Hon Dr Vasant Kumar Bunwaree, Minister of Education and Human Resources;  
Mrs Nathoo, Acting Permanent Secretary of my Ministry;  
Regional Directors of the Ministry of Education;  
Rectors of Colleges;  
Teachers;  
**The Moderator for this debate**-  
Mrs. Nandini Gopaul Nuckchadee, Educator from the Royal College Curepipe;

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Students

I am pleased to be in your midst today for the finals of this first edition of the inter-college challenger cup debate competition which is being organised by the National Women`s Council in collaboration with my Ministry.

This debate competition fits within the broader context of the continued implementation of the Strategic Framework entitled “Young Women Advocating for Gender Equality” for the period 2013 to 2015.

The elaboration of this framework is the result of a joint project of my Ministry and of the **National Women`s Council**. The strategic document was consequently
launched in March last year by the Honourable Prime Minister, Dr Navin Ramgoolam.

The measures contained therein seek inter alia to mobilise young girls such as yourselves, youth clubs and NGO`s including young women associations to ensure sustainability of reflection and action on women`s right issues.

Globally and locally, new challenges are unfolding regarding women`s empowerment and gender equality.

Through the implementation of the Strategic Framework “Young Women Advocating for Gender Equality”, my Ministry and the National Women`s Council aim at reinforcing the social, economic and political empowerment of women, starting with women at an early age.

As you are all aware, Mauritius celebrated the International Women`s Day, five days ago on, 8th March 2014. The theme retained this year is “Inspiring Change”.

During his intervention on that day, the Prime Minister elaborated on the obstacles faced by women and girls. He strongly advocated for a change in mind-set at all levels, calling for continued strong actions towards advancing women`s rights and their empowerment.

Ladies and Gentlemen
My Ministry, as the national gender machinery, has the mandate to address women`s issues and their empowerment.
The objective of which is to make Mauritius a gender-inclusive and equitable society. Today`s challenge cup debate competition is another initiative in that same spirit.

This debate competition wants to incite the younger female generation to grasp the challenges regarding women’s empowerment and emerge as leaders in the areas of intervention underscored in the strategic Framework These are:
• Gender Equality Issues and Economic Empowerment of Women
• Political Empowerment of Women
• Social Empowerment of Women
• Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS and
• Gender-Based Violence

Out of the 116 girls colleges contacted, 45 have positively responded to the invitation to participate in this competition.

I congratulate all the representatives of the different institutions who have taken part in this initiative. It is to be, I hope, the first of many more and as the years go by you will be remembered as the pioneers in the advocacy for women’s empowerment within the school environment.

I appeal here to my colleague the Hon Minister of Education and Human Resources, to support my ministry in its endeavour to promote the measures contained in this framework and encourage more students to participate in the
next year`s edition of the Challenger Cup Debate Competition.

As regards the specific thematics regrouped in the Strategic Framework,

- Gender Equality  Issues and Economic Empowerment Women received **16 entries**;
- Political Empowerment of Women-7;
- Social Empowerment of Women-6;
- Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS -8 and
- Gender -Based Violence-7 entries

For this competition, I am given to understand that the mentors in each thematic area carried out a working session with their respective participants. The students were provided with the tools, skills, knowledge and materials to facilitate participation in the debate.

I commend all the mentors for your laudable efforts and expert advice tendered.

I am informed that the preliminaries for colleges enlisted under the thematic areas **Sexual and Reproductive Health and HIV** and **Gender –Based Violence** could not be held because of the early termination of classes on the 11th of March. They have therefore been postponed.
However, the preliminaries for the other three themes have been held and we are now left with the two best teams in each area of intervention. I am looking forward to the ensuing debates.

Dear Participants,
Winning teams will be rewarded with a token cash prize and books. The challenge cups for the different thematic areas will go to the winning school and be put at stake again next year.
I congratulate the finalists- girls from Queen Elizabeth College, Dr Maurice Curé College, Pailles State Secondary School, Belle-Rose State Secondary School, Quartier Militaire State Secondary School and Universal College.

My congratulations also go to all the participants at the different stages of this competition.

The objective of this debate is also to help you become fully empowered in the 5 areas of interventions under the Strategic Framework.

In that sense all participants are already winners.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Young Women and Girls particularly student girls have a major role to play in women`s empowerment issues. They are called upon to bring about effective and sustainable change for a gender-balanced society.
It is my earnest wish that this debate competition acts a catalyst for young girls students to reflect on ways and means to implement sustainable actions on women rights issues.

Women need to act for the construction of a society where there is fairness and equity in the treatment of both women and men in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

To end, let me extend my sincere gratitude to the members of the jury, who have supported this programme since Day One of the preliminaries.

Allow me also to wish all the women and girls present here a Happy belated International Women`s Day.

On this note, I thank you for your attention and wish you all good luck for the debate. May the best teams win.