

**IORA Women's Economic Empowerment Event:
Mobilising Markets and Commitments to Gender Equality in the Indian Ocean
24-25 August 2015, Mahe Island**

Ministers

Members of the diplomatic corp.

Ambassador Stott Despoja, Ambassador for Women and Girls of Australia

Members of the National Assembly

Ambassador Athanasius, Ambassador of Women and Children of Seychelles

Distinguished Guests, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

All protocols observed

On behalf of Ambassador KV Bhagirath, Secretary General of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, I wish to take this opportunity to welcome you to this IORA Women's Economic Empowerment event. Ambassador Bhagirath requested that I convey his regrets for not being able to attend, but due to some pressing commitments he unfortunately had to change his plans. It was especially regrettable as he attended the first IORA Women's event in Kuala Lumpur and was also closely involved in the Women's event in Hyderabad, India.

Ambassador Bhagirath therefore requested that I convey his regrets for not being able to personally join you in your deliberations on how we can better address and improve the situation of women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship around the Indian Ocean Rim. He requested that I do wish you all success with your deliberations and he is eagerly awaiting the outcomes document of this meeting which we will include in the IORA's Annual Report which will be submitted to the IORA Council of Ministers Meeting in Padang, Indonesia, at the end of October 2015.

Again today we see the smallest and largest of the Indian Ocean Rim Association Member States joining together to acknowledge the common challenges of gender inequality in our Region in particular and to formulate practical ideas to improve inclusion and advancement.

It is here at the outset that we have to take a moment and acknowledge the fact that since assuming the IORA Chair in 2013, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop of Australia, has initiated and championed gender empowerment as a cross-cutting priority objective within IORA. There is no doubt that in this regard she has been a great inspiration to us all. Here we could also acknowledge the significant role of Seychelles in co-hosting this event and championing gender empowerment within IORA.

It is increasingly well understood that one of the best ways to promote economic growth and to achieve stronger communities is to empower women and girls. As more women around the world take on leadership positions in their communities, in their countries, and across the Indian Ocean the impact of female leadership will be profound.

2015 is an important year for recognising the advancement of women's rights reflecting that:

- The AU Heads of State declared 2015 as: "The Year of Women's Empowerment and Development towards Africa's Agenda 2063";
- It is also the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action where nations of the world promised to remove all obstacles to gender equality and the empowerment of women; and,

- The Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are about to be launched which includes goal five on ‘Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women and Girls’.

As was already mentioned under the guidance of Minister Bishop the empowerment of women and girls in particularly the Indian Ocean region was identified as an important cross-cutting priority for IORA already in 2013 and it will remain as such. In this regard the Secretariat has taken it very seriously and we are committed in ensuring that every project being undertaken by IORA and its Member States must have a women’s empowerment and capacity building component linked to it. IORA is also considering including in the Rules and Procedures of the IORA Special Fund a reference that all future IORA projects funded through the IORA Special Fund must have a gender empowerment component that would ensure a direct and positive impact on women and girls. There should therefore be no doubt about IORA’s commitment and future focus in this regard.

We are also very pleased to reflect that today’s event follows successful IORA Women’s meetings last year in Kuala Lumpur and Hyderabad. The recommendations from those meetings have been reflected in the draft Mahe consensus which we hope will be endorsed here tomorrow. It is clear that although much has been done, we have in fact only scratched the tip of the proverbial iceberg in this regard. The Kuala Lumpur’s workshop had a hundred per cent participation rate which clearly reflected the high interest of IORA members to address and improve the access for women in the Region to economic opportunities. We are therefore also very pleased to have learned that IORA member countries and dialogue partners are represented here.

We should therefore fully utilise the opportunity we have here within this exceptionally high participation to:

- extract good practices from individual country contexts;
- to build networks and space for collaboration;
- and to crystallise your views and experiences into the Mahe Consensus which will be submitted to the Council of Ministers Meeting in Padang in October 2015.

Together with Member States, Dialogue Partners and others, such as UN Women, IORA can play a positive role in bringing together private and public sector stakeholders to draw attention to gender inequality and to support Member States to drive women’s economic participation and entrepreneurship.

Your work over the next two days will drive the changes we need to see, so we can live in a world where women and girls can fully and entirely participate in the economic and social fabric of their societies and to take advantage of the full spectrum of their aspirations and abilities. The Secretary General conveyed his best wishes for your deliberations.

Let me end with a quote from what Foreign Minister Bishop has said before and repeated today:

And I quote:

“Gender inequality undermines economic growth, human development and poverty reduction. The evidence is clear—investing in women is not just the right thing to do— it is the smart thing to do.”

Thank you.