

It is indeed a pleasure to be here with you this evening to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of the Social Workers of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

As we gather here, I am reminded of the Book of Proverbs 19:17, which says, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done." This is a powerful reminder of the importance of the work that our Social Workers do and the impact that they have on the lives of the poor and the vulnerable. Their work is a testament to the power of compassion, empathy and resilience in making a positive difference in the lives of those in greatest need of our services.

In Japan, there is a saying, "*Dumplings over flowers*," which emphasises the importance of valuing substance over appearance, and as we honour the Social Workers of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I believe this saying rings true; their work is neither glamorous nor flashy, but it is life-changing and essential for those they serve.

Ladies and gentlemen, excellence is seldom attained without sacrifice, and when that sacrifice is made in the service of humanity, all else falls by the wayside. It is primarily for this reason that the theme of this inaugural awards ceremony: **'Serving People, Celebrating Excellence,'** was chosen.

I believe it is a fitting tribute to our Social Workers who have consistently gone above and beyond what is required to ensure that the Ministry fulfils its mission to be a dynamic, service-driven organisation that delivers premium social services towards the achievement of sustainable human and social development.

Nowhere was this more evident than during the dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic when, as a country, we indeed came to understand who are our essential workers. Our Social Workers at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services were among them, and they valiantly and professionally carried out their duties.

Today, on behalf of all of us here at Ministry and a grateful nation, we say "*thank you, thank you, thank you.*"

We thank all of you who do social work, for your ceaseless dedication and efforts in supporting the vulnerable in our society. Your efforts demonstrate your passion, perseverance and dedication to helping, empowering and transforming lives.

There can be no doubt that as a profession, social work strives to enhance the welfare of humanity and fulfil the essential needs of individuals, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable.

Having worked with the Ministry's Social Workers over the last few years, I have come to recognise the tremendous value they bring to the Ministry, since it is through them, we can achieve many of our goals, not least of which is the ability to wean persons and families away from dependence on Government grants and subsidies, to a place of personal empowerment and pride. I have also come to recognise and accept that social work is a needed and vital profession, as you provide the lens to bring about social change on all levels.

Last year, at the Symposium we held to commemorate World Social Work Day, I boldly declared the Ministry's unwavering commitment to honouring your exceptional efforts. When I envisioned this awards ceremony, I wanted it to stand as a powerful testament of our collective gratitude and appreciation for your tireless contributions. I wanted to create a meaningful tribute and therefore charged the team with creating an event that recognised your achievements, which sometimes might appear unrecognised or unacknowledged.

The members of the planning committee have brought this to fruition. I want to thank the organising committee, first led by our then Deputy Permanent Secretary Jasmine Pascal and now by Deputy Permanent Secretary Ryan Ramcharan; your efforts in planning and executing every detail of this event made a difference.

This evening's ceremony recognises a total of thirty-nine (39) employees who are either Social Workers by profession or who perform the duties of Social Workers and were nominated by their peers.

I noted, with great interest, that these nominees were drawn from across various Divisions, revealing that each one of us contributes in some way towards the wave of positive change necessary to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in our society.

From the pool of 39 nominees, four finalists for the Social Worker of the Year Award have emerged. I wish to commend them for their outstanding efforts in advancing the work of the Ministry and serving as excellent ambassadors for the social sector. Your professionalism and contributions have made a difference to our communities and our nation as a whole. May the Lord continue to grant you good health and strength as you continue in service to the most vulnerable in our population.

I am certain that the journey has not always been smooth sailing, and the challenges you have encountered along the way, would have tested your mettle. Your passion and love for what you do, must cause you to rise above the difficulties. This evening, you stand as a true testament that with determination, endurance, discipline and the right attitude, one can push through and overcome hurdles.

It is my sincere hope that even more of your peers can be inspired to believe that recognition at the highest level is within their reach and will continue to aspire towards this goal, so that the next time these awards are held, there will be much more than 39 nominees.

Special thanks to members of the Adjudication Committee. I am advised that you encountered some challenges; these will be ironed out so that next year, your task will be easier.

Thank you to all of our sponsors, some of whom I am fortunate to call my friends, for your unwavering generosity and steadfast support. Your investment in our cause will undoubtedly have a meaningful and lasting impact; your contributions and presence here serve as evidence of your deep understanding of the crucial role social services play in the development of Trinidad and Tobago. On behalf of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude for your dedication and commitment to our mission. Thank you for partnering with us.

Again, to all Social Workers, thank you for your dedication, selfless and tireless service. The social sector's greatest strength is its people; therefore, I encourage you to continue to learn and collaborate with one another to strengthen social service delivery.

I urge you to keep the vision, keep the dream, keep the passion that drew you to this noble profession in the first place; continue to be a beacon for our communities and hold all of us accountable. Your profession is improving lives, and you are a partner in this never-ending change.

I trust that this will be a truly enjoyable evening for everyone, that will linger in our memories for a long time to come.

Once again, *Congratulations!*

I thank you, and may God bless you!