



INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

BY

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AT THE 39TH SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE ON
THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION
AGAINST WOMEN
(*PRESENTING BELIZE'S THIRD AND
FOURTH PERIODIC REPORT*)

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PERMANENT MISSION OF BELIZE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS

Distinguished Chair and members of the Committee, other participants,

It is indeed a privilege to be before you esteemed members of the Committee to present Belize's 3rd and 4th periodic reports. I bring greetings on behalf of the government and people of Belize and in particular all the women on whose behalf we meet today.

Madam Chair, if you permit, I would like to introduce the delegation that accompanies me to this very important dialogue. Ms Anita Zetina, Chief Executive Officer in the Ministry of Human Development and who served previously as the Director of the Women's Department, and Dr. Carol Fonseca, who has served as the Director of the Women's Department for the last three years. We have no NGO representation, as we did previously, as we are aware that they have had the opportunity to present to you a report from their perspective. We welcome this valuable opportunity to dialogue with you and reflect on our accomplishments and the challenges that we encounter in our efforts to implement the Convention together with national and international commitments as they relate to women.

Madam Chair and members

Belize, as you may already know, is characterized as a multiethnic and multilingual society. Our population in 2006, stood at 301,000. In terms of ethnicity, while the Creole were traditionally the largest ethnic group, Belize is now largely Mestizo at 50.7%. It is also important to note that Belize has a young population, of which 44.6% is below the age of 18.

With regards to women, we now make up 50.2% of the population; a slight increase since the submission of our report when the population stood at 49.7%. While we have observed a slight increase in the numbers, we make note that the percentage of female headed households has decreased gradually from 39.3% in 2003 to 28.8% in 2006. Unemployment rates for women have also seen decreases – 20.7% in 2003 to 12.0% in 2007. However, it still remains twice as high as that of men.

Belize has a small open economy. Its principal sectors continue to be agriculture, agro-processing and services which primarily includes tourism. Agriculture, agro-product manufacturing and tourism are the major foreign exchange earners. Also, marine products and small manufacturing make notable contributions to exports. Significant proportions of these products are sold under preferential arrangements that ensure access to markets and generate prices higher than world market prices. The pressures of globalization and trade liberalization are fast diminishing the security of preferential economic markets. Diversification of exports therefore is a priority and Belize has made heavy investments in the service sector, mainly tourism and offshore banking.

Within these economic and social realities, Madam Chair and members, we have continued to undertake initiatives to enhance the quality of life of Belizean women and their families. Several motivating factors have allowed for the implementation of the many initiatives with regards to policy development, legislative changes, and programs that address the issues faced by our Belizean women. Belize's National Gender Policy, the Women's Agenda, the National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy, and other pertinent documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action and the Outcomes Document, the Commonwealth Plan of Action, the CARICOM Regional Plan of Action and the Millenium Development Goals have all guided the work of our Government including that of non-governmental organizations to improve access for girls and women, to education at all levels, improve health-care services and allow our Family Court and judicial system to become more gender sensitive, thus improving women's access to justice.

The National Gender Policy approved by the Government of Belize in 2003 sets out to identify the inequalities experienced by both men and women and suggests action for the correction of gender disparities as well as gives direction for the coordination and implementation of the policy. The critical areas identified in the policy are: health; wealth and employment generation; violence-producing conditions; education and skills training; power and decision-making.

Madam Chair, the National Gender Policy serves as a guide on which national projects and programmes on gender equity are based. This document assigns responsibility to the National Women's Commission to ensure that the commitments in the Policy are implemented as we seek to address the challenges faced by women in the areas of education, health, violence, decision making and wealth and employment generation.

