The UNIFEM Caribbean office is so excited to be able to re-launch “Gender Dialogue”. An initiative which started at ECLAC, we thank our sister agency for its permission to UNIFEM to take over the title. This publication, which will be available online, is intended as a forum for discussion, critical analysis and importantly, prescription.

We are re-launching Gender Dialogue at a historic time for gender equality and women’s empowerment programming. On 2 July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly voted unanimously to create a new entity to accelerate progress in meeting the needs of women and girls worldwide. The establishment of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women — to be known as UN Women — is a result of years of negotiations between UN Member States and advocacy by the global women’s movement. Part of the wider UN reform agenda, UN Women brings together the mandates of UNIFEM, DAW, OSAGI and INSTRAW for an acceleration of work and for greater impact. It is headed by Under Secretary General, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile.

We are especially delighted that this first issue of UNIFEM’s Gender Dialogue features an in-depth interview with Dame Billie Miller. Dame Billie a former Barbadian parliamentarian, former Deputy Prime Minister needs no introduction. Yet we wish to make special note of her work in moving forward women’s access to reproductive and sexual health services informed by the consistent application of human rights principles.

We hope that you enjoy the interview and that you find the time to comment and respond. Soon, this online publication will become the Gender Dialogue Blog. Look out!

Roberta Clarke – Regional Programme Director UNIFEM Caribbean Office
An argument we continue to be faced with is, is there still need to talk of a gender agenda and has the ‘age of woman’ passed in the Caribbean? Where do you think we stand in terms of gender equality in Barbados and the Caribbean?

We use these phrases and sometimes I am not sure of what they mean... I think that as time goes on they do and should take on different meanings, they are more nuanced. But the gender agenda is very key, we take lot of things for granted in the Caribbean especially as we are juxtaposed to Latin America and Central America in particular and so we take comfort in some of the statistics that we see but there is a great deal still to be done in respect of the gender agenda and I am glad that it is put that way.

In the workplace there are still some quite significant inequities, for instance in the banking and other related industries you will not see a woman, I have not yet seen a woman at the head of any of the major banks in Barbados, none of them. You will see women, and it has been so for a long time as branch heads, but even when you see women now, at that level and you look carefully, the basic salary maybe the same but the perks associated with housing and special allowances for children and so on are not always the same.

I’ve just come back from chairing a ministerial forum at a conference in Washington called ‘Women Deliver’, 42 Ministers a subset of 4,000 participants. Women do deliver and its smart economics. This is a lived experience for me. I saw this happen in my lifetime in the 1950s and 60s. I saw the increase in women’s access to the ownership of land. I say to people as I did in Washington and I use every opportunity to say it, 73% of mortgages in Barbados are held by women. So the reduction of poverty, the social exclusion, I saw all of that changed and I was pleased to be a part of that process especially when I went into Parliament.

Henry Forde was a magnificent attorney general that’s why I always say, that women’s advancement could not have succeeded without the help of more than a few good men. The 1976-81 Barbados Labour Party administration started with the outlawing of bastardy, then we moved to bring the legislation which opened doors for women very quickly: access to the labour market, equal pay for equal work - I saw that happen and so I saw the wage gap narrow considerably in the public sector.

In population dynamics we say that a generation is roughly 28 years, in less than 60 years all of this happened in the English-speaking Caribbean very quickly and happened in a way that we hope it could not be easily reversed, certainly the legislative aspect of it, the freedoms that came to women and the equality that was legislated for women. Women took it up because you can legislate for equality but it’s not always taken up. There maybe all
kinds of reasons why it’s not picked up, some of them are religious, some of them are ethnic, and some of them have to do with where you are in the poverty index.

It waxes and wanes this whole concept of the ‘age of women’ - I don’t think there is any ‘age of women’ but there is still an important agenda for gender.

Increasingly we hear of the marginalisation of men and boys and that their case must now dominate the gender agenda, what is your position on this?

(Editor’s note: Reference was made by the interviewer of an article in a Boston publication, The Atlantic magazine July/August 2010 edition, where author Hanna Rosin wrote on: “The End of Men” in this modern post-industrial society.)

There are some of our gender who are somewhat dismissive, some even scornful of the claim that men now make for themselves and for boys that they are in crisis. There is a great deal of truth in that. Not that they were not in crisis before but it is now far better understood.

The women’s movement as we know it and understand it today would have started at the time when the social revolution started in the Caribbean in the 1930s and 40s. For most of the countries of the English-speaking Caribbean when universal adult suffrage came in the 1950s women got the right to vote for the first time and took great advantage of it but all along women were being educated, certainly at the primary level, equally as boys were.

