threatening to wipe out the gains that we have made. As a small island developing state, the challenges that confront us are enormous. We recognise however, that a single approach to address population and development issues will not suffice. We recognise that the world is fast becoming a

single society and cannot remain on the periphery of this process. As an outcome of this Special Session, the St Lucia delegation would like to make a call for the expeditious transfer of communication technologies, more information sharing, allocation of financial and other resources to address high teen fertility, and greater promotion of horizontal co-operation among developing countries.

As we enter the new millenium, we hope that the international community will confront development changes in a pragmatic way. As a developing country, St Lucia will continue to play its part in this global transformation which seeks to improve the lives of all of us and all peoples.

I thank you.