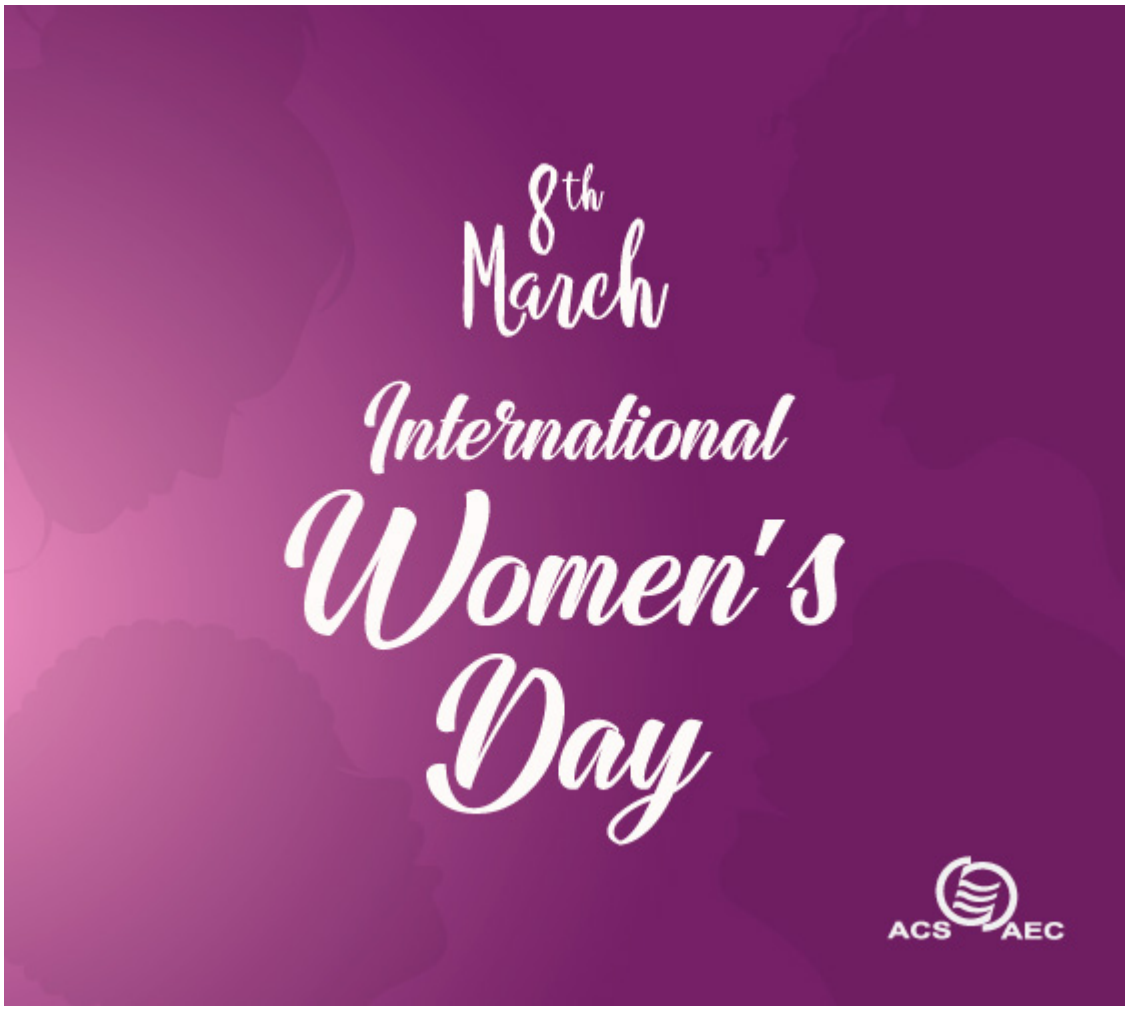
International Women's Day 2023



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Topic: 'Women in the Greater Caribbean: The role of women in a post-pandemic economy'

For more than a century, women have been celebrated for their ingenuity and compassion. Presently, across the globe, women have become drivers of economic growth and innovation coupled with their continued social contributions in developing and upholding societies and cultures. To commemorate the daily efforts, sacrifices and dedication women make to our nations, March 8th is recognized as International Women's Day. This day is dedicated to honoring the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. More importantly, it reinforces the call to action for accelerating gender parity. The campaign for women's parity started with a call for worldwide celebration on the same day to press for the demands of women during the 2nd International Conference of Working Women which was held in Copenhagen in 1910.

Fast-forward to the present, however, and the world would have emerged from one of the most unprecedented global crises: the COVID-19 pandemic. A deep dive into the situation would reveal that the adverse impact on women has been particularly disproportionate, thereby increasing fears that the pandemic has undone decades of advancement for women's rights. But despite the formidable obstacles and challenges of the pandemic, women have risen to the occasion across many fronts. Therefore, in honoring the significant and indispensable contributions of women across the Greater Caribbean, it is paramount to emphasize the role of women as pillars of the post-pandemic economy.

