



GENDER EQUALITY FORUM

A special event of the 4th Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Conference
25-26 May 2024, Antigua and Barbuda

COMMUNIQUÉ to SIDS4

Antigua and Barbuda, Sunday 26th May 2024: Ahead of the 4th Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Conference, a two-day, first-of-its-kind Gender Equality Forum was held under the SIDS4 theme ‘*Charting the Course Toward Resilient Prosperity*’. The more than two hundred stakeholders, coming from more than 40 countries across all SIDS regions as well as non-SIDS areas and representing a wide range of constituencies and sectors, committed to the vital advocacy for and implementation of key actions to ensure that gender equality is at the center of the SIDS agenda. Hosted by the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, the Forum was led by UN Women and the Caribbean Development Bank, in partnership with The Governments of Canada and Australia, with valuable support and participation from Heads of State, Ministers of Gender Affairs, High Officials, government departments, members of civil society, parliamentarians, private sector, Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), regional political agencies, academia, UN system, people with disabilities, cultural and creative groups, youth, indigenous peoples, and other key groups of Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

1. On 25-26 May 2024 in Antigua and Barbuda, the Gender Equality Forum (GEF) provided a platform to **reflect on better practices and lessons learned in operationalizing the SAMOA Pathway and the Sustainable Development Goals and deliberate on the way forward to ensure a gender transformative resilient future for SIDS**, in which all human beings can fulfil their human rights and fundamental freedoms, without discrimination on any grounds, including sex, gender, identity and expression, sex characteristics, race and skin colour (racism and colourism), ethnicity, ability, creed, age, socio-economic condition, political identity, marital status or other distinction.
2. The Forum’s key message was reiterated that **achieving gender equality demands a strategic, intersectional, gender transformative, human-rights based and SIDS-appropriate approach** that overcomes obstacles and transforms vulnerabilities and marginalisation into tools of resilience, innovation, and equality.
3. The Forum congratulated the Small Island Developing States for convening the Fourth International Conference (SIDS4), “Charting the course toward resilient prosperity”.
4. The Forum called on the Heads of States and Governments and high-level representatives of SIDS4 to **ensure that gender equality, women’s human rights and the empowerment of women and girls are prioritised and included in the implementation of the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS)**, building on the Samoa Pathway, by mainstreaming gender equality in the respective national plans and policies. The appeal is to develop a comprehensive SIDS4 Gender Action Plan that includes review timelines, implementation targets, and accountability mechanisms to guarantee urgent improvement of the situation of women and girls, as well as targets that guarantee the participation of women and girls on an equal basis with men and boys at all stages of the governance, implementation and monitoring of the agenda.



5. **The road to CSW 69, Beijing + 30 and beyond must also be strongly integrated with a gender-transformative SIDS program of action.** The priorities identified by the SIDS4 Gender Equality Forum should also inform the Summit of the Future (Sept. 2024), COP29 (Nov. 2024), the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (June 2025), the World Summit for Social Development, and other regional and international processes.
6. The Forum reflected on the SIDS journey, noting that in 1992, the international community formally declared SIDS a special case and committed to assist them to meet their sustainable development objectives. Thirty years after, despite notable progress towards gender equality, SIDS continue to face distinctive challenges that hinder gender equality, women's human rights and the empowerment of women and girls. In this regard, **achieving gender equality in SIDS is both a prerequisite to and an accelerator for the revitalisation of SIDS economies and sustainable national development.**
7. The Forum recognized the immense diversity of Member States within the SIDS as an asset in which the **various experiences of women and girls can be used to leverage the scaling up of innovations and identification of economic opportunities and sustainable use of natural resources.** These should be used to develop economies in a sustainable way, recognizing that the right of all people to live in a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is necessary for the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, such as the rights to life, health, food, water and sanitation and development, among others. At the same time, the enjoyment of all human rights, including the rights to information, participation and access to justice, is of great importance to the protection of the environment.
8. The Forum recognized what was agreed at CSW68 that achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and the full realization of all their human rights and fundamental freedoms requires addressing inequality, poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective. It therefore called on SIDS to **increase investment and financing in initiatives and programmes aimed at addressing both economic and non-economic climate induced losses and impacts which bear implications for gender equality.** It requested that the **allocation of all climate and development finance, including from the Loss and Damage Fund, should always include a well-budgeted gender dimension** to ensure that new, adequate and predictable resources are available and accessible to grass roots organizations and women-led initiatives to address the shortfall faced by the current limited ODA funds dedicated to programmes with gender equality as the principal objective.

