

HONOURABLE CARVIN MALONE
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS
60TH MEETING OF THE PRESIDING OFFICERS OF THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN LATIN
AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
23RD FEBRUARY 2021

INTERVENTION

Excellencies:

Monica Zalaquett, Minister of Women and Gender Equity of Chile and Chair of this Regional Conference on Women

Alicia Barcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC

Maria-Noel Vaeza, UN Women's Regional Director for the Americas and Caribbean

Honourable Ministers

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

It is my pleasure to provide a brief report on the British Virgin Islands' implementation of the Santiago Commitment.

First, I am pleased to inform you that active cases of COVID-19 in the British Virgin Islands are down to zero as of 18th February 2021. This is the result of robust entry and health protocols and their enforcement by the health authorities and local places of business on our islands. We have now entered the vaccination phase of our health response which is in the early stage of rollout.

While we are beginning the process of recovery from the global pandemic, there is no doubt that it has taken a heavy toll on our society, particularly on women.

After the unavoidable emergency closure of our borders in March 2020, which was followed by a lockdown, the tourism sector collapsed. Notably, the sector accounts for roughly a third of GDP and the greatest share of employment compared to other sectors of the economy. Businesses reliant on tourism for income came under intense financial pressure that induced a sharp spike in unemployment. Women were disproportionately affected since they comprise the majority of workers in the tourism sector, employed at hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality businesses. Women, and in particular, single family households headed by women, were thrust into financial hardship.

In response to the financial challenges facing women and other vulnerable persons, we approved a modest economic stimulus package that provided financial and social assistance, including unemployment payments to laid off persons, financial assistance to impacted businesses, and also financial assistance to civil society. We have continued to work with local NGOs such as the family support network to ensure that struggling families are fed. Women are disproportionately benefitting from the assistance being provided by the Government in collaboration with Civil Society, private sector and international partners.

Over the past 12 months as we have maintained curfews, many families and individuals have come under greater social pressure at home. Many women and children have ended up in more vulnerable positions where they can be abused. To a lesser extent some men face similar challenges.

We have continued to campaign through targeted messaging and the stepped-up efforts of our social services offices and the police to discourage the abuse of women and children, and to intervene as we required.

In terms of the welfare of children specifically, the containment of the pandemic has allowed us to begin returning children to classrooms in a staged way. This will place them in a safer and healthier environment during daytime hours. We are conscious of how important this is for girls in particular, who can be the target of abusers.

We are also refining our social protection policies and developing our social registry to be able to better protect vulnerable populations, including women. We also continue to provide support through our public assistance and income support programmes.

In terms of investment in our social infrastructure, we are proceeding with development of social housing for those families and persons who do not have a home and would not acquire one otherwise. This will address an important aspect of their welfare over the long-term.

Madam Chair, at this stage I would like to pay tribute to the many women who are at the heart of the health services and social services in the British Virgin Islands without whom we could not have mounted a robust health and social response to COVID-19. Women are disproportionately represented in the health and social sectors.

Throughout the pandemic we have done everything in our power to ensure these brave women have the personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to safely do their jobs. We are also ensuring that as we rollout our vaccination programme that they get the needed vaccination, so they are protected from illness.

They remain on the frontline of containing the virus. Their lives are continuously at risk in doing everything from testing to monitoring to policy development, coordination and implementation. As minister responsible for health and gender, I am truly grateful.

Finally, as the British Virgin Islands begins to recover economically from the global pandemic, we see women as central. As I mentioned earlier, women are at the heart of our tourism industry. We successfully reopened our borders on 1st December 2020 after eight long months to receive tourists and other visitors. Our entry and health protocols are working well and have successfully netted imported cases of COVID-19.

Our well-functioning system will allow us to receive greater numbers of tourists that will boost our economy and create more jobs. This will help to absorb those women who need employment. To support

this effort, we are providing retraining with the generous assistance of the International Labour Organisation.

Madam Chair, I thank you for the opportunity to deliver this report and look forward to the remainder of our meeting to address the serious challenges women face coming out of the global pandemic.