



OPENING REMARKS

BY

SENATOR THE HONOURABLE DONNA COX
**MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY
SERVICES**

**SEMINAR ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES**

MAY 22, 2024

10:00 AM

SALUTATIONS

- Permanent Secretaries Mrs. Lenor Baptiste-Simmons and Mr. Ryan Ramcharan
- Deputy Permanent Secretaries, Mrs. Wendy Guy-Hernandez and Mrs. Vera Deonanan-Balkaran
- Disability Affairs Specialist, Ms. Tessa Pascall
- Staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
- Staff of the Ministry of Health and the Regional Health Authorities
- Moderator, Dr Natalie Dick
- Facilitators
- Specially Invited Guests
- NGOs and Persons with Disabilities
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning,

It is indeed a pleasure to address you, this morning, at this important **Seminar on Reproductive and Sexual Health for Women with Disabilities.**

Sharron Angle a former American politician once said, “Every life holds value, regardless of location, age, gender or disability. There is a plan and a purpose for everyone.” Do you believe this? Everyone deserves the best possible opportunities to be successful in life. I believe that having the right knowledge brings us one step closer to empowerment and one step closer to transformation. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is for this reason that this Seminar is being held for women with disabilities.

I am therefore happy that this seminar which targets females with disabilities will expand on health related issues that focuses on how you ladies can become empowered to manage and be in control of your health and wellbeing.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) underscores the need for governments to ensure the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of life, particularly emphasizing access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services. It also acknowledges the heightened risks faced by women and girls with disabilities and calls for specific protection against negligence and violence.

Likewise, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, which is spearheaded by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Service, provides a framework for advancing social inclusion and equal opportunities for all citizens with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. It provides the framework for creating an environment that promotes accessibility, inclusion, integration, and full participation of persons with disabilities.

It is observed that some women with disabilities encounter numerous challenges such as physical and communication accessibility issues, attitudinal barriers, and limited access to essential information services, education, and preventive services, that are required for them to lead healthy sexual lives. Moreover, these challenges can heighten the risks of sexual exploitation, assault or abuse throughout their lives, as highlighted by the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities.

The importance of seminars and sensitization sessions such as these, therefore cannot be over emphasized.

At the Commission on Social Development, held at the UN Headquarters in New York in February, which I was privileged to attend, it was underscored that there was the need to foster *social development and social justice through social policies to accelerate progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*

Ladies and gentlemen, it is our desire to fulfil the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some of these targets are focused on disability, including universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights by 2030. As a result, we advocate for inclusivity by striving for a world where 'no one is left behind.

This seminar serves as a crucial platform, especially given the increasing prominence of issues like family planning, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, adolescent pregnancies, and in recent times, the increase in incidents of gender-based violence (GBV).

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, through its Disability Affairs Unit, remains steadfast in its commitment to providing all women with disabilities, access to information and healthcare services, enabling them to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. Thus, this seminar is an opportunity to engage in discussions that lead to actionable steps in building your capacity, and fostering a healthcare environment free of barriers.

Some of the topics to be discussed today include:

- Cost of Having a Family and the Benefits of Strong Parent Led Households
- Sexual and Reproductive Health
- Common Menstrual problems among women and difficulty becoming pregnant
- Gynaecological cancer screening and surgery for women and the challenges
- Sexually transmitted infection/diseases, prevention, diagnosis and treatment
- HIV/Aids Prevention, Diagnosis and Treatment'
- Contraceptive Choices

Every participant will have the opportunity to access various services today. These include;

- Blood Glucose Test
- HIV
- Breast Examination
- Mental Health Services
- Vision Screening
- Dietary/Nutrition Services
- HPV Immunization

Recognizing the need to promote a more inclusive society, the Ministry created an initial draft of the Trinidad and Tobago Disabilities Bill. The draft Bill was shared with several Organizations and invaluable comments and recommendations were received from 18 Government Ministries, the Equal Opportunity Commission, the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago, 3 Statutory Bodies, 10 Non-Governmental Organizations and persons with Disabilities.

These recommendations have been meticulously considered by the Ministry's internal Legislative Review Team, which has undertaken a comprehensive revision process leading to amendments being incorporated into the Revised Draft Bill.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of disability legislation across jurisdictions; regionally and internationally have been done to ensure that the resulting Bill meets or exceeds international best practices and standards.

The Ministry is nearing completion of the final draft of the revised Bill. The Bill will undergo the requisite legislative drafting process, then submitted to the Legislative Review Committee of the Cabinet and forwarded for the approval of the Cabinet.

Noteworthy, provisions of the Draft Bill include, but are not limited to:

- Protection from discrimination;
- Access to Education;
- The Right to work and employment;
- Access to Healthcare;
- Access to Housing;
- Access to Auxiliary social services
- The Right to adequate standard of living; and
- The establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Council for Persons with Disabilities.

Ladies and the gentlemen, I encourage each of you to recognize the value in the person next to you. We are all uniquely different but all of us have a contribution that adds worth to another in this journey we call life.

I commend the Disability Affairs Unit for leading this important initiative and pledge my ongoing support.

In conclusion, I urge each of you to actively participate in today's proceedings, keeping in mind our collective mission to help, empower, and transform the lives of vulnerable communities.

I encourage all participants to make use of the valuable information which will be provided through our qualified presenters and visit our stakeholder booths, so you can take control of your reproductive health and general well-being.

I thank you.

May God bless you.