Inclusive, Peaceful, Safe and Resilient Societies

9. In the deliberations, the Gender Equality Forum noted that in a world marked by complexity, diversity, intersectionality and interconnectedness, **the pursuit of inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies stands as a paramount imperative,** requiring that SIDS ensure equitable resource allocation; address systemic inequalities; promote social cohesion; protect the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of all peoples; foster resilience to shocks and crises; and build resilient economies. To accomplish these goals, it is crucial to redesign political processes to ensure full, equal, effective and meaningful leadership and participation of women peacebuilders, women-led mediation, and diverse youth-led networks at every stage of peacebuilding, prevention and resolution.
10. It also considered that while education remains an important strategy, **access to education by itself has not addressed many of the persistent gender inequalities** in employment, wages, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence against women and girls, and other dimensions of women and girls' autonomy. Therefore,



participants called on all SIDS individually and collectively to **take deliberate action to end gender inequality in all its manifestations across multiple dimensions**, encompassing social, economic, environmental, and governance domains.

11. The Forum recognised that there is a growing backlash to gender equality, women's and girls' rights and the empowerment of women. **Governments of SIDS were also encouraged to increase alliances with its gender machineries, the women's movements, feminist organizations, women human rights defenders, climate and environmental defenders, women-led mediators networks, and other human rights and grass root civil society organisations** to promote awareness, develop internal capacities, build political commitments, leverage knowledge-sharing, and take action to foster support for gender equality, rights and the empowerment of women and girls.
12. The Forum delivered a solid and bold message on the **absolute need to prioritize comprehensive prevention of and response to violence against women and girls**, including through understanding and addressing the root causes (such as the gender stereotypes and negative social norms that sustain discrimination against women and girls), strengthening appropriate normative, legislative, and policy frameworks, ensuring necessary services and pathways, providing necessary infrastructure (i.e. safe spaces, shelters, one-stop approaches for response to sexual violence), developing prevention pathways (e.g. through curricula and media representation) and delivering the appropriate psychosocial support. To end gender-based violence requires whole of government and whole of community, evidence-based, measurable, inclusive, and funded national action plans.
13. On the backdrop of the Equality Village Entrepreneurial Marketplace featuring thirty (30) women entrepreneurs from the Caribbean and the Pacific as part of the Gender Equality Forum, the Forum recognized that empowering women economically is crucial for benefiting families and communities in SIDS. It emphasized the need to ensure women have access to trade and investment opportunities, especially in the new sustainability and low-carbon economies. **Trade and investment rules and policies must prioritize women's inclusion, supporting their access to finance, global value chains, digital opportunities and resources.**

Women's and Girls' Rights, Participation and Leadership

14. SIDS have benefited from women Heads of State and Government; however, the SIDS regions have not yet met the critical mass of 30% representation of women in parliaments and peace processes and at all decision-making levels. It was recognised that women's voices and participation in peace processes and transitions remains undervalued and underrepresented, and women are often excluded from decision-making spaces. **By recognizing, resourcing, and amplifying women's voices, experiences, expertise, and leadership, including in the civil society, the SIDS Regions will not only build more inclusive and sustainable peace, but also pave the way for a future where conflict is not inevitable.**
15. The Forum noted that one of the key challenges in achieving gender equality by 2030 is an alarming lack of financing with a staggering USD 360 billion annual deficit in spending on gender-equality measure, and the fact that with current progress it could take over 300 years to achieve gender equality as Secretary General António Guterres told the Commission on the Status of Women (based on UN Women estimates). The Forum further supported the International Women's Day 2024 theme of "Invest in women: Accelerate progress" and called for strengthened, dedicated and innovative investment in women, and ensuring investment opportunities for young women and girls.



