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Opening Remarks

by

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at the

Small States. Big Opportunities for Women's Economic Leadership

Commonwealth Women's Forum Opening Session - Advancing Gender Equality – Investment in Prosperous and Resilient Commonwealth

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Excellencies, Heads of Government, Ministers, business leaders, investors, development partners, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

It is an honour to join you. I thank the Government and people of Antigua and Barbuda, the Commonwealth Secretariat and all partners for bringing us together.

Across our Caribbean communities, there is a familiar saying: *one-one coco full basket*. Little by little, the basket fills.

Generations of women have lived that discipline. A vendor puts aside something from the day's earnings. An entrepreneur expands her guesthouse, room by room. A mother makes her weekly contribution to a savings group, bringing school fees, a business investment or a deposit on a home within reach.

Each contribution carries an ambition, and they have financed education, built enterprises and sustained communities. That is a story of enterprise, determination and investment in the future. It is also a story that asks something of us.

If women are doing their part to build prosperity, are our institutions doing enough to help their efforts grow?

Here in Antigua and Barbuda, that question has particular significance. Two years ago, in St John's, the international community adopted the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for Small Island Developing States. Our duty now is to translate that agreement into opportunities people can access, enterprises they can build and livelihoods they can sustain.

Gender equality sits at the centre of that duty. It is, first, a human right. In small states, where every individual talent counts and every investment must work harder to achieve returns, it is also essential to competitiveness, resilience and shared prosperity.

Friends, we meet at a time of converging pressures. Global conflict continues to unsettle our economies. Climate hazards threaten livelihoods built over generations. The cost of living stretches household budgets.

For a woman running a business, caring for a family or rebuilding after a storm, these pressures meet in a single life. They compete for her time, draw on the same savings and narrow her choices.

A single shock can consume what took years to build. In moments like these, equality can slip down the list of priorities, deferred until conditions improve. But these are precisely the conditions that make investing in women indispensable.

The Caribbean and global women's movements have long challenged us to evaluate development by the difference it makes in women's lives. Their questions remain urgent: Who benefits? Who owns? Who decides?

At the Caribbean Development Bank(CDB), these questions help frame our responsibility under our Strategic Plan 2026–2035.

As the Region's multilateral development bank, we must help turn effort into opportunity, enterprise into wealth and resilience into lasting progress. Our success must be evident in women's ability to build businesses, enter new industries, influence decisions and secure sustainable livelihoods.

Allow me to set out three priorities.

First, connect women's enterprise with capital and markets.

Consider a woman entrepreneur who wins her first substantial export order.

Before she receives payment, she must buy materials, increase production and arrange shipping. Her success has created a financing need. But if her lender asks for property she does not own, an order she has earned becomes an opportunity she cannot realise.

Her ambition is there. Her customer is there. The financing must be able to meet her there too.

Through the SheTrades Caribbean Hub, our partnership with the International Trade Centre, we have built a community of more than 3,000 women entrepreneurs across our 19 Borrowing Member Countries in just three years.

Our Grow and Go Grant Facility has helped women-owned businesses strengthen their competitiveness and reach new markets.

The SheTrades Caribbean UK Trade Mission, supported by the SheTrades Commonwealth+ Programme, connected women entrepreneurs with buyers and distributors. It generated almost half a million United States dollars in immediate trade, with the potential for that value to more than double.

These results show what becomes possible when enterprise is connected to opportunity. Our goal now is to expand that reach.

CDB is using partnerships and innovative finance to expand our lending capacity and channel liquidity through local institutions to small businesses. We are working to shape finance around how women's businesses operate, open procurement opportunities to women-led firms and connect them to global value chains.

Second, invest in the conditions that allow women to take those opportunities.

Return to that entrepreneur. Even with an order and access to finance, she still needs time to produce, reliable care for her children and safe transport to reach her business.

An opportunity on paper must become a practical possibility in her life.

That requires investment in care, safety, accessibility, skills and technology.

Through the Basic Needs Trust Fund, CDB has launched a Gender Toolkit and learning programmes to help practitioners prevent and respond to gender-based violence. We are also working with UN Women on a multi-country initiative to address harmful social norms and strengthen prevention, responses and data on violence against women and girls.

Inclusion must be designed into this work. Women of every age, women and girls with disabilities, and women in rural communities must be able to access the support they need to advance.

For every initiative, we must ask a practical question: can the women it is intended to serve actually use it?

And the answer must shape how we invest and how we measure results.

Third, make ownership and leadership the goal of transformation.

The Caribbean is navigating climate, energy, digital and demographic transitions at the same time. The decisions we make now will shape who creates wealth, who holds influence and who leads for decades to come.

Women must have the opportunity to be designers, owners, investors and leaders in that future.

The WE-C.L.I.M.B. Fund, supported by the Agence Française de Développement, is strengthening climate resilience in women-led enterprises.

The Tech It Up Facility, supported by Global Affairs Canada, is helping women innovators bring clean-energy solutions to market.

Through the Women in Renewable Energy Fellowship, we are helping women build the skills, networks and influence to shape the Region's energy future.

We are also designing the CDB Academy as a regional platform for digital capability, artificial intelligence readiness, leadership and enterprise. And we will continue our longstanding support for the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at The University of the West Indies in developing leaders who turn equality commitments into action.

These investments must create a clear path: from acquiring skills and being equipped with the foundation to charting their own destiny and helping determine the future of societies.

Excellencies, that is the story connecting our three priorities.

A woman builds an enterprise if she wants. She can access the capital and markets to grow it. Care, safety and accessibility give her the freedom to pursue it. Skills, ownership and power allow her to shape what comes next.

When those conditions come together, her efforts can build lasting prosperity for herself, her family and her community.

That is the standard we must set for our institutions and our partnerships.

We began with a basket filled little by little.

Across Antigua and Barbuda, the Caribbean and the Commonwealth, women will continue to bring their ideas, their enterprise and their determination. Our responsibility is to ensure that what they build can grow, withstand shocks and create opportunities for the next generation.

For CDB, that means financing women's ambitions, investing in the conditions that support them and backing their leadership in the industries of the future.

For this Forum, it means leaving with partnerships ready to deliver, commitments backed by resources and a clear responsibility for results.

One-one coco full basket.

Every investment matters. Every barrier removed matters. Every commitment honoured matters.

Let us make them count, until every girl can grow up knowing that she has the freedom to build, the opportunity to own and the authority to lead.

Thank you.