

**U.S. Embassy's 4<sup>th</sup> Belize Woman of the Year Award**  
**Welcome Address by Ann-Marie Williams**  
**March 8, 2013, U.S. Ambassador's Residence, Belmopan**

The idea of an International Women's Day celebration emerged at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century out of the early socialist movement. Such a celebration, was unheard of at the time, as it wreaked of pure radicalism. Today, it's anything but!

Since 1975, after the first World Conference on Women held in Mexico City, the United Nations began celebrating March 8, as International Women's Day. Two years on, the UN adopted a resolution that all member states should observe one day each year to bring into sharp focus, women's rights.

That observance has been translated into a national holiday by dozens of countries including—China, Bulgaria, Russia, Vietnam and Zambia. Today as we celebrate or observe the day, we do so in Belize under the International Women's Day committee's theme---"***The Gender Agenda: Gaining Momentum.***" There's also a UN theme: ***A Promise is a Promise: Time for Action to End Violence against Women.*** Amidst the many commemorations around the world—UN Women, is at this time launching a song titled ONE WOMAN. The song is a rallying cry designed to inspire listeners to join the drive for women's rights and gender equality. You will be able to download the song at noon today from UNWomen's website. [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)

And what exactly are we doing in Belize, this day? Well, this ceremony never existed before 2010 and this is the biggest thing for women today. So, Ambassador, congratulations are in order for you and your staff.

Much has been achieved--just ask our first woman of the Year winner, Sonia Lenares, how difficult it was to think of starting another chapter of the YWCA. But she persevered and the Belmopan Chapter of the YWCA is opening its door on March 19.

Likewise, many thought it futile to have expanded the swampy Belize City in the Collet area so that women can have access to house lots—not the late Gwendolyn Lizarraga, the late Sadie Vernon saw it as her life’s work to have invested in girls when she started the precursor to the Sadie Vernon High—the Belize Continuation School.

Our Woman of the Year, Sylvia Flores could tell us what it must have been like in the boys club, being the first woman minister of Defence and let’s not forget her late mother, Evelyn Avila, President of the United Women’s Group, Dangriga Branch, who in the early 1970s started a housing project for 25 women in the swampy Unity Zone area of her home town, Dangriga, don’t forget the fiery hot Marie Sharp, who deared to have started her successful pepper industry in her kitchen, the late Nurse Vivian Seay who started the Black Cross Nurses Association of Belize, the late Nurse Cleopatra White who was one of the first women Village Councillors and how about Zenaida Moya—the first Belize City woman Mayor, twice over.

However, with all our struggles and achievements, the question on the gender agenda remains—Is it gaining momentum? Not if like me, you listened to Louis Farrakhan after 11 yesterday when he was addressing the inmates at the Hattieville Prison—‘talk about a woman should be at home waiting on her husband after he comes home from a hard day’s work...’ (All of you here are in trouble) humor.

I’d like to borrow a few lines from Singer Songwriter Helen Reddy’s 1971 hit song—*I am Woman*, to best explain to Farrakhan. Here goes: the song, which has been dubbed, a women’s anthem says and I quote—*“But I’m still an embryo with a long, long way to go until I make my brother understands...”*

If we are to build a more peaceful, prosperous and just Belize and by extension the world, then we will definitely need to abandon circumscribing the participation of women, who make up half or more

than half the population in most countries. Development cannot occur sustainably if half the workforce and production is not being used. Despite real gains in attaining gender equality and women's empowerment in a number of sectors, women's participation at the highest decision-making and parliamentary levels remains low. And speaking of low representation, one outstanding individual, a man has added his voice to the song—"Temporary Special Measures".

In addressing the 49<sup>th</sup> Policy Roundtable of the Organization of American States, on *the Rights of Women: From Law to Practice* held on March 1<sup>st</sup> in Washington, DC, OAS Secretary General, Jose Miguel Insulza said that among the many issues faced by women, political representation is crucial. On this issue he noted, and I quote—"the only way to achieve real equality is through affirmative action laws" that are accompanied by effective implementation in reality. "It is no longer enough to simply proclaim these laws, because there is always some excuse or another for not having enough female candidates in various elections and the numbers are not good," he added.

The Secretary General added that "there is no democratic society when all citizens do not exercise the same rights; that is the opposite of democracy." "A society which, in practice, denies rights to certain individuals because of their status, their gender or their race, certainly is not a sufficiently democratic society. Therefore, our obligation is to ensure that these rights exist not only in law but also in practice." End quote.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to challenge you today to ensure women's political representation and participation exist, not only in law, but do all you can to make it happen in practice.

Welcome to this International Women's Day event, welcome to the U.S. Embassy's Belize Woman of the Year Award.

Thank you!

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