

Message of Dr. Benjamin Reyes, Secretary-General
The Colombo Plan 73rd Anniversary Celebration
Sheraton, Colombo
July 4, 2024

Honourable Council President and Founding Members, Council Members, Excellencies, Representatives of Diplomatic Missions, Representatives of International Organizations, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening!

Allow me to greet our Colombo Plan member countries, friends and supporters a very Happy 73rd Anniversary! We also acknowledge the assistance of the Government of Sri Lanka for continually hosting the Organization throughout the year. Not many inter-governmental organizations can claim such a milestone of 73years of partnership!

Please accept our heartfelt appreciation to all of you for joining us for this somewhat different anniversary celebration.

As you may have noticed, we slightly changed the program of our anniversary from the usual diplomatic activities we are used to attending, to highlight a particular concern that have recently caught our attention which should concern all of us, our Council Members, friends and supporters.

If you will recall, last year during our 72nd Anniversary, we highlighted the 50th Year anniversary of our Drug Advisory Program. For this year, as we enjoy our 73rd year of cooperation and mutual support, we want everyone to be aware of a particular concern that should not even exist during this day and age.

Tonight's anniversary will highlight the activity that has been ongoing this week (since July 1 at the Granbell hotel), and that we have been working on for over a year now, with our good friend HE Bashu Dev Mishra, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal's Ambassador to Sri Lanka and Maldives. Excellency Ambassador Mishra, this is as much your accomplishment as it is The Colombo Plan's.

The activity I'm referring to is the Training of Trainor's for the Dignified Menstruation Advocacy, with participation of 26 participants from 13 countries. We are undertaking this initiative under the purview of our Gender Affairs Program in cooperation with the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation with their Founder who is with us, and who will be introduced later.

But let me tell you, when I first learned about this initiative, I was truly appalled to learn that such disrespect and violation of women's rights are still happening in so many cultures in various parts of the world, causing morbidities and even deaths. I'm talking about the myths and stigma being perpetuated surrounding a purely normal physiologic cycle women experience every month—the female menstrual cycle or monthly period.

And the concerns I want to highlight are not limited to “period poverty”, which is defined by our friends from the United Nations as the lack of access to period products and the limited available options for privacy—in other words, the lack of access to sanitary products or clean and private restrooms and safe spaces. The issue goes beyond that. I’m referring to the inherent beliefs and stigma in some cultures that women on their periods are deemed unclean and unfit to mingle in society for few days every month.

While these might seem amusing to us in civilized societies; myths, misconceptions, and misinformation about periods feed into stigma which can be hugely damaging for many girls, women, and people who menstruate around the world.

In part, this stigma exacerbates certain cultural beliefs about menstruation. Rather than simply being acknowledged as a natural bodily function, it is considered rude or embarrassing to even discuss periods in some communities around the world. While referring to monthly periods using euphemisms, such as "strawberry week" in Austria, "I'm with Chico" in Brazil, and "Granny's stuck in traffic" in South Africa, may seem harmless, they reinforce the idea that periods are shameful and something to talk about in “codes”.

This often leads to women and girls feeling confined to their homes, being excluded from public spaces, or considered to be bad luck or harmful to others for about a week every month.

Due to the conversation around menstruation being suppressed, and these myths continuing, this period stigma has had a huge impact on the lives of these girls. Among many other concerns, a good example is how girl’s education is affected. For instance across Africa, it is estimated that one (1) in 10 girls would miss school when they have their periods, and could miss approximately 10%-20% of school days—factors which can lead to them dropping out altogether. This puts them at a greater risk of child marriage, and getting pregnant at a younger age, which comes with heightened health risks.

Not receiving full education and being forced into early marriages also inevitably usually lead to a reduced capacity to access employment and contribute to income generation, a terrible consequence which only serves to hold back women’s life chances.

Again, this is just a simple example of what we want to address. I’m not an expert, hence we invited the real expert in the field who would expound later.

We all have mothers, most would have sisters, and other females in our lives. We should be grateful if this stigma does not cause problems in our respective realities. But having known such concerns exist, how can we not act? We can endeavor to do what we can in our own capacities to help those who suffer because of this issue.

Again, this is why The Colombo Plan exists. Through the years, we have accumulated extensive experience and technical expertise, adapting our roles and functions to address changing social and developmental priorities; to serve as an effective platform for the dissemination of

knowledge and improved interventions aligned with the international, regional and local policies and programs. We have committed member countries, donors and competent professional partners to make sure The Colombo Plan is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal No. 5) of empowering women and eliminating root causes of discrimination that will curtail women's rights in private and public spheres.

If The Colombo Plan can do something to address such issues, then we can be proud that our organization is still doing its best to make the world a better place to live in, even after 73 years. And we commit to do this as we look forward to our hundred years.

Again, Happy 73rd Anniversary to all of us! Enjoy tonight's program. Thank you and good evening!