In the global women’s movement that surged aggressively in the early and mid 70s and thereafter, I think that women did not reach out sufficiently to bring men and boys especially along. Without the help of men certainly when it came to the legislative agenda it would not have happened so swiftly.

There is a lot of ground still to be covered as this question puts it I do not like the word dominate. I understand why it is being put that way but the word should be share. That’s what we have to do. We have not shared enough what has happened in the last 40, 50, 60 years. And so men and boys do feel excluded in some areas. Of course they exclude us still in other areas. But women press on, I see now a woman who is likely to become a cricket umpire, I see women on building sites, high up, dispensing concrete and it just warms the cockles of my heart. I remember when women first became bus conductresses on the old time buses with running boards. I remember when women first became bus drivers.

...This ‘end of men’ though oh dear, dear, dear... Men are still the ones at the cutting edge in space exploration and all of the new technologies. There is no female equivalent of Bill Gates or Steve Jobs yet. In the world of finance and the captains of industry there is no female equivalent to Sir Richard Branson. Women have moved in and gone to the top in what I call the old professions but where the new jobs
are, and where the new technologies are taking us, men are still in the forefront. So we must not fool ourselves, we are still in catch up mode in that sense, so there is no ‘end of men’ and there must never be ‘end of men’, that would mean end of the world... It is an ugly phrase which I think should be discouraged. 

These are phrases that too often send conflicting signals to young people. When boys hear them, what are they supposed to think? Likewise what are girls supposed to think? So we have to be mindful because these are double entendre, they are sending mixed messages, sending the wrong messages, so that we have to be careful about how we throw these things out.

It has to do with working that interface particularly with girls and boys. I am disappointed that in my generation I observe that there are still too many women socializing their boy children to respect mother and mother only. It is not peculiar to the Caribbean or this hemisphere, it is universal where men absolutely worship their mothers, but these same men who would lay down their lives for their mothers are those who abuse their wives and discriminate against their daughters and that has to do with socializing. It has to do with other things as well, including what young children see in the home.

The ‘end of men’ – I cannot accept this phrase because women must not fool themselves men are still in the vanguard. Women have overtaken what I call the old professions and I see it everywhere in the world. The Chancellor of the University of the West Indies and the Vice Chancellor quite independently of each other early in this first decade of the 21st century were heard to opine in public statements, their concern that in every single faculty of the University of the West Indies except agriculture, women outnumbered men. There has been some rebalancing since those statements were made but it is still overwhelmingly so and this is simply because women are catching up!

What was your experience like being the sole woman in Parliament for some time? How do you think the situation has changed for the present-day female Parliamentarians?

I was the only woman in the House of Assembly in my first 19 years Parliament. There were lonely years especially when the social legislation was coming on stream rapidly. There was only one woman’s voice in Parliament speaking to it and often the time to speak in Parliament was so limited that I had to choose. You could not make 10 points in a 30 minute speech. In that way I was so sorry that there were not more women who could have spoken to other areas and brought more of the woman’s perspective. I do try to explain always to men and to women, women bring their own perspective to the development process and without it the whole would be impoverished. By
the same token, men’s perspective is necessary for balance.

Sometimes it was difficult for one woman among 28 men to maintain the gender balance.

I also felt that I had to stay the course for the sake of women who would come after me. In the latter years when I was Senior Minister in Parliament I felt I could mentor both sides of the House and did so willingly.

The present day situation is worrisome. There are fewer women in both the House of Assembly and the Senate of Barbados. A perusal of the statistics put out by the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) show the number of women in Parliament to be in decline across the Caribbean. I do not believe that quotas are popular in this region. The preference seems to be for everyone by merit, especially to the highest committee in the land.

Women are having difficulty with the process of running for Parliament. They are having difficulty raising the funds; they are having difficulty about where they are going to be placed in the campaign. Women want something more defined and ordered. They want to be clear about where they will fit in the process. The roughness and the personal abuse puts women off. Even women who are leaders and treated with great respect in their communities wonder why they should expose themselves to attacks on their character. They say they do not need it. It may be true that they may not need it, but the greater truth is that their country needs their input and contribution. The women’s perspective is wanting in Caribbean Parliaments and that is a concerning thing.

The first time that women could vote after universal franchise in 1951, and could therefore stand for a seat in the House of Assembly, a woman went into the Parliament of Barbados, Ernie Bourne was in the House. It would be 20 years before Gertrude Eastmond went into Parliament in 1971. I became the third woman to go into Parliament in May of 1976. There are presently three women in the House of Assembly one of who sits in the Cabinet together with one from the Senate, which represents a decline because when I left the Cabinet in January of 2008 there were four women in the House of Assembly and all four sat in the Cabinet. Women who sit in the Cabinet bring the woman’s political perspective to the table.

