



CEDAW COMMITTEE *of Trinidad and Tobago*

*Phone: 868 225 7734*

**Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

### **Our Voice Our Vote**

#### **Women's Votes must not be trivialized**

As citizens of Trinidad and Tobago prepare for the general election on 10th August 2020, it is imperative that we evaluate the candidates who are being presented as potential leaders and lawmakers - at least for the next five years.

CEDAW Committee of Trinidad and Tobago (CCoTT) is a volunteer non-governmental organization focused on Education, Advocacy and Public Awareness on and for the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). We engage all stakeholders in the execution of our mandate through a collaborative and transparent approach.

Cognizant of the need to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all spheres and promote equal rights for women and girls, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago became a signatory to and ratified this United Nations (UN) convention in 1989. Under **CEDAW Article 2** States agree to condemn discrimination against women in all its forms and commit to substantial work on ending it. This includes abolishing all existing laws, customs and regulations that are discriminatory. **CEDAW Article 7** further mandates that States will work to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life and will ensure women the right to vote, hold office and actively participate in political parties, lobby groups and NGOs.

**Why vote?** Universal adult suffrage - the right to vote - came into effect in Trinidad and Tobago in 1945 and the first election to the then Legislative Council was held in 1946. With this right comes great responsibility, and the onus is on us, as citizens, to exercise that right and demand a comparable exchange. Our vote is priceless - Our rights are priceless.

**Manifesto versus Policy** It is customary for political parties to create, distribute and evangelize their manifesto during campaign season. Some very talented orators are able to memorize the critical points to the extent that the listener becomes so acclimated to what is being said, that one may walk away thinking that what they heard was already a policy or law. We cannot be enthralled by campaign pledges which seek not to change our lived experiences and our country in a positive way.



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Being true to our mandate of Education and Public Awareness about the convention, CCoTT hosted a 5-part series “Our Voice Our Vote” via zoom from July 22 - August 6. The current climate as well as technological trends afforded CCoTT the opportunity to connect with our audience in a highly relevant forum given the new normal. CCoTT’s objective was to provide an environment where the candidate and citizens could engage in conversation in a safe space. The series introduced a diverse group of new and seasoned candidates to the zoom audience through an interactive information session that included a question and answer segment.

We must continue to hold current leaders and aspiring public office leaders, accountable for the decisions that affect our lives, including opportunities for growth and development. Valuing women’s participation in the political process is key to creating a more equitable and representative field with options that are beyond a few unsavory choices. We must ask ourselves if these candidates exhibit certain tendencies in their current state, what would happen if given the reins of high level public office holders?

The CEDAW principles of Respect, Protect and Fulfill should never be compromised. We must all work toward achieving the mandates of every CEDAW Article, not only for our generation but for generations to come. Our united voice is key in this critical period in our country’s transformation. Let us keep at the front of our consciousness, what this could mean for all women - past, present and future.

As we approach 10 August, 2020, we share concerns that were expressed during the conversation series, and commit to raising these concerns, not only during campaign season, but until they are addressed.

- A Code of Ethics to be agreed to by all political parties and candidates that is grounded in respect for human rights, transparency and democracy.
- The continuation of current COVID-19 policies and procedures which includes social measures and support for the most vulnerable until a vaccine becomes available and accessible to all.
- Terms like ‘gender lens’ and ‘gender mainstreaming’ become more than talking points. A marked behavioral change and evidence based/informed strategies must be represented in language, interaction with citizens and policies.
- Programmes and policies advanced should be inclusive of persons and communities that have been marginalized with the goal of shared equity and responsibility.



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- Economic development which recognizes the value of all industries, including care work, with legislation that ensures women are paid equally – equal pay for equal work.
- The adoption of anti-sexual harassment and complaint policies by all political parties. It is crucial that any person who experiences sexual harassment have an avenue to report these incidences and that these policies and processes are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent so that sexual harassment is prevented and addressed outside of the parliamentary sphere.
- The creation of a task force and/or monitoring roles or positions which focus on preventing sexual harassment and misconduct and give effect to established policies and procedures.
- The prohibition of campaign funds or public monies from being used in connection with non-disclosure agreements relating to sexual harassment alleged by affected victims.
- The Privileges Committee of the Parliament to review the booklet on parliamentary language and update it to admonish the use of sexist statements, comments or words.
- We urge the TTPS to take all allegations made against political officials or aspiring representatives seriously and commence investigations immediately, particularly when there is an impending election.