16. Participants also noted that women are breaking barriers and attaining leadership roles across various sectors and industries. Therefore, there is need for scaling-up actions to address the cultural, ideological and structural barriers to women's leadership at all levels and participation in peace processes at all stages, including as political mediators, and **call on SIDS to ensure that seats are made available for women to achieve critical mass and parity in all processes aimed at ensuring that the SIDS are Islands of Peace.**
17. The Forum remains in solidarity with the people, especially women and girls, in Haiti and called for stability and peace. They recognized that **regional collaboration, including the full participation of Haiti in CARICOM processes, is needed to support a peaceful transition in Haiti where women play an active role and are important decision-makers and must be substantially represented at the table. Measures need to be taken to prevent and address gender-based violence and its impact on women and girls in all humanitarian crises.**
18. The Forum acknowledged that without healthy individuals, resilient prosperity is unattainable, and without healthy women, gender equality remains an elusive goal. **Good health is crucial for women's full participation in society, enabling them to engage effectively in education, livelihoods, and community activities, thereby contributing to sustainable development and vibrant, resilient communities.** To support healthy women, **a robust gender-responsive health system-** providing comprehensive care throughout a woman's life, ensuring resilience through timely, gender-sensitive services, healthcare, support, and emergency responses- is essential.
19. The Forum further recognised that **sexual and reproductive health and rights includes the right to decide freely and responsibly** the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so. The Forum recognized that a holistic approach is required for individuals to exercise their rights to make informed choices including through access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) for both in and out of school youth, contraceptives and other services, particularly where there currently may be restrictions, that would contribute to improved overall health outcomes and gender equality in the region. Additionally, it recognized issues such as violence, stigma, and respect for bodily autonomy, which profoundly affect individuals' psychological, emotional and social well-being.
20. The participants **encouraged SIDS to address unremunerated care and expand programmes for the affordable care of children, the elderly and persons with disabilities that enable women and men to participate** in economic, creative, professional and leadership activities, including in rural communities and in the aftermath of disasters, while creating additional employment opportunities in the care industry and providing appropriate safe spaces for the wellbeing of dependents and wards.

Strengthening Institutional and Statistical Capacities and Capabilities

21. The Forum calls for the systematic integration of gender equality and human rights considerations in the political and technical governance of each SIDS State; coherent foreign and domestic legislation, policy and procedures; responsive regional architecture; gender expertise in regional and national technical bodies; intersectional composition of advisory bodies and decision-making structures; and best practices in public service management and organisational culture.
22. The Forum highlighted the **critical roles of National Women's/Gender Machineries in leading the normative, policy and legal framework for gender equality, women's rights and the empowerment of women and girls.** The



participants encouraged SIDS, as a matter of urgency, to strengthen the National Women's/Gender Mechanisms, through institutional arrangements, skill development, and allocation of adequate human, financial and material resources, to allow them to engage partners across all sectors to secure the political will and technical expertise necessary to increase adoption and use of gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting and other high level policy and governance instruments and strategies that would contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment, and address the intersectional and multi-dimensional nature of gender inequality. The Forum underscored the strategic importance in engaging these important Mechanisms to help build capacity and specialized training for Gender Focal Points to support gender mainstreaming in the SIDS-ABAS processes.

