

**Statement by
H.E. Mrs. Joan Musa
Special Envoy, Representative of the Prime Minister, and
President of the National Women's Commission
to the
23rd Special Session
Entitled Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development
and Peace for the Twenty-first Century
June 9th, 2000.**

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Five years ago countries of the world gathered in Beijing and put forward, twelve critical areas of concern for the advancement of the world's women. The discussions, negotiations and agreements carried out, during this historic meeting, resulted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Today, as we review the progress made, we are called upon to identify new challenges, incorporate emerging issues, and represent the concerns and interests of billions of women around the world who are hoping that from this special session will emerge greater empowerment and gender equality.

Mr. President,

When Belize endorsed the guidelines put forth in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, we as a nation committed ourselves to improve the lives of Belizean women. Today, I am pleased to report that there have been many achievements and take pleasure in sharing with you some of our ideas for a way towards gender equality, development and peace for the 21st century.

As a developing nation, Belize recognizes the need for its women, who comprise half its population, to participate in every aspect of its growth and development. For the first time in the history of our young nation, a *Women's Agenda* was adopted as a crucial part of an electoral manifesto. This manifesto committed the currently elected government, to take action in socio political issues affecting women, to promote their economic empowerment and address their legal status. The *Women's Agenda* has accelerated the implementation of our national, regional and international commitments to the advancement of women.

Like the rest of the world, Belize is aware that to achieve women's empowerment they must take into account the rapid changes in the global economy which have so far proven to be merciless upon those who lack education, access to

technology, capital and good physical and psychological health care. In short the poor!

Today 80 percent of the world population live in poverty. In Belize the poor number almost one third of our total population. We owe it to them Mr. President, to exhaust all efforts to provide greater access to capital, education, health care and relevant technology, necessary tools for their emancipation. This is a challenge that must be undertaken and should benefit all our people.

The challenge to empower women begins with the girl child, who must be provided a home where she is safe from all forms of abuse, be given the opportunity to go to school, be provided with all relevant health and other support services which will help her to grow up a strong confident woman.

Mr. President

Since 1995 violence against women, particularly family violence, has been one of the most prominent issues of concern among Belizean women. Studies conducted to assess the situation of violence against women emphasized the need to confront this issue from a multi-sectoral approach. This has led to a comprehensive plan to address family violence, which includes the implementation of several actions, from better training of police officers in domestic violence cases, to improved management information systems in areas of health, education and law enforcement. We realize this is a work in progress and our Women's Department, National Women's Commission and non-governmental organizations continue to work with the people of Belize to totally eradicate violence against women.

Mr. President

The future success of any developing nation begins with the availability of education. Through education men and women learn essential skills needed to succeed in a productive society. In Belize it is understood that both formal and informal education are essential to the empowerment of our women. Thus in addition to primary, secondary and tertiary school programmes, many skills training programmes are made available.

Another key factor in the achievement of equality and empowerment of women's social and physical well being is in the health sector. We realize that optimal health is required not only during the reproductive years but also through each stage of life. To this end we have broadened our reproductive health services and drafted norms and protocols in the provision of family planning. As part of our prevention strategy, our schools health and physical education curricula now include lessons in human sexuality, gender relations and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

Mr. President,

Although many are the sole providers for their families, women continue to face an unfair economic system. Many women work long hours for unfair wages due to lack of skills, training and access to capital. In Belize government and non-governmental organizations have focused attention on providing skills training and offering affordable credit to women. Through our Government's Social Investment Fund and Small Farmers and Business Bank, a special window has been designated for women seeking loans. In 1999, 35 percent of total loans issued by these institutions went to women. We are encouraged by these modest achievements, but we are determined to do more. We recognize that our women must be involved in every aspect of decision making from the boardroom to the Cabinet room, from the PTA to the trade unions. This is a sure way to a meaningful development. Of course we the developing nations can not accomplish this alone. For sustainable growth and the eventual removal of huge numbers of women from the unrelenting grasp of poverty we need the support and cooperation of our developed partners, who must recognize our vulnerabilities and work

With us to develop more fair and equitable trade practices. We need to benefit from development assistance, shared technologies and scientific knowledge. Together we can eliminate poverty from our planet.

Today, as we chronicle those achievements made since Beijing, we recognize the long journey before us. We know that much more must be done and commit our efforts to the development and implementation of a gender mainstreaming strategy, with the intention of developing a gender policy which facilitates training and other important aspects of women's growth and development.

Mr. President,

In his opening address to this Special Session, the Secretary General stated that the old and new challenges facing today's women, are part of the complex, interconnected world we now live in. They can be met only if we enable women to build on the best this New World has to offer, rather than condemn them to suffer. The latter, Mr. President can not continue to be an option! And so, born out of the desire to build upon those commitments made in Beijing and with a new hope and vision for the future, let us renew our commitment to achieving gender equality, development and peace for the 21st century by empowering all humanity.

I thank you.