More and more women must be encouraged to come forward. There are a lot of anomalies, a lot of inequalities in the process, but campaign financing and the behaviour of people during campaigns, the structure of campaigns altogether, I believe that is changing. I think that people of my generation would want to sit at home and see and hear excerpts from campaigns on their television sets. This would obviate going out to the meetings although some people like that and it will
continue. I think there will be more school room meetings where people can be more comfortable and therefore more participatory, with question and answer sessions. So there is a very important transition that is struggling to emerge, I hope that women will feel that they can come forward in greater numbers as this occurs.

Do you believe that with this change in the format and setting of public meetings which would allow a question and answer session that women candidates would feel more comfortable?

I think that is the way of the future. More and more town hall meetings on a broad spectrum of issues are taking place. The call-in programmes have given the man and woman in the street a voice.

I am not saying that the big rallies would disappear and they should not. I love that, the big open-air meetings, but I am also very supportive of a different style of campaigning - a campaign which would allow women to be far more participatory. The platform is important because in this part of the world, I think it is universal, where you have free elections people expect their leaders to be good speakers and to be able to articulate their concerns and their causes.

Women need not be afraid to set their own rules, which is what I did when I first went on the campaign trail. You have to be disciplined and be prepared to enforce your campaign style. If you are to be speaker number one do not think you can come at 9 o'clock and push your way onto the platform.

I did not feel that I had to go into rum shops to campaign and I never did. I went into people's homes, that is what I saw Grantley Adams do and that is what I saw my father do and I did it and I liked to be able to get up on the platform on the first night and say that I had been into every home three times before election day. I think that it is an affront that you could get up on a campaign platform and ask people to vote for you relying on a poll or a casual walkabout. If you do not go into the people's homes and introduce yourself and your programmes and ask for the vote, you cannot be surprised if you do not get it.

**Our style of governance is transitioning very slowly. It is struggling to evolve and women must have a say. If we abdicate that responsibility, and I use that word deliberately, to be a part of the process we cannot then be heard afterwards to complain about male dominance which would re-assert itself.**

I consider that I have been fortunate in that all of the political leaders with whom I worked, including leaders on the other side who would have been leaders of the opposition, treated me with respect.

More happily in the years when I was in Government, I was given a free reign, I was allowed to flesh out my ideas. In
every portfolio I held, Prime Minister Adams was very encouraging of all the initiatives I wanted to take, and especially those for the development of Bridgetown. Both Tom Adams and Owen Arthur believed in my dream for the City. I was able to start that process, but it is not completed.

**What advice or recommendations can you offer female candidates on how to best manage themselves with the media?**

Again you have to set your own ground rules. You determine what you are going to do and what you are not going to do and what you are going to be open to and what you are not going to be open to. The press savaged me with that Saturday school headline and they are a lot of people who still say to me “were you really going to send us to school on Saturdays?” I had never said that.

You can define the kind of relationship that you want. I have had to say to young reporters from time to time, I have prepared myself for this interview with you but you have come un-prepared.

Be careful not to be ambushed in a situation where the unfortunate word or phrase slips out. Respect between politicians and the media, has to be mutual and it has be earned. The interface with the media should work for the Party as well as the individual. The majority of the press respected my way of dealing with them; what they had with me was certainty.

The UN has created a new entity UN Women – which merges and will build on the work of four previously distinct parts of the UN system which focus exclusively on gender equality and women’s empowerment.

**What does it hold for the women’s agenda in your view?**

I remember when this was first being discussed. There was a lot of opposition among women’s groups to the merger and creation of one entity. I saw it then and I still see it as a challenge to women.

In the world of school and work, men are more collegial than women and this is something that women are now embracing.

Men are more likely to mentor each other and the question is, can women learn to work more collaboratively, more cooperatively, to be less territorial?
When I was in the Parliament of Barbados, for the first 19 years, I was the lone woman, and those were the years when we were bringing the social legislative agenda forward. There were so many occasions when it would have been a great thing if they were more women. And then, three women came in Cynthia Forde, Mia Mottley, and Elizabeth Thompson. It was greatly satisfying because I had mentored all three of them and still do.

The development process is moving with such speed sometimes you can hardly keep up with it. I see this as a challenge rather than a disaster. In the overall, I think that working together must be good for the women's agenda. It makes perfect sense, in the business world it would have happened a long time ago. I think that the correct decision has been made and will show how well women do in the UN system managing a division like this.

END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

CARIBBEAN LAUNCH:
Strengthening Accountability and Changing Culture to End Violence against Women in the Caribbean
11-12 October, 2010
Hilton Hotel, Barbados

To offer comments or for further information: please contact UNIFEM Caribbean Office Communications Specialist – Sharon Carter-Burke at sharon.carter-burke@unifem.org Tel: 246-467-6124