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on violence against women
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* *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations*

The following comments are based on the development of National Plan of Action on Gender-Based Violence (2010 – 2013) for Belize. The Plan was developed in 2009, and passed by Cabinet on June 15, 2010. An important input to the Plan was the National Assessment of Actions on Ending Violence Against Women, which was carried out earlier in 2009¹.

(i) Guiding Principles

In its introductory sections, the Plan includes a definition of gender-based violence as well as guiding principles that provide a foundation for action. The definition draws on three sources:

- Recommendation 19 of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, which defines gender-based violence as predominantly violence against women;
- The *Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women* (better known as the *Convention of Belem do Para*) which describes the type of behaviour defined as gender-based violence; and
- The *Beijing Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women* that situates this violence within the context of gender discrimination and the subordination of women.

These international standards also provided the general context for the development of the Plan, and the development of laws and policies are consistent with commitments made by Belize under these frameworks.

The Guiding Principles included in the Plan were developed through the National Assessment. These principles are:

- 1) The response to violence against women must be based on *understanding the roots of this violence in a system of gender inequality and women's subordination*.
- 2) All programmes must *put the safety and security of women and children first*.
- 3) *Confidentiality* must be guaranteed to all victims of violence against women.
- 4) Each system responsible for violence against women must *develop its own plan for ensuring a positive response*. This plan must be focused, delegate clear responsibility for implementation, provide adequate resources, and include a mechanism for monitoring

¹ Lewis, Debra J., *Walking in the Darkness, Walking in the Light: A National Assessment of Actions on Ending Violence Against Women*, Women's Department, Ministry of Human Development and Social Transformation (Belize) 2009

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and evaluation. Those at the highest level of the systems and Ministries responsible for them must take *ownership* of the implementation of these plans.

- 5) *Guaranteeing a fast and effective police response* must be a high priority. Women's confidence in this response can only be assured through the implementation of *mechanisms for external oversight* of police actions.
- 6) *Civil society*, and in particular women and women's organizations, *has a critical role to play* in advocating for individual women needing protection and support, as well as in advocacy for changes in public sector policies and practice. It also has an important responsibility in developing a deeper understanding of the roots of violence against women and in raising public awareness of this.
- 7) Government must demonstrate the *political will* to take action to address violence against women. A key part of demonstrating this political will is in *providing the human and financial resources necessary for an effective response*.

The plan is organized around 4 goals and corresponding objectives. These are:

Goal 1: There is zero-tolerance for gender-based violence in Belize.

Objective 1-1: Police response to survivors of gender-based violence is improved.
Complaints concerning police response are reduced.

Objective 1-2: Prosecution of acts of gender-based violence is strengthened. Attrition in reported cases that go to trial and result in convictions is reduced by 50%.

Objective 1-3: Survivors of gender-based violence have access to justice, including adequate legal representation.

Goal 2: Survivors of gender-based violence in both urban and rural areas are provided with adequate services and support.

Objective 2-1: All survivors of gender-based violence have access to adequate health services delivered in a supportive, respectful and confidential manner.

Objective 2-2: All survivors of gender-based violence have access to adequate support and advocacy services.

Objective 2-3: All victims of domestic violence in crisis have access to adequate shelter and financial support.

Objective 2-4: Rural women who are victims of gender-based violence have access to justice and support.

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Objective 2-5: There is strong cross-sector collaboration in responding to survivors of gender-based violence.

Goal 3: Gender-based violence in Belize is reduced, and ultimately eliminated.

Objective 3-1: Recidivism by perpetrators of gender-based violence is reduced by 30%.

Objective 3-2: There is greater public understanding of the roots of gender-based violence.

Objective 3-3: Men take greater responsibility for understanding the roots of gender-based violence and take action based on that understanding.

Goal 4: It is possible to measure both the extent of gender-based violence in Belize and the effectiveness of strategies to respond to it.

Objective 4-1: Systems designed to measure reported cases of gender-based violence capture all reported cases of both domestic violence and sexual offenses.

Objective 4-2: A system to measure the incidence, frequency and severity of gender-based violence is in place.

Objective 4-3: A method to assess the effectiveness of strategies to respond to gender-based violence is in place.

In the document, the Plan is provided according to these objectives, as well as by sector, to allow each sector to readily identify its obligations under the plan.

