

IORA WOMEN EMPOWERMENT EVENT

SPEECH by SEYCHELLES AMBASSADOR for WOMEN AND CHILDREN Dr Erna ATHANASIOS

Ministers, H.E. Ambassador Susan Coles, Australia's High Commissioner to the Seychelles, H.E. Ambassador Natasha Stott Despoja, Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Members of the National Assembly, Principal Secretaries, , Distinguished guests, participants, all protocol observed.

A very good afternoon to you all.

It is with immense pleasure that I address you all today at this IORA event to interact on the important issue of women's empowerment, a subject that is very close to all our hearts.

Let me firstly extend a warm welcome to all our overseas participants to our beloved Seychelles. Having travelled from all the different corners of our region, is a demonstration of the level of importance each and every one of you has given to this cross cutting issue of Gender Equality and women's empowerment.

I would also like to extend our appreciation to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (UN Women), IORA and the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for co-organizing this dialogue event and for allowing Seychelles to be your gracious host.

It goes without saying, that the role of women in society is an important one. It is therefore fitting to say that Women's economic participation and empowerment, are fundamental to strengthening women's rights and enabling women to have control over their lives and exert influence in society. It is about creating just and equitable societies.

For centuries, women have often faced discrimination and persistent gender inequalities, with some women experiencing multiple discrimination and exclusion because of factors such as ethnicity or caste. Women around the world, collectively perform 66% of the world's work, and produce 50% of the food, yet earn only 10% of the income and own a mere 1% of properties. Much remains to be done, as we seek to improve those statistics and ensure a more equitable platform for women around the world. With the new paradigm shift for sustainable development, it is imperative, more than ever to strive for development that is based on the principles of equality and fairness.

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment are no doubt key priorities for the Seychelles Government. Being a small island developing states, we share the same vision as the other Indian Ocean Islands and the wider Indian Ocean rim.

Once again, the smallest and largest of the Indian Ocean Rim Association member states have joined together with other IORA members and dialogue partners to acknowledge the common challenge of gender inequality. Participants have come together to share good practice and

scaleable solutions to enable women to fully contribute to the social and economic fabric of their societies.

We are fully supportive of the regional initiatives being undertaken to advance a more progressive development agenda with regards to women's empowerment. Having recently declared our pro-active stance at the 25th African Union Summit, in Johannesburg, South Africa, Seychelles received the '**Gender Parity** Achievements' Award in recognition of our efforts to actively promote gender equality and empower women and girls. We stand before you today, proud of this achievement and as your host country; we are very pleased and willing to share the experiences that shaped such success.

Seychellois women have always been at the forefront of development. They have been active participants in making Seychelles a success story in so many areas. From this morning's site visit, you have had a chance to visit some of these women led businesses in key economic pillars of Seychelles, namely tourism and fisheries.

Our size, isolation and history may have played a role in creating our close knit and harmonious Seychellois society, where the contribution of every individual is valued irrespective of their gender. But the political commitment of Government has also been a significant factor in ensuring that the inequalities, discrimination and cultural barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment that is so pervasive in many other societies, does not exist in Seychelles. We therefore look forward to sharing our success stories and learning from the other member countries on best practices to advance economic empowerment of women in our region.

With the increasingly competitive global market, there needs to be more regional cooperation to ensure the active participation of women in newer, emerging markets. Governments should continue to be innovative in their efforts to shape policies that are coherent and respond to today's dynamic society. The private sector also has a pivotal role to play in creating the right conditions in the workplace to achieve gender equality and create more opportunities for women empowerment. These, coupled with the creativity, passion and determination of our women will surely help them reach their maximum potential and therefore enhance the IORA economy.

I truly hope that through the thought –provoking presentations and discussions, we will be able to identify the necessary actions required by all parties involved to improve on gender equality and to facilitate new ideas for collaboration to maximize impact for women's economic empowerment in the Indian Ocean Region.

At this juncture, I would like to wish you all a fruitful deliberation and may you use this great occasion to share your ideas, exchange experiences and establish good networks that would allow you to continue to strive for women of our region.

I thank you.