Since 1999 Domestic Violence Units have been established at major Police Stations countrywide. These units are equipped with trained officers who respond to reports, carry out investigations and do follow up. The Police have incorporated Domestic Violence into the curriculum at the Police Training Academy and a training manual has been developed. Police officers, social workers and community leaders have also been trained in the dynamics of family violence and basic intervention techniques. Over 300 police officers have received domestic violence training. In 2004 the department worked closely with the Police Department to formulate a Domestic Violence Protocol for their Department. This was finalized in December 2004. Active public awareness campaigns by key organizations continue to sensitize the public about issues related to domestic violence. A calendar of activities to mark the 16 days of Activism highlighting International Day to Eliminate Violence Against Women, World AIDS Day and Human Rights Day has been developed by the National Gender-based Violence Committee. On November 29th, 2005 the Women's Department launched a UNIFEM funded documentary on gender-based violence portraying the personal stories of survivors of domestic violence, a Handbook for Survivors of Domestic Violence and the Men Against Violence Group was initiated.

The Ministry of Health through its health information system collects data on family violence through relevant agencies using a National Gender-based Violence Registration Form. The Ministry of Health, manages the data collected and annual reports are produced and disseminated contributing to new policy and program areas. The National Domestic Violence Committee has reviewed the National Gender-based Violence Registration Form managed by the Ministry of Health's Information System.

This Form has been updated to gather additional information such as ethnicity. Staff throughout the country have been re-trained on the use of the form.

Madam Chair and members, the Ministry of Human Development along with the Ministry of Health, and other key organizations such as Haven House, Shelter for Battered Women, WIN-Belize, Alliance Against AIDS and the National AIDS Commission continue to draw public awareness to the link between HIV/AIDS and domestic violence. In Belize, the same age group reporting domestic violence is that most infected with HIV/AIDS (ages 20-49). To address this epidemic a National AIDS Commission has been legally established to coordinate activities. An aggressive public awareness campaign has also been developed and is implemented with the support of the private sector. Of concern is the rapid increase in the number of women who are acquiring HIV. Efforts have centered on education and personal development for women through programs such as the "Power fu Women" group that focuses specifically on HIV/AIDS issues.

However, a persistent challenge is the issue of poverty and the dependency of women on men, which leads to women not being able to negotiate safe sex. It has therefore become imperative for us to continue to address the economic empowerment of women along side HIV/AIDS and violence.

Furthermore, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy focuses on interventions to protect and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights. It addresses Millennium Development Goal #5 to improve maternal health and outlines strategies to provide women with more access to reproductive health services.

Madam Chair, Belize's education system depends upon active cooperation between government and the churches. This relationship, while it has brought many gains to the education system, has also posed some major challenges in relation to gender equality. For example the termination of unwed pregnant teachers, which has existed for many years, has just been addressed in the last three years.

The Women's Department spearheaded a study to look at the issue and the findings were launched in collaboration with the Women's Issues Network of Belize.

The case between the teacher and the Catholic Management has indeed set an example and we are confident that such will not recur.

A manual on gender and self-esteem has been developed for primary school teachers to enable them to assist in the changing of attitudes, behaviours and expectations as it relates to boys and girls. To complement this effort, a public awareness campaign on gender has also been implemented.

A nationally executed three month project to create public awareness on issues relating to Family Violence, Sexual Violence and Gender Inequality was also launched in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. This project had the participation of students from secondary and tertiary institutions throughout the country and aimed at developing a sense of responsibility in young women and men in terms of the important role they can play in finding solutions to Family Violence, Sexual Violence and Gender Inequality.

Madam Chair and members: the Women's Department introduced a Gender Integration Safe School Programme in January of 2005. This project, which is geared at providing the foundation for more equitable relations between girls and boys in our society, was introduced to ten primary and secondary schools throughout the country and since has expanded as a result of the positive impact it is having on the students. The target groups are students in Standard Five in the primary school system and Second Form in the secondary school system. Over a thousand students have benefited from programs countrywide. The sessions which are facilitated by Women Development Officers and partner agencies include topics such as Gender Sensitization, Domestic Violence, Sexual Harassment, Self-Esteem and HIV/AIDS. Sessions are held once a week per school.

Public officers from each Ministry have also participated in a Gender Integration

Training organized by the Women's Department which provided a clear understanding of the concept of gender equality and of the gender mainstreaming strategy.

