

STATEMENT

BY

**AMBASSADOR STUART W. LESLIE
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF BELIZE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

**AT THE HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE
FORTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

MONDAY, 7 MARCH 2005

ON THE THEMES:

**REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION
AND THE OUTCOME DOCUMENTS OF THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY;**

AND

**CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS.**

Madam Chairperson, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

The 49th Session of the Commission of the Status of Women has provided a valuable opportunity to assess our gains, but most importantly to chart the way forward in furthering the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing +5 Outcome Document and the Millennium Development Goals.

I congratulate you and the other members of the Bureau, on your election to guide the work of this most challenging and important session of the Commission.

At the outset, my delegation wishes to associate itself with the statement made by the distinguished representative of Jamaica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Madam Chairperson,

Belize's national action plan is guided by the Women's Agenda and the National Gender Policy. Both documents form the backbone of our Government's policies in relation to gender equality and equity and reflect the objectives of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action and, the Outcome Document. These documents give the impetus for the implementation of many initiatives that Belize has undertaken.

Of the twelve critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action, our work has focused on five: violence against women, health, education, poverty eradication and women in decision-making.

Despite gains, violence against women continues to be high on our agenda. The Government of Belize will continue to intensify its efforts to combat Family violence, sexual violence and other forms of abuse against women and girls.

A number of advances in the health sector have led to improved local access to health services, reductions in mortality and fertility rates, and increases in infant vaccination rates. The adoption of a Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy as part of our commitment to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, has also served to address critical issues relating to women's and adolescents' sexual and reproductive health needs and rights.

HIV/AIDS continues to pose challenges. 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 that focus specifically on HIV/AIDS issues. It is therefore, imperative for us to address the economic empowerment of women along side HIV/AIDS and violence.

In Belize our 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 had existed for many years, has just now been addressed. We will continue the partnership in education with the Churches, for it is a valuable partnership, however

we will continue to work together to protect the rights of our women in compliance with our constitutional obligation.

Madam Chairperson,

The provision of training opportunities for women and girls has been addressed through various forms and by government and non-governmental organizations. These programs equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to become self-employed or to get a job.

The National Gender Policy, through its commitments, seeks to accelerate progress in these areas by addressing issues such as unpaid domestic labour, equity in employment opportunities, child-care, access to credit and pension entitlements.

The placing of an economic value on childcare and domestic duties in cases of separation or divorce has been a step towards the empowerment of women and poverty alleviation particularly for those women who do not work outside the home.

The introduction, by the Belize Social Security Board, of a non-contributory pension for women who are 65 years and over has also assisted many older women who otherwise may have lived in poverty situations. Financially secure women make for stronger societies.

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 and the recognition of common law unions for the purpose of inheritance and property rights, the Sexual Harassment Act, the Equal Pay Act and most recently the law on Trafficking in Persons.

Belize is proud to report that while we have not attained the 30% of women in decision making, we are making progress. The recent appointment of the first female financial secretary and the first female judge of the Supreme Court speak to these efforts.

Madam Chairperson

Despite the many achievements, much more needs to be done in our *efforts* to attain equality and equity in Belize. The Government of Belize remains committed to the advancement of women and the pursuit of gender equality. We will continue 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.

Today, we renew our commitment to those goals set out in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing +5 Outcomes Document and the Millennium Development Goals.

Our journey continues as we move towards attaining a just and equitable society.
I thank you