

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEAKING NOTES  
FOR CHRISTINE ST-PIERRE  
MINISTER OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AND LA FRANCOPHONIE

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I am honoured to have this opportunity to tell you a little about Québec's experience working to advance the status of women and achieve equality in higher education. And I can think of no better place to do so than right here!

Your vast and beautiful country is full of opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships. One example is the concern India and Quebec share for the advancement of women in education and the workforce.

I can't overstate my admiration for your university's noble goal of educating and empowering women, one that has been pursued for over a century.

You don't need me to tell you that education is the foundation of all progress. Everyone here today is well aware of this truth, which is reflected in your motto: "An enlightened woman is a source of infinite strength."<sup>1</sup>

Education is not merely an unsurpassed tool for achieving equality between men and women.

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<sup>1</sup> SNDT Women's University motto

It is a precondition to any such equality.

Québec's women have had a long road to travel to access higher education.

And while we've come a long way, much remains to be done.

Until the mid-twentieth century, young women in Québec had very limited access to higher education.

They had to overcome the prejudices of universities, professional orders, and the clergy.

In 1964 we broadened educational opportunities, making it easier for girls and women to pursue studies.

Today 58% of students enrolled in higher education are women. Women earn 60% of graduate and undergraduate university degrees. As a result, we now see growing numbers of women throughout the labour market.

Today women comprise over half Québec's workforce. The women's employment rate in 2012 was 57%, up from 37% in

1976. And women's average hourly wage is 90% that of men, versus 84% when Québec's *Pay Equity Act* came into force in 1997.

We are increasingly seeing women in leadership positions: at financial institutions, in business, at universities and in government ministries. Yet many obstacles remain.

For one, most women still choose to study in fields traditionally considered "women's work." Gender differences in choice of academic studies persist. Others challenges include the traditional division of roles in family life and the slow pace of progress for women in positions of power, and the conditions of specific groups of women—single mothers, immigrants, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and women with lower levels of education.

Women are also more likely to work part-time, and to do a greater share of the unpaid work that keeps households running. And more women leave their jobs to care for children or loved ones, even though paid parental leave is available to both spouses.

## **A priority**

Human rights have always been of the utmost importance to the Government of Québec.

Respecting human rights is one of our society's fundamental values.

And gender equality is also a Québec Government priority.

Our *Government Strategy for Gender Equality* seeks to promote an egalitarian, non-sexist, and stereotype-free education system; more diverse career choices; more equitable division of household responsibilities; and gender parity in bodies with decision-making power.

Quebec also has initiatives to increase women's presence in high-growth fields and improve pathways to employment for immigrant women.

In the space of 30 years, the percentage of women entrepreneurs has increased from 28% to 39%. In 2015, 5.3% of women and 10.4% of men were business owners.

Our *Entrepreneurship Action Plan* aims to boost the number of entrepreneurs, with a focus on young people, women and immigrants. The Québec Government also supports a regional network of women entrepreneurs.

Québec has strict guidelines to ensure fair and equitable treatment, and the most generous family and child support system in North America, to help parents achieve better work/family balance.

All employers are required to pay equal wages, not only for equal work but also for equivalent work.

We have equal employment opportunity programs to counter discrimination in both the public and private sectors.

To give a few examples, pregnant women have the right to miss work for pregnancy-related appointments. If a woman's workplace poses a risk to her health or that of her unborn child, she has the right to be assigned other duties or take paid leave. Employers cannot dismiss a woman because she is pregnant.

I should also mention the three pillars of our family policy: a public early childcare system; a parental insurance plan that provides more generous, more accessible, and more flexible parental leave; and a tax credit to support children.

The Québec government has prioritized achieving gender parity on the boards of directors of 20-odd government corporations. We created a Business Partner Roundtable that, in just two years, has helped increase the percentage of women on the boards of the province's 50 largest listed corporations from 15% to 19%.

We fund organizations that promote women's presence in the workforce. Many of these also encourage women to choose non-traditional career paths.

Competitions encourage girls and women to study in traditionally male-dominated areas.

We are fighting the stereotypes that limit academic and professional choices.

I'd also like to mention Québec's *Government Strategy to Prevent and Counteract Sexual Violence* and the *Intervention Strategy for Preventing and Countering Sexual Violence in Higher Education*.

A recent *Forum on Sexual Assault and Harassment* brought together 200 stakeholders from the law enforcement, legal, cultural, construction, business, labour, and Aboriginal communities.

In September, we will reintroduce sex education classes at school, updated to include the concepts of consent and respect.

### **International Solidarity**

Just as a concern for rights and freedoms is woven into the fabric of Québec government policy, it is also an integral part of our international relations.

Québec has signed 12 human rights covenants, conventions, and protocols, and takes part in UN monitoring programs.



One forum where Québec puts its concern for human rights and equality into action is La Francophonie, where full member status gives Quebec a voice, access, leadership, and influence.

Finally, the new *International Policy* that will guide Québec's diplomatic efforts over the next decade makes the protection and defense of human rights and gender equality a priority.

It called for the appointment of a government representative tasked with promoting Québec's expertise in human rights and freedoms and gender equality around the world.

Gender equality is also central to our international solidarity actions.

It is widely understood that tackling gender inequality is among the most effective ways to combat poverty and achieve sustainable, equitable development, which in turn fosters progress, peace, and democracy.

It will take a generation of women with greater awareness of their roles, rights, responsibilities, and ability to help build stronger societies.

Because there can be no sustainable growth without women's contributions. That means growth depends on making women full and equal participants in the economy.

Women around the world need each other: together we can one day achieve true equality, to the great benefit of both women and men.

And for the benefit of our economies, which cannot afford to ignore half the skills and talent at their disposal.

### **Education system**

I would be remiss to visit your fine university today without saying a few words about Québec's education system.

For international students, Québec has a lot to offer—a world-renowned education system, enviable quality of life, a safe environment, and a relatively low cost of living compared to other parts of the world.

Our universities offer over 3,000 programs, including more than 1,400 master's and PhD programs. They boast quality instruction, ultramodern libraries, and state-of-the-art facilities.

Last year Montréal was named “best student city” in the world, beating out London and Paris, by *QS Best Student Cities 2017*.

Many of Québec's academic programs include job-focused components: case studies, online simulations, field trips, and professional internships—all experiences employers look for when hiring.

Most programs are offered in French, but several institutions offer English-language courses and multilingual programs.

Three of Québec's 18 universities are fully English-speaking.

All students have access to the services they need to achieve success, integrate, and enjoy an enriching learning experience.

Québec welcomes 35,000 international students annually, and India is the fourth most popular country of origin.

And we are always happy to welcome more international students—including, of course, more Indian students! Above all, we are always happy to see more female students.

Thank you for being such a great audience!