The process of developing both the National Assessment and the National Plan reviewed other relevant policies and plans such as the National Gender Policy, the National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy and Plan of Action, as well as the previous national plan on gender-based violence. One challenge in linking the new National Plan on Gender-Based Violence to the National Gender Policy is that the policy in place as the plan was being developed was out of date (2002) and lacked specific directions for policy change. In 2009-2010, the Women's Commission has been undertaking a major review and revision to the policy, and it is hoped that the new policy will integrate the specific work on gender-based violence into the gender policy.

With respect to the intersection of the Plan with the gender equality machinery, the development of the Plan was carried out under the auspices of and in close consultation with the Women's Department, and the Department will be responsible for coordinating the implementation of the Plan. In terms of budgetary issues, activities included in the Plan are accompanied by cost

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estimates, and the Plan stresses that endorsing the goals, objectives and activities it contains must necessarily imply a commitment to identifying the resources necessary for implementation. It remains to be seen whether Cabinet endorsement of the Plan will translate into budget decisions. Gender budgeting has not been successfully pursued in Belize, so this was not considered in the development of the Plan.

The duration of the Plan is 2010 to 2013. However, the time necessary for the process of achieving Cabinet approval has meant that the timeline has been adjusted to start activities in late 2010.

The Plan pays particular attention to the needs of rural women who are often particularly challenged in accessing services and support. The plan outlines increased backing for advocacy and support services for rural women by adding one additional Women's Development Officer in each district with specific responsibility for rural outreach, by enhancing the ability of Community Health Workers in rural villages to respond to gender based violence, and by providing emergency assistance for victims of violence who need transportation to safety and/or medical services through the Community Health Workers. Also, the plan addresses the particular needs of Maya women who are often geographically and socially isolated, and who generally rely first on the traditional alcalde system for protection and justice. The Plan calls for the development and implementation of a training programme on gender awareness and the Domestic Violence Act for alcaldes and village chairmen in Maya villages.

In addition, the Plan calls for greater protection and support for young women and girls, especially in the light of high rates of sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly by older men. The Plan calls for stronger liaison between schools and social workers, as well as specialist teachers to teach matters related to sex and sexuality, violence against women and children and related issues. The Plan also outlines measures to strengthen the protection of young women and girls when giving testimony in sexual abuse cases.

The Plan includes all forms of gender-based violence against women, with specific reference to domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse and exploitation. For domestic violence, the Plan assumes the definition provided in the Domestic Violence Act (2007) which includes physical, emotional or psychological, sexual and financial abuse. It also includes a broad definition of "spouse" to include those who are living together but unmarried, as well as those who may not live together but who have children in common or who are in visiting relationships without having children together. The Plan also notes that the current definitions of "rape" and "indecent assault" used in the Criminal Code are inadequate and calls for a review and revision of these definitions to better reflect the range of sexual assaults.

While the Plan does provide specific financial support for NGOs immediately, it does call for the development and implementation of a mechanism for providing secure, ongoing financial support to community-based services for women and children. This mechanism should be in place by budget year 2012-1013.

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A review of the current situation, statistics and studies was carried out as part of the National Assessment that preceded the development of the Plan. This review was not repeated in the National Plan document, but its findings provided input to the Plan and can be accessed through the Women's Department. One problem, however, is that studies on violence against women in Belize are very limited, and further work needs to be done to strengthen existing methods of generating statistics and implement additional methods to assess the incidence, frequency and severity of gender based violence in Belize. This issue is dealt with explicitly in the Plan of Action under Goal 4.

Because the National Plan is just in its initial stages of implementation, it is difficult to judge how successful it will be in practice. Nevertheless, it is possible to note several specific improvements over the previous plan. First, the inclusion of specific indicators for objectives and activities should allow for more effective monitoring and evaluation. Attaching budget estimates for activities and stressing that endorsing the plan necessarily implies a commitment to financing should help in holding government accountable to its obligations. Finally, the Plan explicitly addresses the need for each sector to take full ownership of its responsibilities. The reintroduction of the Gender Integration Committee – the Gender Focal Points – is intended to support the sector execution of the plan. This will be key to the successful achievement of the goals and objectives set forth in the document.