23. The Forum raised strongly the need for inclusion of **strengthening institutional capacity, funding, and other supports to civil society, particularly women's rights organizations**, as well as upscaling of actions that address the barriers they face in implementation and impact.
24. The Forum calls on SIDS to **scale-up actions to address the barriers to women's and girls' participation in STEAM education, employment, innovation and management**, including through equal access to technology and technological skills development for all men and women, and girls and boys- particularly in underserved communities. Participants recognized that women are breaking barriers and attaining leadership roles across various sectors and industries, including in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics), but their journeys are often marked by unique challenges and obstacles shaped by gender dynamics.
25. **Gender statistics and data disaggregated by sex, age, disability and other relevant variables accompanied by gender sensitive analyses provide the basis for data-driven decision-making, sound planning, and national, regional and global accountability.** However, many of the SIDS experience difficulties in collecting data and generating the required analyses and reports. In this regard, the Forum urged SIDS to ensure that the monitoring regime for the ABAS is aligned with existing reporting requirements for the thematic areas and normative frameworks, and, at the same time, demanded that International Development Partners streamline and synchronize reporting and monitoring regimes to take into account the limited capacity of the SIDS to collect and present data on a wide range of sectors, conventions and agreements. The Forum also encouraged SIDS to strengthen their internal capabilities to collect and manage data, conduct gender analyses, and submit regular reports, including to CARICOM and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

Enhancing Environmental and Disaster Resilience, Climate Change and Securing the Future of SIDS

26. The Forum welcomed the attention being given to environmental and disaster resilience, climate change and securing the future of SIDS, noting that the losses, damage and risks related to climate change internal displacement, water and sanitation, food security, housing, sea level rise, ocean acidification, intensified storms, droughts and extreme temperatures pose an existential threat to the viability of our islands and territories, which is disproportionately felt by women and girls; even more so for those intersecting with differences in ability, socio-economic standing, indigenous background, race, age and sexual identity and orientation. The Forum discussed that, among other differences, the responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work rises more significantly for women and girls during times of crisis in part due to the erosion of social infrastructure such as childcare facilities and schools. The Forum recognized that in the aftermath of a disaster women and girls often face an increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence, that lack of amenities such as sanitary products and private sanitation facilities, and access to reproductive health services further stifles women's ability to effectively participate in and contribute to the safe, dignified and orderly return to normal life and economic activity.



27. The Participants urged SIDS to **consistently allocate adequate financing and technical resources to institutionalize the identification of gender gaps and the application of gender transformative approaches** in plans, processes and programmes for implementing the ABAS, including revitalizing SIDS economies, scaling-up climate action and enhancing environmental and disaster resilience, executing inclusive health solutions, increasing prosperity and productive capacities and employment of the populations, and any other current and emerging sectors and priorities.
28. Furthermore, **SIDS should adopt policies and programmes to ensure that women and girls are included at all levels on an equal basis with men and boys**, such as researching trends and sustainable solutions; making decisions; taking action to address the challenges and to ensure benefits from the emerging jobs and business opportunities related to prevention, mitigation and response to climate change and disaster management; and guaranteeing all aspects of governance for a secure future. An important example of where integration of gender equality will have an important impact is in the formulation and execution of the Multi-Dimensional Vulnerability Index.

Overall

29. In 2015, our Heads of State and Government made a commitment to leave no one behind, and this must be supported by key actions and funding for improved services, programs, policy development, and infrastructure. In this regard, UN Women remains committed to monitor the outcomes of the Gender Equality Forum through periodic convenings to track progress, challenges, and opportunities, together with CSO, donor, private sector, media, regional political agencies and development partners, among others.
30. The Gender Equality Forum extended deep appreciation to the Government of Antigua and Barbuda for hosting, and UN Women and the Caribbean Development Bank as lead organizers in partnership with the Governments of Canada and Australia who supported the event, and to all other partners that resourced this Gender Equality Forum including the Government of New Zealand, Equality Fund, ParIAmericas, UN Foundation, Liberty Latin America, PAHO/WHO, UNESCO, UNFPA, and the Office of the President of the General Assembly. The Gender Equality Forum appreciated all those who contributed remarks in person or by pre-recorded video. The Gender Equality Forum also appreciated all other organizations that supported participation of their own or other delegates at the Gender Equality Forum, and the participation of those delegates which lead to the rich and robust set of discussions and messages reflected in this Communique.
31. **The Forum finally highlighted the need for resources and funding for gender equality and SDG5 and to support the actors and actions that would form the important follow-up implementation of the key messages in this Communique.**