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PANEL I

**Synergies between national-level implementation of the Beijing Declaration and
Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of
Discrimination against Women**

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

Distinguished Chair, Panelists, Participants, Good Evening. I bring greetings from the Bahamas Family Planning Association and from all NGOs in the Bahamas.

Synergy suggests multiple forces working together to achieve a goal that neither force can fully attain on its own. Whereas attainment of the goals of CEDAW removes barriers to equal access by women to full participation in their specific environments and ultimately in the context of a more complex international arena, realization of the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action (The Platform) ensures that women, freed from discrimination are strategically positioned and equipped to exploit that freedom. The Platform in designating poverty, health, education and sexual violence among its areas of critical concern and proffering strategies to improve such, has incisively pointed to existing areas of synergy between CEDAW and Beijing. This emergent symmetry, clearly indicates that women freed from discrimination are fully free only when the structural environs in which she functions, support, rather than undermine her power and the quality of life to which she is entitled. Political architects who are unable to discern this synergy and who are attracted to the qualities of only one of these instruments i.e. CEDAW or Beijing will find themselves ill equipped to secure **full** freedom for women under the law.

Exploited Synergy Necessary for Complete Success

Success measured by either CEDAW or the Platform alone is a measured success. What would be the quality of social entrenchment experienced by women freed by legislative mandates of CEDAW but who remain without access to dignified health care, culturally relevant education and training or residence in a society secured from criminal anarchy? Improved quality of life, good health care and relevant education in a safe environment, attained through the implementation of the Platform only, would be critically fragile if the rights of women as gendered beings were not ensconced in her country's constitution and fully embedded in legislation. Exploiting the synergies of CEDAW and the Platform promulgates a force for radical, systemic change that neither of these instruments can achieve when executed alone.

As an example Article 12 of CEDAW dictates that State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care. The Strategic Objectives and Actions of the Beijing Platform in its focus on Women and Health carves out clearly what has to be done before parties can consider their tasks completed in security the rights of women in this area. The Platform notes that governments in collaboration with NGOs and employers and workers' organizations and with the support of international organizations... must design and implement in cooperation with women and community based organizations, gender sensitive health programs ...that take into consideration life-long changes in women's needs... part of which includes ensuring that health and service workers in their delivery of health services conform to human rights and to ethical, professional standards on issues of voluntary and informed consent, avoiding inappropriate medications ... taking time to discuss side effects etc. The Platform thus extensively outlines, in minute detail what full rights in the health arena involves. The synergies reflected in just this one area shows that

when used together CEDAW and the Platform, there is little room if any for political vagrancy and delirium about what full equality means.

Platform without CEDAW

More importantly, action taken without inclusion of substantive elements of both instruments sabotages the change process and can function ultimately to derail the forward momentum of the movement to give women full rights under the law. Evidence of the consequences of this dichotomous use can be seen in the present muted state of NGO advocacy for equality in the Caribbean region, the Bahamas included. A review of advancement of women in the Bahamas shows that the Platform of Action has been successfully implemented to some degree without overwhelming political and legislative deference to the dictates of CEDAW. At the programmatic level, women in the Bahamas have access to excellent, free health care, school enrollment for girls is close to one hundred percent, per capita GDP is \$16,050 per annum (US equivalent), literacy rate among women is over 89%, there is an extensive gender-sensitive network of social services, freedom of worship and assembly with the right to inherit property equally with men. This attention to the Platform alone has created a comfortable environment that has beguiled women into a false sense of security. This open access to high quality services is not tied to or paralleled with improvements in legislation that secure her existence as a fully gendered, entitled being under the law. These benefits are gifts of temporary appeasement that can be withdrawn at any time

This overwhelming Platform-focused politic in the relatively prosperous, tourism-based, festival-conscious, religiously-charismatic cultures of the Caribbean has robbed too many women of the sense of militant advocacy needed to implode cultural barriers to full equality under the law. Deluded that all is well, there is a perverted militancy about attaining more material comforts rather attending fully securing their status under the law.