(ii) Development and adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs) on violence against women (VAW)

This NAP was the second for Belize, following the 2007 – 2009 plan. The development of the current NAP in Belize was part of a larger project² to address issues of gender-based violence in Belize, funded by UNIFEM and implemented through the Women's Department, Ministry of Human Development and Social Transformation. Prior to the work undertaken on the Plan, two other documents were produced – a national assessment of actions on ending violence against women³ and a specific review of the justice systems response to sexual assault⁴. These reviews provided the foundation for the development of the Plan, and indeed might be seen as part of a two stage process in the formulation of the Plan.

Resources were not available for a national survey on VAW prior to the development of the Plan. However, the National Assessment reviewed all available studies and statistics, and solicited input from those working within various sectors, from women's advocates in both the public sector and civil society, and from survivors of violence against women. The National Assessment and justice system/sexual assault review were carried out from April to June 2009, and the Plan of Action was developed from August to October 2009. The Plan was officially endorsed by Cabinet on June 15, 2010.

² Strengthening State Accountability and Community Action for Ending Gender-Based Violence in the Caribbean

³ Lewis, Debra J., *op cit*

⁴ Moore, Antoinette, *Strengthening State Accountability in Policing and Prosecuting Sexual Assaults*, Women's Department (Belize) 2009

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Consultations were carried out in both the assessment/review and plan development stages. The methodology used for the national assessment included a literature review, key informant interviews and focus groups with sector representatives, women's advocates and survivors. The justice system review also conducted extensive interviews specific to that sector. In the formulation of the plan, a draft plan was circulated to key informants in various sectors and interviews were undertaken to get further input. Two key issues for this last set of consultations was to insure that the Plan would be "do-able" within the time frame allotted and that there should be stronger sectoral ownership of the plan than had been the case with the previous plan. The final draft of the Plan was also circulated to the Chief Executive Officers of the relevant Ministries, and a meeting held with the CEOs for their input. This step was particularly important to the process of achieving Cabinet endorsement of the Plan.

Civil society (including women's shelters and other groups providing services and advocacy on violence against women and girls) was involved in the process through a focus group of women's advocates carried out in the assessment. In addition, the Director of the Women's Issues Network of Belize (an network of civil society groups) was interviewed on the draft Plan, particularly on the responsibilities of civil society organizations. The Programme Coordinator of UNICEF was interviewed as a key informant during the assessment process.

The National Assessment, justice system review and proposed Plan of Action were released at an event sponsored by the Women's Department in November 2009. Copies of all three documents were provided on disc at that event. The National Plan of Action will be available in print in September 2010. The documents are not yet available on the internet, as the Ministry website is currently being updated.

The process of consultation carried out in the development of the National Assessment, justice system review and Plan of Action was very important. As mentioned previously, particular attention was placed on insuring that key players in the various sectors see the Plan as being "do-able" and that the sectors take ownership of their part. In addition, insuring that the CEOs of the relevant Ministries were "on board" with the Plan was essential to achieving Cabinet endorsement. Since the Plan is at the very beginning stage of implementation, it is not possible to assess whether this will lead to greater commitment to putting the Plan into action. An early activity included in the Plan is the strengthening of gender focal points within each Ministry build on the consultation process and carry it through to implementation.

(iii) Legislation

There is no national legislation on violence against women *per se*. The Domestic Violence Act and Criminal Code provisions on sexual offenses are the main legislation in this area. There is no reference or requirement for a NAP in legislation.

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The Plan calls for a review of all laws on sexual offenses. It also calls for effective monitoring and evaluation of the Domestic Violence Act, which was revised in 2007 and came into effect in 2008.

The national assessment noted that there is generally a significant gap between what is promised through legislation and what is delivered. It calls for legal services to be available to women in order to use existing (or future) legislation to its full potential. It is absolutely essential that legislation not be seen as an end in itself. Services and support must be in place to allow for effective use of the law, and those responsible for carrying out the law – from judges and magistrates, other court staff, lawyers, and police – must be both knowledgeable of and committed to effective implementation.

