



Interview of the Month
Kim Simplis Barrow
Special Envoy for Women and Children
First Lady of Belize
June 2017

1) GenderHopes: Can you tell our readers a little about your own upbringing? Are there any points that you really felt that your gender defined the opportunities that were available to you?

Kim Simplis Barrow: I had a very humble upbringing. My family did not have much in terms of material wealth; however, I was very lucky to have an abundance of love and support from my parents and extended family.

My views on gender were shaped by my early experiences growing up. I saw my parents working side by side as co-breadwinners. My parents both worked very hard to provide us with the basic necessities and as difficult as life was, our education was always prioritised, for both girls and boys. There were no gender divide when it came to chores, both girl and boy children were taught to help inside and outside the house.

I saw my Mother work many jobs that were non-traditional for women at that time. The majority of my friend's mothers were home makers, while my Mother worked as an orange reaper in an orchard, managed a gas station, having to pump gas at times. She seized whatever opportunity was available to make an honest living. After getting over my initial misgivings about my Mother being so different from the other mothers, I came to understand at an early age that women are powerful in their own right and can reach immeasurable distances if they choose to harness that power. So although I know that gender stereotyping, glass ceilings and other gender related barriers are a reality for women and I am committed to doing my part to dismantling these barriers, I have never personally felt that my gender defined my opportunities.

2) What first inspired you to create the Special Envoy for Women and Children?

I was appointed by the Government of Belize as Special Envoy for Women and Children in 2008. Therefore it was not something that I created.

I believe my appointment to the post arose from the recognition of my work through the Lifeline Foundation which I established in 2006. The Lifeline Foundation focuses on improving the quality of life for the children of Belize.

The Foundation has assisted children from all walks of life, with all types of needs and abilities. I am especially proud of the tangible contributions we have made to a number of schools across the country; building classrooms and bathroom facilities; establishing feeding programs and building cafeterias; installing potable water systems, equipping computer rooms among many other improvements to aid in the educational development of our children

Growing up, I always admired my mother's efforts working with marginalized children within the Red Cross Society. From a young age I knew that in my own right, I wanted to touch lives and change minds. This was the impetus for founding Lifeline.

I gladly accepted the appointment as Belize's Special Envoy for Women and Children because I saw it as the ideal platform to extend my reach and amplify my efforts on behalf of Belizean children and to work more directly with and on behalf of my Belizean sisters. My eight years in this post has been a challenging, rewarding and humbling experience.

3) There are several projects that are run by the Special Envoy for Women and Children, is there a one that you feel particularly passionate about?

I am particularly passionate about assisting and uplifting children with disabilities. There is so much that needs to be done in the area of disabilities in Belize, as there is truly a dearth of services. Being cognizant of the many needs has fuelled my passion and commitment to help children with disabilities to reach their full potential. This is why, in early 2012, I initiated the construction of The Inspiration Centre to improve the lives of some of Belize's most marginalized and vulnerable children through a synergy of integrated care services. This Centre is the only one of its kind in the country that provides the comprehensive physical and speech therapy, community based rehabilitation, basic medical services and social support for the holistic care of children with disabilities (birth to 16 years) and their families. Since opening its doors in April 2014, hundreds of children with disabilities have benefitted from our unique program. For the first time in Belize, these children have access to Speech, VitalStim & Physical Therapies, Ponseti, Hearing Screening, Medical Evaluations as well as the services of Rehabilitation Field Officers and a Social Worker.

4) Can you explain your vision for the 20-4-20 Women's Economic Empowerment Program?

Since March 2014, my Office has spearheaded the 20,000 STRONG Women's Empowerment Campaign. This campaign featured two national rallies which mobilized thousands of Belizean women from across the nation and from all spheres of our society in a celebration our collective accomplishments.

Several other activities have been successfully implemented under the banner of 20,000 STRONG, including a national conference on women and girl's financial health. In Belize, there has been good progress in key areas of

women's rights, but there is still more work to be done. One area we continue to grapple with is women's economic empowerment. Many barriers exist that block women from accessing capital or becoming financially independent.