CEDAW without Beijing

This perversion of implementation happens with CEDAW-only interventions as well. Politicians always claim to be heavily influenced by the *SPIRIT* and not the substance of CEDAW. In the SPIRIT, principles of women's rights as articulated in CEDAW are embedded in election rhetoric to secure the political support of women. For example, political rhetoric encouraged women to activate their roles and rights as emancipators of black people in the struggles to attain freedom from political discrimination. That liberation however did not extend to emancipation from sexism within the struggles. As a reward for their support, many opportunities were opened to women within regional societies at the grassroots and programmatic levels. However, there was little political taste for the substance of CEDAW, little systematic strategy to transform the patriarchic constraints of the social context in which women existed. Consequently, women's rights never matured into women's equality under the law.

Dysfunctional Dichotomy

Dichotomous implementation of CEDAW and Beijing, which really is an effort to eliminate discrimination without disturbing the law, continues today. Women throughout

the Caribbean are being encouraged to work together, to preserve national sovereignties in struggles against illegal immigration and the assimilation of foreign persons, cultural artifacts and influences. There is the caution to remain alert to racial discrimination. What is implied is that these discriminatory factors are greater threats than sexism to the quality of life that women now enjoy. There is no urgent lobby for full-scale review of all existing laws and policies with the aim of facilitating the full erasure of gender discrimination. The ultimate tragedy of not understanding and capitalizing on the synergies of CEDAW and Beijing is that the majority of the unsecured gains that women now enjoy, they do so at the whimsy of the political directorate of the day in an environment without legitimate bench marks for assessing the quality of the success of eliminated discrimination.

In the absence of gender specific benchmarks for valid equality borne of the CEDAW\BPFA synergy, too many women in the region are being led to believe that they have already been liberated from major discrimination. Culture, tradition and religion continue to put forward versatile definitions of equality that can be politically exploited with homicidal impunity. Evidence of this can again be seen in the Caribbean context, the Bahamas included.

Elimination of Discrimination Aborted?

Emergent reinforced patterns of social and theological ascriptions of power to men has persuaded too many women to believe that the major dislocations currently existing among men of the African Diaspora result from men not being allowed to exist as the 'head' of institutions in their societies. This notion is receiving strong reinforcement from recently revived charismatic, fundamentalist theology in many communities. Women of the African-Caribbean arena have for decades derived the strongest definition of their gender role from religion. Many times, direct and subliminal messages have carried the theme that no matter how personally empowering a woman's political, economic or social circumstances, a man by reason of his gender is ordained to headship. Thousands of women and men have internalized this precept, with some persons defining "headship" as role sharing while others interpret it as divine instruction for literal domination. So, oblivious to their insecure status in legislature, concerned about increasing manifestations of dislocations within the male community, and in response to a well placed desire to strengthen their 'heads' and the subsequent quality of leadership in the society, many women have joined men in embracing the notion that women's issues have been sufficiently resolved to the point that they have given Governments the mandate to divert more political attention to helping men.

It is worrying that this concern about male dislocation is going forth before many women have acquired a thorough understanding of the length and breath, or wide scope of freedom imaged in CEDAW and Beijing. At the NGO level in the region, there has not been an easily detected, major integrated effort to adapt CEDAW and Beijing into a shared strategic plan for attaining full equality for women under the law. This means that Caribbean women at this critical point in their growth and development, risk losing all they have gained over the years if they act on suicidal instincts to impel the political

machinery to divert or dilute its attention to women's affairs without ascertaining how far their own agendas have proceeded.

Collaboration without Suicide

Both CEDAW and Beijing while articulating gender as an analytical framework for policy, still allow that collaboration with men is essential to the advancement of women and peace in the world but it was never intended that this collaboration occur at the expense of efforts to have women attain full equality under the law. What happens though if the state of full equality under the law does disturb or dislocate some men as has been erroneously postured? Does this mean that the theorizations and activism that advanced women were in error and should now be abandoned? Ideologues of the patriarchy who have always been offended by direct political attention paid to women and the audacious interrogation of the inherent transcendence of masculinity can be comforted that the confusion arising from the porous definition of gender now permits them to abandon attention to women especially now that it has become politically expedient to do so. Politicians can if they now want to, roll back the gains made by women if these gains were only political Trojan horses unaccompanied by legislative mandate to secure women's rights to these gifts under the law.