(iv) Criminal Justice System

The plan includes the following measures with respect to the criminal justice system:

Area	Measures
General CJS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish a Family Court in each district• Increase number of Family Court magistrates in Belize City• Conduct a public awareness campaign on the use of the Ombudsman's office for complaints on the response of the police and other public sector systems• Conduct a special investigation into the issues raised in the justice system/sexual offenses report
Assistance to survivors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sustain and expand support and advocacy services for survivors

Investigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and revise existing police protocols • Review, expand and implement police recruit and in-service training • Ensure that all officers (including senior officers) have basic training in the Domestic Violence Act • Establish a system of long-term specialist officers for responding to domestic violence • Establish a sexual offenses unit in the Criminal Investigations Branch, staffed with female officers • Conduct identification parades using one-way mirrors • Develop and implement a mandatory arrest policy • Establish a DNA laboratory
Prosecution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish dedicated Crown Counsel for the prosecution of sexual offenses • Develop and implement sensitization sessions for judges • Establish a multi-sectoral committee to monitor progress on all sexual offenses cases • Amend DVA and other relevant legislation to authorize Family Court to deal with both civil matters and criminal matters (summary offenses) related to domestic violence • Training for clerks of the court on DVA
Rights of complainant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Legal Aid available at no cost to survivors of Domestic Violence • Increase number of attorneys at the Belize City Legal Aid Office • Establish Legal Aid offices in the districts • Strengthen protection for under-age victims of sexual abuse
Sentencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and revise all sexual offenses legislation (including sentencing)

Improving police response to violence against women is critical. There is currently a low level of confidence in this response. Addressing this issue must be a top priority if the criminal justice system is to effectively respond in cases of violence against women.

(v) Prevention

The plan includes the following measures with respect to prevention:

Area	Measures
Awareness raising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a symposium on the roots of gender-based violence • Conduct a public awareness campaign on rape and sexual assault, including an analysis of the roots of this violence as well as practical information for survivors • Develop materials to raise awareness among young people on the roots

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	of gender based violence
Education/ Educational Curricula	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement in-service training for teachers on legislation and obligations on sexual abuse • Incorporate training in basic counseling skills in teacher training programmes • Insure that a counselor trained in the identification and response to all forms of abuse, including sexual abuse, is available in each school • Appoint and train specialist teachers to teach matters relating to sex and sexuality, violence against women and children and related matters
Sensitization of the media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze the impact of the media's treatment of women on attitudes and practices related to gender based violence
Empowerment of women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a network civil society organizations working on violence against women to develop and sustain countrywide services and advocacy
Involvement of youth, men and boys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop materials to raise awareness among young people on the roots of gender based violence • Hold a symposium for men on masculinity and gender based violence • Support the establishment of a men's group addressing issues of masculinity and gender based violence
Rehabilitation programmes for perpetrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the current Batterers' Intervention programme and review the programme based on that evaluation, if necessary • Obtain long term commitment from cabinet to continue financial support for the Batterers' Intervention Programme after the pilot

An important part of this work must be to develop greater understanding of the roots of violence against women in a system of gender inequality and women's subordination. Effective change cannot only look at symptoms but must also address the deeper causes.

(vi) Protection, support and assistance to victims/survivors

The Plan provides the following measures with respect to protection, support and assistance to victims/survivors

Area	Measures
Support services/ health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and revise protocols and train health care workers in hospitals and clinics • Annual in-service training on gender based violence for health care workers, including developing an understanding of how the issue affects themselves and their patients • Strengthen the Ministry of Health's Complaints Policy and disseminate to all agencies working with survivors • Implement emergency contraception and prophylactic treatment for

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	<p>HIV for all victims of sexual abuse/sexual assault</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase social workers available in hospitals• Strengthen a system of doctors permanently resident in Belize who specialize in gathering evidence and giving testimony in cases of sexual abuse and other sexual offenses
Support services/ integrated services and shelters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support the creation of a network on violence against women to develop and sustain countrywide services and advocacy• Assess the need for community based services for survivors and support the expansion of existing services and the establishment of new services• Develop and implement a mechanism for secure ongoing financial support (from government) for community based services

Protection orders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is included in the context of overall strengthening of policing, as well as monitoring and evaluation of the new Domestic Violence Act.
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire one additional social worker in each district to provide adequate support and advocacy for survivors of child sexual abuse • Develop criteria for the maximum case load for social workers and, if necessary, recommend hiring additional social workers

In terms of support services/integrated services and shelters, the model proposed in the Plan (and described in more detail in the National Assessment) is for community-based violence against women crisis centres operated by civil society organizations. These organizations would provide crisis response, peer counseling, practical assistance, shelter services and advocacy. Priorities would be defined by community in each district of Belize. Because of Belize’s ethnic and cultural diversity, these community based centres would also be in the best position to identify those groups of women needing specialized services and support.