My vision for the 20-4-20 women's economic development program is to continue building on the success of the 20,000 STRONG platform through the provision of funding for female entrepreneurs via loans and/or grants, training and identifying mentors to accompany women in their business journey.

5) You have one daughter, Salima, do you and your husband adopt a feminist style of parenting?

I never thought about categorising our parenting style, but I suppose it can be described as a more feminist style of parenting.

My husband and I certainly employ a democratic approach to parenting our daughter. We provide guidance, set boundaries for her and promote values that support equality and mutual respect within the home. My husband and I model these values for her within our own relationship. We engage in shared parental responsibility for Salima's care. We both have very hectic schedules that include quite a bit of travelling and so we both need to do our parts in ensuring that the household runs smoothly in an effort to provide a stable and nurturing environment for her.

Salima knows that her thoughts and feelings are just as valid and as important as our own. We support her in expressing her own sense of identity through clothing, hairstyles, hobbies and other positive avenues. Furthermore, we often engage in discussions about the beauty of diversity and uniqueness. By doing all this, we hope that Salima will embody self-respect and value and respect everyone equally.

6) What are some of the challenges that parents face raising young girls today in Belize?

As a mother of a little girl, the biggest challenges that parents face, in my opinion, is trying to protect their daughter from falling victim to society's many stereotypes. Whether it's with the toys she plays or clothes she wears, from a young age, the media and society tells our daughters what role they should assume. Rather than having gender roles dictated to them, I believe our daughters should be able to ascribe to their own sense of identity.

Another challenge is teaching our daughters to love and respect themselves. Often times we overlook that the attention required for each child should be individualized and tailored to their specific strengths and weakness, so I urge parents to pay attention to their children, because if we fail to acknowledge the good they have to offer, it will be harder for them to see it in adulthood.

In this day and age technology also presents major challenges. Cyber bullying is a fact of modern day life all over the world and certainly in Belize. The unfortunate truth is that social media platforms are being used as another way of inflicting violence against women and girls. It brings an additional dimension to the complicated task of teaching our girls how to navigate from

girlhood to womanhood with a positive sense of self and self-esteem in tact.

7) What is your vision of a feminist future?

My vision of a feminist future is quite simple. I envision a world in the not too distant future where women and girls can enjoy equal rights and opportunities with their male counterparts. A world where a woman is not judged by her looks or the way she dresses but is valued for her intellect, her abilities and her deeds. A world where every little girl and boy learn from a very early age that the sky is the limit. There is nothing they cannot achieve with hard work and determination. A world where women and men work side by side as equals at the kitchen tables, at the conference tables, in the board rooms, in Cabinet and Parliament, creating a better world for our children.

I know it is a mammoth task and so I am determined to do my part in my corner of the world. And so everyday in my roles as mother, wife, daughter, sibling, community member, Special Envoy, Spouse of the Prime Minister I try to do my part in creating this feminist future.

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Mrs. Kim Simplis Barrow is the wife of the Prime Minister of Belize, Honourable Dean Barrow and mother to her only child, Salima Barrow. She is Belize's Special Envoy for Women and Children and Global Ambassador for Special Olympics since 2008 as well as the Founder and Director of the Lifeline Foundation, which raises thousands of dollars annually to aid disenfranchised children. Her two major projects as Special Envoy for Women and Children are a Paediatric and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit constructed at the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital and the Inspiration Centre which offers healthcare and therapy for children with disabilities.

Her efforts to raise public awareness on the commercial sexual exploitation of children includes successfully advocating for the passage of two pieces of legislation to strengthen protection for victims of sexual violence and human trafficking as well as an amendment to the Criminal Code for harsher penalties for perpetrators of sexual offences. She has also co-written two booklets on sexual abuse prevention and produced multi-lingual videos. She has also hosted national conferences on ending violence against children and improving the situation of women entrepreneurs in Belize and a global first ladies conference in New York. Under the 20,000 STRONG Women's Empowerment two national rallies were held to uplift women and in 2016, to unveil the 20-4-20 Women's Economic Development Program.