Eudine Barriteau, Professor of Gender and Public Policy at the Center for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, Barbados noted that “ the rich contributions made by differing schools of feminist thought have taken us to the point where the subjectivity of women as embodied beings has gained an epistemological significance and has finally transcended the empty ontological category of non-man. Paradoxically, at this very juncture, we see the viability of feminist activism on the verge of regressing to a simplistic understanding of the way forward.”

The absence of shared national strategic plans for attaining equality, borne of the synergies of CEDAW/BPFA has produced the absence of qualitative and quantitative indicators for successful liberation and so governments and well meaning activists can invoke and defend their own definitions of 'mission accomplished' without deference to CEDAW/Beijing. Who can legitimately challenge the view that Governments in the region have already liberated women and should now turn their attention to liberating men? Yes, our brothers need help but both men and women need national strategic plans for re-conceptualized gender mainstreaming. NGOs must ensure that governments of the region have a clear understanding that the needed attention being requested for men is not a mandate to abandon its efforts to support the advancement of women. Neither is it a license for other civic bodies to begin reinforcing gender stereotypes and activating cultural constraints on the advancement of women.

Barbados, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, The Women and Development Program of CARICOM have all embraced the transfer from a focus on the advancement women to a focus on gender with the conceptual inclusion of men. NGOs need to scrutinize the hypotheses underpinning ideologies explaining men's dislocation to ensure that the focus remains on encouraging men to find ways of re-constructing their masculinity so that it does not require a power

imbalance in their relationships with women. Attention needs to be focused on adjusting the economic, social and legal practices and policies impacting men and not pervert the discourse with the assumption that women's gains have destabilized men.

Implementation Status

Bahamian women are advancing but by all means that advancement is far from complete. With all of the limitations mentioned above and recognizing CEDAW and the Platform for Action's premise that social, health and educational interventions that empower poor women are a necessary, component of sustainable development, significant efforts have been expended by NGOs in providing and supporting disadvantaged women with opportunities to, improve the quality of their health, their educational status and to establish income- generating schemes and services to support their quest to balance the demands of employment with single parenthood.

Non- government organizations particularly church based organizations have established hundreds of community based preschool and day care services, personal development certification courses, vocational training opportunities are offered, and asues (informal money lending cooperatives) are arranged. These programs are predominantly subsidized by women within the lower socio-economic strata of the society.

By advocating for self-sufficiency and less reliance on government support, NGOs have encouraged and supported women in their establishing home- based food service ventures that offer meals for under a dollar, home-based hair braiding and nail artistry services, itinerant lunch and pastry vending services. Seasonal informal commercial vendors set up mobile flea markets in public parks and open spaces to take advantage of increased product demand during festive periods of the year. Most, if not all, of such ventures are successfully run by younger women who have been encouraged to enhance their income earning potential. NGOs also sponsor workshops and seminars on a regular basis on money management, budgeting, financial planning, retirement planning for women of all socio-economic backgrounds.

Non- government organizations, involved in providing financing of homes have relaxed the criteria for purchases. This makes it easier for single parent families to qualify for assistance. Smaller, weekly payment and saving schemes have been organized that allow the single woman to accumulate down payments for a home over a period of time. . Real estate agents have been regulated to minimize the number of contractors who prey on the vulnerability of women in this area. The selling of refurbished, previously owned vehicles has become a thriving market that allows women to obtain reliable transportation at reasonable costs. Merchants have altered credit terms to accommodate purchasing of furniture and other household appliances.

Health based NGOs through their lobbying of private financial and corporate institutions and the wealthy expatriate community have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support the Government's HIV/AIDS interventions and sponsored hundreds of Prevention and Public Awareness Initiatives. Recently, the Bahamas Family Planning Association, the oldest active women's NGO in the Bahamas teamed up with the Bahamas Government, the Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family

Planning (JOICFP) to execute a national adolescent reproductive health project that exposed stakeholders across the culture to training in issues related to the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents from a gender perspective.

Recent Hurricanes made NGOs more acutely aware of the increased vulnerability of female heads of households in the face of natural disasters. The significant financial and emotional costs of disaster preparation and restoration activities for these women were noted and responded to. Support was also given to illegally migrated women who live in inexpensively constructed dwellings. Such living conditions increased their vulnerability to danger. Being illegally migrated may have also fostered some reluctance to approach formal relief agencies for assistance. This resulted in some instances in inadequate resources for preparation and restoration activities. NGOs mobilized themselves to provide counseling, financial and material support.