Madam Chair, since the passing of the Domestic Violence Act in 1993 and national consultations, several initiatives have been undertaken. Over the last few years, particular pieces of legislation were amended or passed in seeking women's empowerment. These initiatives include the amendment of the Criminal Code to provide for the offence of marital rape; to rationalize the penalties for the offence of carnal knowledge of a female child; provide a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment for habitual sex offenders and makes provisions for the treatment and reporting of sex offenders. Furthermore, the law now recognizes common law unions as couples living together for five years or more and not married to anyone else for the purpose of inheritance and property rights. The law has also placed economic value on home care/child care in instances of divorce or separation and custody of children no longer depends on mother's private life.

Other legislation which have promoted equality and women's empowerment include the revision of the minimum wage for domestic workers and shop assistants increased to be on par with other workers, the Equal Pay Act and the law on Trafficking in Persons.

An integral part of the Ministry of Human Development's collective effort is to help alleviate the problems generated from trafficking which impact women and children. Belize has passed a Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act that gives effect to the UN Protocol on trafficking in persons and specifically addresses growing concerns regarding the coerced labor or service imposed on persons as a result of their migration status or being pregnant, disabled, addicted to alcohol or drugs, or being a child. The Act has led to the establishment of an Anti-trafficking in Persons Committee mandated to ensure the implementation of the law. One of the primary objectives of the Committee is to promote public awareness from a bi-lingual perspective for prevention, prosecution and protection. Women and young girls who are involved will now be seen as victims and afforded protection under the law. In the past, women and girls were arrested and charged and the perpetrators were not.

Thirteen years after The Domestic Violence Act was passed, the Women's Department spearheaded a review of the Act. From February to June 2005 with the help of a Challenges Worldwide Volunteer, we met with representatives of agencies central to the implementation of the Act. The interviews included people at all levels of service including government officials, public officers, counsellors, representatives from non-governmental organizations, clerks of court, intake officers, magistrates, police officers, the Assistant Commissioner of the Police and the head of the Domestic Violence Unit, members of the Domestic Violence Committee and Haven House Board. Victims of domestic violence as well as perpetrators were interviewed. Statistical information from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Human Development was also integrated into the review. Using information collected from these interviews, the Women's Department focused on reviewing the Domestic Violence Act to see how the data collected could be used to make amendments or additions to the Act. The final report presents the data collected from these interviews in relation to the usage of the Act, its strengths and weaknesses, and the supportive framework surrounding the Act. The report strongly advocates for both a proactive and re-active national approach to domestic violence and calls for a renewed National Plan of Action to address gender-based violence. It calls for an integrated response which addresses law enforcement, health, judicial, housing and community advocacy.

It calls for a move towards reframing the issue as gender-based violence for the development of a broader array of interventions. On International Women's Day, March 8th, 2007 the Attorney General introduced the Domestic Violence Bill 2007 which supports the repeal of the Domestic Violence Act of 1992. Shortly this Bill will be tabled in Cabinet with a view to present it to the House of Representatives for enactment.

Madam Chair, traditional networks with Women Issues Network-Belize, Haven House, Belize Family Life Association, Youth Enhancement Services and the Young Women's Christian Association continue to improve women's access to justice. The National Committee for Families and Children, through its National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents calls for the reduction of family violence by 25% by 2009.

The Women's Department continues to work along with Family Court, the Domestic Violence Unit and the Police. Haven House, shelter for battered women in Belize established on January 29, 1993, continues to play a central role in providing a safe home for women. Government continues to give an annual subvention for the day to day running of Haven House.

The Women's Department acts as the Secretariat for Haven House and provides support services for victims. In August 2005 a Program Coordinator was hired for Haven House and initiatives are presently being taken to upgrade the shelter's facilities. Partnerships with international agencies UNIFEM, PAHO/WHO, UNFPA, CIDA, and Global Fund have continued to assist with funding and technical support.

