Speech for Hon. Minister

International Women’s Day, 08 March 2016

Cyber Tower 1, Ebène

The Hon. Prime Minister,
The Deputy Prime Minister,
The Vice Prime Ministers,
Colleague Ministers,
Members of Parliament,
Members of Diplomatic Corps,
The Permanent Secretary and Staff of my Ministry,
Members of the Press,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to welcome you all to the Celebration of the International Women’s Day 2016. Let me wish all Mauritian women a very Happy Women’s Day.

I equally wish to convey special greetings to all those foreign female workers, who have left behind their dear ones, and are contributing to the economic development of our country.
My special thoughts also go to all those women, worldwide, who on this day, are still struggling to lead a decent life; in particular the displaced ones, those victims of war and natural calamities.

International Women’s Day is the story of ordinary women as makers of history. The specialness of 8 March lies in its being the culmination of many long and difficult years of struggle for women’s human rights.

It has become a day of coordinated efforts to celebrate women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of women’s rights; to celebrate our sustained commitment and drive for change-- our drive for social justice, and for gender equality.

Progress for women has been incremental and each victory became the foundation on which the next one has been built. Women’s empowerment has taken place because of the unflinching advocacy by feminists, as well as the United Nations. As we celebrate International Women’s Day, we need to acknowledge the leading role that the United Nations and UNWomen have played in fostering the human rights principles.

I would like to seize this opportunity to extend my appreciation and gratitude to the UNDP (Mauritius) for its longstanding support to my Ministry for furthering the gender equality agenda.

The adoption of the 2030 Global Goals by the UN in September last in New York ushered a new era. They provide (I quote) an “epic opportunity to the world” said film maker, Richard Curtis. And this is precisely why I deemed it
opportune to retain the theme “Championing Goal 5 of the SDGs: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls” for the celebration of this International Women's Day. This decision is not a mere coincidence. It is, in fact, intentional as we need to spread the word about SDG 5 including its nine targets.

As we move ahead with the SDGs, we must brace ourselves to work together and make a difference. But before making the next leap for implementing SDG 5, we must first of all understand that empowering women is an ongoing process for the attainment of gender equality.

It is equally important to understand that gender issues are not focused on women alone, but instead on the unequal power relations between men and women. Men therefore, have a big part to play in today's national dialogue. Men should not shy away of describing themselves as feminist.

The UNWomen Executive rightly stated that “Patriarch is bestowed on men at birth- whether you want it or not, you are privileged as men. And you either fight and reject it by becoming a feminist man; or you enjoy the privileges that come with it.”

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

13. I am fully aware that the gender equality discourse often leads to questions like:
   - “what does a woman want more than what she enjoys?”
   - What is she seeking to obtain?
   - Of what rights has she been deprived of?
   - What privileges are withheld from her?

14. The answers are simple and clear.
She asks nothing as a favour, but as her birth right;
She wants to be acknowledged as a responsible human being, not as the “sexe faible”... the French expression that says it all !;
She is seeking not to be governed by patriarchal norms; by laws, policies and programmes in which she has no voice.

She does not want her empowerment to be considered as an act of charity or compassionate attitude, but instead a legitimate and long overdue one.

15. This discourse, therefore, calls upon us to synergise our efforts and work together “pour donner a la femme sa juste valeur”. Because, despite elaborate and extensive work undertaken by both Government and Civil Society Organisations in terms of legislation; institutional frameworks; lobbying by feminists and massive investments to raise awareness on women’s human rights, there are still huge deficits in the actual enjoyment of women’s social, economic and political rights.

Our women and girls continue to face a multitude of barriers to gender equality. As we celebrate the International Women’s Day around the theme of “Championing Goal 5 of the SDGs: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls”, it is critical that we flag out some of the gaps that still undermine women’s and girls’ full potential.

16. We could list various examples of gender gaps:

- **Education Gap.** While we have attained gender parity in enrolment rates at the level of primary and secondary schools and our girls are performing better at those levels-- the number of girls enrolled for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) reveals that there is substantial
gender disparity in student enrolment rate in research and technology-- For instance, out of 2856 students enrolled at the faculty of engineering at the University of Mauritius in 2015, only 19% were female. The same trends can be observed over previous years. Hence, the need to accelerate our actions to encourage girls to opt for domains considered male dominated.

- The statistics in regard to the **Health gap** indicate that though the maternal mortality rate has decreased from **0.66 in 2013 to 0.52 in 2014**, efforts towards lowering further the Maternal Mortality Rate has not followed the same trend. This calls for research in the subject matter. We also need to consolidate our efforts in preventing diseases that affect mostly women such as breast and cervical cancers.

- Another challenge relates to the economic dependency ratio. An ageing population will add pressure on the sustainability of public economy. Women's specific health needs would have to be addressed from a gender perspective in light of the changing structure of the population and longevity of women.

- In regard to the **Employment Gap**, the challenge ahead of us is addressing the different gaps and issues related to employment. Despite the fact that the female unemployment rate has decreased from **12.7% in 2012 to 11.4% in 2014**, unemployed women outnumbered unemployed men which stood at **5.5% in 2014**.

- The **Leadership Gap** is another matter of concern with the gender disparity at the level of national assembly. Moreover, even though the amendment to the Local Government Act of 2012 resulted in an increased election of women, their election has not contributed significantly to the promotion of gender discourses.
The presence of women at Board level in the private sector remains drastically low. According to the Board Remuneration and Practice in Mauritius by the Hay Group in 2015, out of 612 Directors of 52 surveyed companies in Mauritius, only 4.58% were women. Furthermore, there is no women Non-Executive Chairperson in any of the 52 companies.