With the support of NGOs working with women and violence, the Bahamian community is continually exposed to intense media campaigns designed to strengthen the community's commitment to viewing violence against women as a crime regardless of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Shelters, hotlines and counseling services are also provided. Human resource departments of insurance companies, hotels, large businesses and labour unions in the normal course of their duties, team up with NGOs to sponsor health walks and runs. These usually are co-sponsored with health fairs (education seminars and exhibitions) in the workplace and in the community that focus specifically on women's issues. Free cancer, pap-smear screening and breast examinations, blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes testing are carried out regularly at these events,

Critical Challenges

Although significant employment exists among women, the high cost of living still finds many women just barely meeting their subsistence costs leaving no opportunities for saving. Culturally embedded patterns of conspicuous consumption at times, result in the poor use of resources. Both factors undermine efforts to influence resource management and the attack on poverty.

Extended family structures undermine efforts to empower women. Traditionally afro-centric family structures boasted of the value of 'extended families' in promoting family stability. Adolescent fertility rates over the past years have created not valuable extended families but what could be called 'extended grannies'. The age at which 'grandmother' status is attained is dropping. Some grandmothers are now thirty years old and younger while great grandmothers are fifty years old and younger. An increasing number of women have been forced into financial crisis by the fecundity and subsequent financial dependence of their children or occupants of their households. There are households where women are nearing the age of retirement and still retaining responsibility for adult children. These children for either financial or culturally approved attachment reasons have returned home or may have never left home in the first instance. These adult children may be grandparents themselves. So rather than being the single parent of one family, the woman is the single parent of several families in her own household. Such

situations increase vulnerability to emotional and financial ill health throughout her life span. This highlights another aspect of the long- term impact of sexual and reproductive issues on the quality of life enjoyed by women.

There is free access to education at the high school level. However, inadequate financial resources are allocated for tertiary or advanced specialist training. The cost for such is prohibitive for women with and without family obligations. Some non-government bodies have organized distance education opportunities to assist in this matter. The Ministry of Education in conjunction with UNESCO and the Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions recently reviewed ways of improving the opportunities for distance education. A society of women without access to advanced specialist training opportunities is ill prepared for the competitive impact of regional single market economic structures and the free movement of people that will inevitably accompany impending free trade agreements. The issue remains a very serious one

There is no organized politically neutral NGOs voice committed solely to ensuring that women's rights as human rights are articulated clearly at the policy making level. In 2003, The office for Research, Planning and Development and the School of Social Sciences of the College of the Bahamas in conjunction with the Caribbean Association of Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) hosted monthly, roundtable discussions on human rights and the Bahamian constitution. Specific discussions on the government's obligations to international conventions including CEDAW were featured. This clearly is not enough.

Duplication of interventions for sexual and reproductive health diminishes the impact of available resources on services. I/E/C activities focus more on changes in the prevalence rate than on more organized programmatic responses to the gender variables fuelling Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights issues. Issues of adolescent rights, parent rights, spousal rights as they relate to bodily integrity, confidentiality, informed consent have not been clarified. Professionals interpret the law in a manner compatible with their individual consciences.

Training is needed for NGOs in the art of advocacy and the content of CEDAW and Beijing. Education and training in these areas will help NGOs to shatter the apathy that comes with prosperity and poor understanding of the international parameters on equality. Our younger women need to be immunized against the cultural forces that constrain the advancement of women. There has been insufficient transfer of passion and a failure to nurture a new generation of activists for women's rights. Mature activists are burned out by the challenge of trying to fulfill roles of family head, mother and professionals. There is little power left for advocacy and militancy. Many women moved into the workplace but not enough men moved into the homes to assist with family responsibilities. The activists are in need revival, restoration and retraining.

Distinguished Chair, Panelist, Participants, we all need to be careful that the ideological mechanisms that dictate the way forward are not ideologies where epistemologically women's beings are validated in relation only to male ontology. The way forward must

be borne out by a path cut clearly by the synergies between National- level implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Thank You

Barriteau Eudine, Violet, 2004. Examining the Shift From 'Woman' to 'Gender' in the Caribbean: Implications for Development. Public Lecture. Available at gender@uwichill.edu.bb