

WOMEN, MEDIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen and my congratulations to the Kiwanis Club of Eastern St. Andrew on achieving this 8th anniversary milestone in your journey to help build better communities.

For a moment when I was asked to address this distinguished organization, I was at a lost as what I could speak to you about and then after praying on it, the inspiration came to speak about Women, Media and Social Change...quite a formidable sounding title but the power of it lay in the simplicity of the formula...the power of women times the power of media equals social change.

It has been said that between God and children are mothers, the embodiment of infinite love...in fact, woman, according to Mahatma Ghandi, is the nobler of the two sexes and the soul force or the truth force of humanity.

In our variety of roles from revolutionary freedom fighters of the Underground Railway to activist mothers in Chile who marched

for their children's freedom, the power of women to advance social change has been demonstrated around the world.

Throughout history, women have been instrumental in advancing truth and liberty from Nanny to Winnie, women are a force to be recognized and when mobilized, a force to be reckoned with.

Women around the world are constantly balancing the demands of family, work and life...thus the old adage - a woman's work is never done.

For many, their success is tied to their sense of self - self respect and self love are the cornerstones of a firm foundation for the woman and therefore by extension, the husband, children and the society.

The Jamaica woman stands squarely in the center of Jamaican society, an object of affection and respect on one hand and an object of aggression and disrespect on the other.

The mothers of this nation have worked side by side with the fathers, to establish this country, often at lesser wages than our male counterparts, but no less committed, accounting for 46% of the total labour force, and dominating the sale and social sectors.

There are several indicators worth reviewing to determine the state of women's affairs in Jamaica – representation, education, compensation, protection, legislation and of course, the state of the nation.

According to recent studies by the United Nations, despite the fact that Jamaican women have high academic qualifications, they remain largely under-represented in positions of influence, power and decision-making.

In fact, it is estimated by the Planning Institute of Jamaica that women must have four more years of schooling in order to compete for salaries similar to men.

Not surprisingly, women are mostly salaried and self-employed workers and head approximately 47% of Jamaican households with 30% of that segment, falling below the poverty line.

In preparing to speak to you, I reviewed several recent gender reports for Jamaica, all of which raised alarm regarding the high level of domestic related violence against women that continues to be a problem in all social classes and further notes that faced with entrenched values tolerating male dominated behaviour, Jamaican women remain reluctant to acknowledge or report the abusive behaviour.

The UN estimates that 90% of all cases of violence against women in Jamaica is domestic, a frightening statistic that implies that all is not well on the home front.

According to another report, sexual abuse and incest have been experienced by an estimated 26% of the adolescent females aged 15-19 - that's 1 out of every 4 teen girls and teen pregnancy in Jamaica ranks the highest in the Caribbean.

So where is Jamaica on women's affairs? Jamaica ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women in 1984 but has not ratified the Inter-American Convention for the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women.

There are several important legislative bills still awaiting passage which deal with domestic violence and incest however sexual harassment remains unaddressed by legislation.

There is an urgent need to increase lobby efforts in this regard and force government to implement stronger legislative protection for Jamaican women and children who are at the front of the victim line in the violence gripping the nation.

Jamaica today in many ways scarcely resembles the Jamaica of ten, twenty or forty years ago...the current scourge of violence in the society is a principle indicator that this is not the kinder gentler Jamaica Harry Belafonte sang about as his Island in the Sun...this is a new Jamaica... Improved?... well that depends on who's talking.

In today's testosterone heavy Jamaica, the vaccine for the disease of violence is a mixture of love, education and options – the feminine energy is needed to restore balance in the society.

There are many women related organizations in Jamaica such as yours, actively working, usually without adequate resources, to lobby and implement programmes on behalf of women, children and social change.

In spite of the conditions outlined by the gender statistics, Jamaican women have made strides and continue to affect social change in the society on a daily basis at many levels - individual, organizations, corporations, community and national but there is much room to increase that impact.

The question is how can we begin to shape a different future for Jamaica than the current picture being painted by today's state of affairs.

Education stands as a priority in virtually every strategy being promoted for everything from gender empowerment and youth development to poverty alleviation and job creation.