- The **Safety Gap**: the safety of women at home and in the public sphere is becoming more and more an issue that deserves our attention. Out of the new cases of domestic violence cases registered at my Ministry for period January to December 2014, 90 percent of victims are women. Women also experience subtle forms of harassment at the workplace, in the bus or at public places. This is an issue that needs to be flagged out and addressed by the public and private sectors.

- The **Money Gap** in terms of access to credit often limits women’s ability to be more engaged in the world of business and entrepreneurship development.

- The **investment Gap** which means that the best investment in women’s empowerment will, by all means, yield the highest return. Because when women are educated, they are more likely to invest in their own empowerment;
  - this, in turn, changes the way society looks at them;
  - they have a voice in their own life and that of their family;
  - they are better positioned to determine their future;
  - they are able to participate fully in the labour market;
  - when they get an income, they can invest in their health and well-being;
  - they are also in a better position to negotiate in business, thereby becoming more productive.
18. Then, we have the Action Gap which, in fact, is the easiest to address. Today’s National Dialogue is, therefore, about bringing together voices of key actors in the gender equality and women’s empowerment arena, to update and discuss priority areas of intervention on how best to address the various gender gaps. This implies identifying priority areas of action; and calling for greater acceleration for the effective implementation of SDG 5.

19. We have in our midst to-day, networks of expertise and knowledge. We can easily spur action for Championing Goal 5 of the SDGs. Our agenda should aim at strategic and bold changes. Our actions should be transformative.

20. The UNWomen Director, Mrs Phumzile refers to the implementation of SDG 5 as “a 15 year marathon”, she states that “we must be like sprinters, taking off fast from the start, setting a leadership pace, and with the resources to last the course and create a “crowd- pulling effect”.

Very well said!! But what next? Where do we go from now?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

21. More than 80 world leaders, including our prime Minister committed themselves at the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2015 to engage in concrete and measurable actions for rapid change in their countries. We need to applaud the UN Secretary General, who urged Member States to create,
and energetically implement **coherent gender equality policies** and provide significant financing for gender equality. We also need to applaud our Prime Minister for renewing his commitment at the United Nations for his sustained political will and determination to work towards substantive gender equality.

22. This statement is, by all means, a matter that calls for public-private partnership, corporate investment and engagement of Civil Society Organisations.

23. The implementation phase of SDG 5 has already begun at the international and regional level. The UN has already set up a high level political forum to monitor the follow up on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; to keep track of progress and provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations.

24. It, therefore, goes without saying that, at national level, we need the active participation of the public and private sectors, Civil Society Organisations, men and boys, gender activists, and feminists so that their voices are heard and that our achievements regarding SDG 5 are shared with the UN, in due course.

25. We cannot afford to do business as usual. We need to strategize on how best to meet the set targets of SDGs. Today’s National Dialogue is the first step that will lead us to the journey on which we shall all embark on this International Women’s Day.

26. The public sector, through the various Ministries, should renew their commitment to engender their sectoral policies. I understand that each Ministry has been able to formulate a gender policy statement but is faced with the challenge of implementing the recommendations--- mostly because of lack of expertise in the field of gender. As the National Gender Machinery, responsible for
the promotion of gender equality, I will engage into discussions with relevant foreign institutions for the training of Gender Focal Points.

27. Concurrently, I will also advise Supervisor Officers to tap resources for the same purpose. It is, of utmost importance, that gender equality becomes your agenda, too.

28. In the same vein, I invite the private sector to Walk The Talk so that the gender equality discourse gets its prominence within your organisations.

29. My Ministry has scheduled a Round Table Meeting with Men aimed at engaging them as Advocates for Gender Equality. It is envisaged that this initiative will lead us to the setting up of “Platform Advocating for Gender Equality” which is to be referred as “The P.A.G.E”, led by men.

30. We have also deemed it strategic to set up a Model United Nations Commission for Status of Women with the participation of secondary students which is geared towards raising awareness on the set targets of the SDGs. This initiative will be an annual feature and will, ultimately, enable young boys and girls to contribute in addressing gender inequalities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

31. Our aim is to form and maintain a strong contact base, which will serve us all in the implementation of SDG 5. In light of the present socio-economic challenges,
the adoption of a multi-sectoral approach to attain gender equality remains a prerequisite.

32. Concurrently, our Gender Equality campaign, which I remind you, was already launched last year for my first Women’s Day Celebration as the Minister for Gender Equality, (nous sommes un peu en avance, M. Le Premier Ministre !!! ) Our campaign, “Gender Equality is My Agenda” with our driving slogan “Egalite zom fam: nou l’obzectif” needs to be consolidated. Hence my decision to use this slogan, supported by a simple and attractive artwork, for a national campaign, launched as from 4th March, on a large network of bus panels and billboards.

33. My Ministry is also in the process of working towards its “Rebranding” and one of our priorities is to rename all Women Centres as Women Empowerment Centres-a place where all women can connect themselves for their full empowerment.

34. Before I conclude, I will like to reiterate the political commitment of Government to work towards a gender inclusive society. **Action is the only way forward. There can be no other substitute.**

35. I invite you to sharpen your focus and pave your way towards a Mauritian society that is respectful of the principles of gender equality and democracy. Let us join hands to become Champions of SDG 5 to ensure that we carry the torch which was lit by feminist movements and rekindled in Conferences and fora.

36. With these words, I wish you well and thank you for your attention.