The pandemic distinctively impacted women in numerous capacities across all sectors in the Greater Caribbean. It amplified gender inequality in the regional labour market and uncovered new challenges that widened existing gender gaps. Statistics showed that a historical decline of 5.4% of the labour participation of women was recorded in 2020, indicating that 12 million women in Latin America and the Caribbean were forced to leave the workplace[1]. As the sole caregiver, numerous women across the Greater Caribbean were forced to make the ultimate sacrifice of becoming unemployed as the pandemic-forced isolation deeply affected access to educational and care services that would have previously enabled paid employment. Additionally, pandemic-induced unemployment levels had a disparate effect on women in the labour market. Among the economic sectors strongly affected by the crisis, services ranked high, of which women, especially in the Greater Caribbean, have a greater presence or almost 50% of the labour force[2]. Take for instance the tourism and hospitality industry where women comprise a significant number with respect to formal labour and more than 50% of the typical informal labour. The issue of caregiving reinforced a number of gender gap issues as pre-pandemic figures already pointed to an uneven contribution of time from women in the household for care and maintenance. It was expected that during the isolation periods, women give additional time to the upkeep of the household leading to overwork and reduced productivity in many cases[3]. Even after persons returned to physical workspaces, women were still expected to work from home to provide childcare during and after working hours. This eroded decades of efforts to correct the bias relating to gender roles to empower and employ women as drivers of growth, since women continue to struggle with reconciling paid work with other family responsibilities.

Now more than ever, it is evident that the key to perpetuating resilience and economic sustainability is to foster inclusivity. In all capacities, women have proven to be innovative, and therefore, it must not be lost that deploying the full potential of a woman is both critical and necessary for regional advancement. This demand for putting women at the center of investment designs is supported by a woman's unique economic role, contributions and constraints in realizing advancement and sustainability. Women contribute 37% of global GDP[4]. In the Greater Caribbean, about 40% of SMEs are owned by women. As such, providing comprehensive support to enhance opportunities for women in society can only lead to sustainable growth and development well beyond pre-pandemic levels. A major takeaway from the pandemic is that digital transformation is a necessary phenomenon for the advancement and resilience of economies. For women, technology is a unique opportunity for economic empowerment. It redefines economic possibilities for women and increases access to employment. Not only is this essential for the upward value of human progress, but it also provides greater income generation, increases the number of skilled workers and economic diversification. The Greater Caribbean is poised to leverage the social and economic gains of bolstering digital transformation with the inclusion of women. The majority of new jobs require digital skills, coupled with the flexibility offered to women through e-commerce and technology-based business to reconcile paid employment with family responsibilities. To truly rebuild sustainable and resilient economies, women must be allowed the space to transform their innovative natures into economic gains. Greater inclusion of women in societal institutions can bring about poverty reduction, economic diversification and the bridging of other inequality gaps in society[5].

At the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the emphasis on inclusivity and the important role of women in development is clearly seen through its internal composition: the three major Directorates are all women-led. In fact, women account for 70% of the Secretariat personnel overall. Inroads continue to be made in the region with institutions that support women-led initiatives, such as the Women in Maritime Association Caribbean (WiMAC). For decades, the port and maritime industries have been male-dominated, with women only representing 2% of the labour market as recent as 2019[6]. On the heels of the pandemic, WiMAC pushed boundaries to enable greater participation of women in the port and maritime industry through their partnership with the Caribbean Shipping

Association. Cutting-edge research on solutions for port and maritime challenges that were exacerbated during the pandemic were presented by several women during the 2022 Caribbean Maritime University World Maritime Week Conference. This is a clear indication that, buoyed by their innovation, women are more present in sectors that were previously male-dominated. Another initiative is the formation of the Caribbean Women in International Trade (CWIT) group. This recently established group provides a platform to foster advancement of Caribbean women in regional and international business. Since its formation in 2022, the group has been actively engaged in encouraging a discourse that will position Caribbean women as key accelerators of regional trade. Such institutions help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by promoting spaces for the reduction of inequalities and greater inclusivity in society.

The role of women in a post-pandemic economy goes beyond the call for gender parity and identify women as the engines of economic advancement. In celebrating the significant and indispensable contributions of women across the Greater Caribbean, the ACS joins the global community in commemorating International Women's Day. The women in our life occupy many roles that are crucial to the functioning of our economies and societies. As engines of growth, women require a narrative that considers their strength and embodies the full nature of their potential to propel advancement. The ACS is honoured to contribute to finding the balance that further enables the significant contributions of women for an advanced and more inclusive Greater Caribbean.

Malikah Pino is a Research Assistant in the Directorate for Trade and Sustainable Development. She works closely with the focal areas of Trade External Economic Relations and Transport.

Khadesha La Touche is a Research Assistant in the Directorate for Trade and Sustainable Development. She works closely with the focal areas of Sustainable Tourism and Air Transport.

[1] (International Labour Organization 2021). 13 million women in Latin America and the Caribbean saw their jobs disappear due to the COVID-19 pandemic

[2] (International Labour Organization 2021). 13 million women in Latin America and the Caribbean saw their jobs disappear due to the COVID-19 pandemic

[3] ECLAC Caribbean, 2021. The burden of unpaid care work on Caribbean women in the time of COVID-19.

[4] UN Women, 2020. Women as drivers of economic recovery and resilience during COVID-19 and beyond

[5] Abdi, Aisha. Women are the key to economic development in third-world countries. King's College London, 2019.

[6] (International Maritime Organization 2019)