Women must begin to target the power of the great educator – media, to inform and influence, in favour of an agenda that addresses social change sensitive to women’s affairs.

The challenges facing women invariable affect the children who are the future and therefore as women, we have a responsibility to mobilize ourselves to drive social change in defense of the defenseless.

Media, like no other influence external to the family, stands as a powerful socializing agent for both positive and negative messages affecting today’s youth.

Media must be utilized, monitored and held accountable... it is time to voice our concerns loud and clear - speak out – call in – write in – let them know we demand standards.

The power of the media to influence behaviour has been qualified and quantified in countless studies around the world.

Most of the time the impact of media messages are not immediate, but over time with repetition, children see and hear messages, internalize them and therefore they impact on their values and self-esteem.

According to these studies, media content and advertising affect children's behaviour through four critical messages:

- Violence as a way to handle conflict**
- Sexual action with no negative results (disease/pregnancy)**
- Cigarettes and alcohol shown as cool and attractive not unhealthy and deadly**
- Fast foods and thin bodies promoting poor health and unrealistic body images**

Do your own survey when you next drive down the street count the number of billboards, stationary and moving that promote these values or do a count on your TV or radio... imagine the impact of that on the minds of young children.

The impact of violent media messages on children is evidenced not only by their increased aggression toward others but through their relatively easy acceptance of real world violence or on the contrary, their fear of the real world.

The level of violence in today's Jamaica, particularly the current trend towards increasingly younger violent juvenile offenders, is arguably due in part, to the influence of media on our children.

Media is driven by content such as music, movies, videos, news, sports, culture, education and advertisements.

Jamaican media which includes over 10 commercial radio stations, 5 television stations and 5 major newspapers, continue the mad scramble to the bottom line as they struggle to survive in the face of a shrinking advertising pie.

This bottom line approach has taken helped take us to the bottom as a society and the content and standards of Jamaican media have declined as well.

Groups like Women Media Watch have a vital role to play in monitoring this sector and networking with other women's organizations to implement effective public education campaigns.

Media competition is fierce as alternative sources of entertainment have overwhelmed the market and Jamaica's young people are increasingly focused on the values and culture imported through cable - even the dress, language and musical tastes are starting to resemble those of a hip hop nation rather than a reggae nation.

Jamaica's culture from music to art ranks as one of the three major influences in the global arena and has been established as an intrinsic part of the Jamaican identity.

The foundation of any civil society is based in the recognition and preservation of its culture and therefore in the face of the cable invasion, more needs to be done in the home and school as well as by traditional media, to ensure Jamaican culture remains vibrant and relevant to Jamaica's future generations.

Media by today's definition is not limited to radio, television and print but must also include the internet and computer games.

The level of violence and sexual images available online or in many of the video games are excessive and harmful and we must become more proactive in supervising and limiting our children's exposure to these products.

Media images oversaturated with sexual messages from the almost naked girls featured in the latest music video, both local and overseas, to the sexual themes found in the movies, television programmes, music and even cartoons we allow children to consume.

Children don't have time to be children in today's world – they are bombarded from the moment they walk out of their door...the key therefore is to equip them with tools that will allow them to manage the barrage.

Exposure to media messages is not limited to what children receive at home but their impact is influenced by the values they learn at home.

Media literacy starts at home and there are a number of things you can do to make yourself and your family media literate including limiting media time, setting guidelines as well as supervising and discussing messages as a family.

Like many of Jamaicans, I am worried about the state of our nation, our children and our future in the face of today's social chaos.

We need to spend as much time as possible talking with and listening to our children...and by our children I mean all our children...it takes a village to raise a child...and only a moment to make a difference in someone's life.

Give the children options...encourage creativity, healthy adventure and self-expression through avenues such as the arts sports and reading.

Help your children become media literate and understand how their media choices affect them.

I would like to encourage you to read an article called “Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens” downloaded from the American Academy of Pediatrics website and ask that you collect a copy before leaving tonight.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening, I would like to close with a quote from Malcolm X who said “To educate a man is to educate an individual – to educate a woman is to liberate a nation”.