Through efforts of the Women's Department and National Women's Commission a multi-sectoral committee was established to develop a renewed National Plan of Action (2007-2009) to address gender-based violence. Twenty-one key stakeholders representing Women's Department, Human Services Department, Community Rehabilitation Department, Family Court, Women Issues Network-Belize, PAHO/WHO, National AIDS Commission, Police Department-Domestic Violence Unit, Haven House, YWCA, YES, The United Women's Group, Mental Health Association, and the National Women's Commission agreed to develop an integrated multifaceted approach to all forms of violence against women and not just domestic violence. This integrated response addresses law enforcement, health, judicial, education, housing, and community advocacy.

Madam Chair, the National Women's Commission, the Women's Department and the National Committee for Families and Children lobbied and advocated for female Belize Defense Soldiers to not be discriminated against because of being pregnant. In July 2005 Cabinet directed that the Defense Board be advised that the practice of taking disciplinary action against women soldiers because they became pregnant is discriminatory and should be discontinued.

On July 19th, 2005 Cabinet agreed to amend the relevant legislation (Labour Act) and regulations to provide for 14 weeks maternity leave

entitlement for female Public Officers instead of 12 weeks on full pay and to ratify the revised ILO Convention No. 183 – Maternity Protection Convention.

Cabinet in July 2005 directed that the Attorney General’s Ministry draft amendments to existing legislation to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 9 to 12 and to raise the age of marriage (with the consent of the parents) from 14 to 16 years.

Madam Chair, we recognize that despite the many achievements, much more needs to be done in our efforts to attain equality and equity in Belize and to provide women with full access to justice. Limited human and financial resources are a major challenge particularly when discussions about women’s issues are now being debated against the perception of men at risk or marginalized. Limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms also pose a challenge and the availability of data disaggregated by sex and the analysis of such, are concerns.

Traditional stereotypes, attitudes and expectations of society continue to pose challenges. Women’s daily reality of survival after domestic abuse continues to be a major issue. Once women leave the shelter they are often unable to support themselves and their children financially. Often this is a common reason why they return into their abusive situations. There is the urgent need to put in place structured systems that allow for these women to secure housing, jobs, placement for their children in schools, day care, and counseling.

The threatening or pressuring of victims of violence in order to force retraction of complaints as well as the arbitrary prosecution and punishment of victims continues to be a major issue. Women victims and their family members who make complaints are threatened in order to pressure them into retracting their statements or where victims, instead of receiving redress for crimes committed against them, are themselves arbitrarily punished or detained. Adequate victim protection is a major concern.

The Government of Belize remains committed to the advancement of women, the pursuit of gender equality and women’s access to justice.

Our Government continues to rely on partnerships with NGO's, civil society groups, international partners and other stakeholders to actively engage women, girls, men and boys in the promotion of gender equality and eliminating violence against women and discrimination. The steps we have taken have sometimes been small and in some cases we have made giant leaps, but our journey is far from over. It has only begun. We constantly renew our pledge to fulfill the goals and objectives of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing +5 Outcomes Document, and the Millennium Development Goals.

Madam Chair, we continue to advocate for the involvement of men in the promotion of gender equality and emphasize the need for men to contribute to change. As has been reiterated on so many occasions sustainable gains for women can not be effectively achieved when women are addressed in isolation from the rest of the society, especially from the men who are their partners. We call as well for the involvement of young people to be the new generation of gender equality advocates.

Cooperation between government and non-governmental organizations must continue to be enhanced to bring about effective and positive change for the women in our country. We are living in times when we can no longer afford to work in isolation. We need to maximize the use of our resources and network with each other to accomplish common goals and objectives. Far more efforts must be made to collaborate with church groups and other faith-based groups. It is only through these multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approaches that we can achieve change towards women's empowerment and equality. So, too, must we continue the process of amending and revising outdated and inappropriate laws so that they reflect the changing times and ensure that women have equal legal status.

Madam Chair, once again we welcome the opportunity to dialogue and look forward to a most productive meeting.

I thank you.