To accomplish the development of services as well as the national network on violence against women (which is being proposed as a sub-network of the Women’s Issues Network), civil society organizations will need support to build capacity to carry out this work.

(vii) Training and capacity-building

Measures included in the Plan for training and capacity building have already been outlined with respect to specific programme areas above, including police, prosecutors and health sector workers. The Plan does not specify the specific type of training materials to be used.

As previously noted, specialized police are proposed for both domestic violence and sexual offenses cases. In addition, dedicated Crown Counsel for the prosecution of sexual offenses is also established by the Plan. The Plan does not propose specialized courts, but sensitization of judges, and the consolidation of civil and criminal (summary offense) matters relating to domestic violence in Family Court is included.

A key concern in Belize – in this area as well as others – is that training has not always delivered the desired results. It is very important that training is not seen (or designed) as “one-off” events, but instead is structured as part of an ongoing process of capacity building and evaluated based on it’s impact on the delivery of services and programmes.

(viii) Collection of statistical data, research and analysis

Both the police and the Ministry of Health collect data on cases of gender based violence. In both cases, data are disaggregated by sex. The Plan calls for both systems to be reviewed and strengthened, as there is some evidence that not all data is being successfully collected.

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Goal 4 of the Plan specifically addresses issues concerning data collection, as well as monitoring and evaluation. It includes the following measures:

Area	Measures
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and revise the existing process for gathering the Police Department’s <i>Gender-Based Violence Statistics Nationwide</i> (in particular to insure consistent application of the system) • Review and revise the Ministry of Health’s <i>Surveillance system on Gender-Based Violence</i> to insure that both domestic violence and other sexual offenses are recorded. Revise the list of those responsible to complete the forms, including Community Health Workers • Develop and implement an ongoing mechanism to measure the incidence, frequency and severity of gender-based violence in Belize (through the Statistical Institute of Belize)
Monitoring and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement a plan to monitor and evaluate the effects of the new Domestic Violence legislation. • Develop and implement a system to record complaints by victims advocates that minimum standards of response and care by specific systems are not being followed. • Complete the review of the Sexual Harassment Act and propose amendments to the act and strategies for more effective implementation.

In addition to the above, the Plan includes a section outlining the Monitoring and Evaluation of the Plan itself. An important part of this process will be strengthening Gender Focal Points in each Ministry to be responsible for overseeing implementation and monitoring within that sector.

The Plan includes indicators for each objective and activity, as well as timelines for implementation.

(ix) Implementation

Implementation of the Plan is coordinated by the Women’s Department, who chairs the National Gender-Based Violence Committee, a multi-sectoral body including both government and civil society representation. Strengthening the district GBV committees is also proposed in the Plan. Both the national and district committees pre-date the current plan, but work is needed to insure consistency and effective collaboration.

Because implementation of the plan is just beginning, it is not possible to identify good practices in the process at this point.

The Plan includes estimates for most of the activities (with a few requiring additional planning before costs can be finalized), and designates resources needed as “recurrent” or “short-term”. Those resources needed for the provision of the ongoing response are listed as “recurrent” and should most appropriately be integrated as part of government’s annual budget. Problems continue to occur when activities that should be an ongoing part of government’s responsibilities

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are covered by funds from external sources. Too often, these activities are dropped or marginalized once external funds have run out. Set up costs or one time activities (such as specific public education campaigns or research projects) can appropriately be accessed from external sources and are designated as “short term” resources.

Although endorsement should imply a commitment to the necessary resources included in the Plan, government has not yet allocated funds for the various activities. Further work will be needed to insure that support for the activities is included in the budget process during the period of the plan for recurrent resources, and to identify and pursue sources of external funding for short-term activities.

Overall implementation will be monitored by the Women’s Department with support from the National Gender-Based Violence Committee, the Gender Focal Points and civil society (through the Women’s Issues Network of Belize).