BELIZE

Belize’s report


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The outcome of the twenty-third special session of the general assembly (2000)

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Ministry of Human Development
Government of Belize
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Introduction

The following report seeks to highlight major achievements and challenges as Belize, through its national mechanism for the advancement of women, along with its partners embarked on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing +5 outcomes document.

In preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Women’s Department undertook to consult with men and women countrywide with regards to the twelve critical areas which now form part of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing +5 Outcomes Document. Through these consultations, Belize identified five of the twelve critical areas as priority issues in the quest for EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE. With the exception of the girl child, Belize, similar to other Caribbean countries, prioritized poverty and the economy, health, violence against women and power and decision-making. Education was the fifth critical area for Belize. Not withstanding the fact that the girl child was not on our priority, the National Committee for Families and Children has undertaken the task to address the issues of children’s rights including that of girls and young women.

Participation in the Fourth World Conference, the development of a Strategic Plan and the Women’s Agenda (a policy document of the party which became government in 1998), gave the impetus for the implementation of many initiatives with regards to policy development and legislative changes that Belize has undertaken over the last decade. Both international and national commitments have therefore contributed to the advancement of women in Belize.

Despite the many achievements, much more needs to be done in our efforts to attain equality and equity in Belize. The approved National Gender Policy provides the necessary framework from which further initiatives will be undertaken. The development of the National Gender Policy was based on a situational analysis of gender in Belize as well as on other pertinent documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Outcomes Document, the Commonwealth Plan of Action and the CARICOM Regional Plan of Action.
PART ONE

OVERVIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

The priority areas for Belize, as indicated earlier, continue to be violence against women, health, education, poverty and women in decision-making. Initiatives undertaken were centered on legislative changes, policy development, service delivery and gender mainstreaming.

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, provides for 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 refer to the revision of the minimum wage for domestic workers and shop assistants increased to be on par with other workers, the Sexual Harassment Act, the Equal Pay Act and most recently the law on Trafficking in Persons.

To address the area of violence a multi-sectoral committee was established to develop of a plan of action and to assist with monitoring its implementation. To date the following have been accomplished: Family Violence Units have been set up at major Police Stations country wide, police officers, social workers and community leaders have been trained in the dynamics of family violence and basic intervention techniques, the Ministry of Health, through its health information system manages data on family violence collected by relevant agencies using the registration form, The Ministry of Health has developed a protocol for the management of family violence cases at hospitals and health centers, and the Women’s Department has also developed its own protocol to respond to cases more effectively. Several publications on family violence including a basic counseling manual have been produced and many public awareness campaigns have been developed and implemented particularly on International Day to End Violence Against Women. Belize has also ratified the Inter-American Convention, Belem do Para, which it takes into account in the development of efforts in this area.

Activities in the area of policy development include the approved National Gender Policy which again focuses on the five critical areas, the Breastfeeding Policy and the Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy.
Major activities in gender mainstreaming consisted of the 1st and 2nd phases of Gender Budget Initiative, public education campaigns on gender including sensitization sessions with Cabinet Ministers and senior public officials. A Manual for training public officers on gender analysis and planning as well as a manual for primary school teachers on gender were developed. To complement the efforts, a manual on the definition of gender from a Belizean perspective was commissioned by the Women’s Issues Network of Belize to be used in the training of its member agencies which consist of mainly non-governmental organizations.

In the area of service delivery the Women’s Department as well as the National Women’s Commission (NWC) have lobbied and advocated for the implementation of programs which promote women’s empowerment. For example the NWC commissioned a study on women’s participation in leadership positions and the recommendations integrated into the gender policy. The Government has established the Small Farmer and Business Bank to facilitate loans for women. On the other hand, skills training and entrepreneurship development programs have been delivered to women countrywide.

The Government of Belize ratified the Convention on the Elimination on all forms of Discrimination Against Women in May 1990. Since then it has submitted its initial and second periodic report and is presently completing its third and fourth periodic report combined. The Government has acceded to the Optional Protocol and has taken seriously the recommendations of the committee and to this end has changed legislation and developed the national gender policy which takes into account those recommendations. A study on discriminatory practices in the education system was commissioned. This study has led to the development of a plan of action which includes a campaign to eliminate discrimination in the education system.

The achievements in these areas have been as a result of the multi-sectoral approach utilized to develop and implement the activities. Political will and support as well as the participation of non-governmental organizations in the lobbying and advocacy efforts have resulted in greater awareness of women and gender issues. The financial support of many international and regional agencies has also added to our success. In general, resources as well as attitudes and the expectations of society with regards to the role of men and women have hindered in many ways. However, much has been accomplished since the Fourth World Conference on Women.
PART TWO

PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CRITICAL AREAS OF CONCERN OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION AND THE FURTHER INITIATIVES AND ACTIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

As mentioned earlier, the work of the Women’s Department along with its partners, both government and non-government and the international community in Belize has centered its work on the five critical areas of concern.

1. Poverty/unemployment:

The Department, as well as many NGO’s, has been offering skills training programs to women and young girls as a means of empowering them economically. The programs are aimed to equip women with traditional as well as non-traditional skills to enable them to become gainfully employed or to start their own business. Besides training, credit opportunities although limited, are being offered to women who wish to become entrepreneurs. During the time in review, a non-traditional training for women was funded by the Caribbean Development Bank and facilitated by the Center for Employment Training. Women in the Belize and Stann Creek Districts benefited from this program. Women have also benefited from credit opportunities through the Small Farmers and Business Bank, the Development Finance Corporation and the Belize Enterprise for Sustained Technology. In March of this year, the Commonwealth Secretariat facilitated a training of trainers seminar on Entrepreneurship Development particularly geared to public officers and NGO’s who work with women and young people in an effort to promote entrepreneurship development with these groups. The Youth for the Future Initiative has also been assisting with business and credit development focusing on youth. The National Gender Policy through its commitments seeks to accelerate progress in these areas by addressing issues such as the unpaid economic value of domestic labour, equity in employment opportunities, child-care, access to credit and pension entitlements.

In relation to this area of concern, the placing of an economic value on childcare and domestic duties in cases of separation or divorce is a step towards the empowerment of women and poverty alleviation particularly for those women who do not work outside the home. The recognition of common law unions is also vital since not only married are entitled to this benefit. 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 women who otherwise may have lived in poverty situations. This initiative was introduced in 2003.

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1 Belize has six districts: Belize, Cayo, Corozal, Orange Walk, Stann Creek and Toledo. The Belize District has the most populated City and the Stann Creek District is in the south and one of the poorest districts.
2. **Violence Against Women:**

National efforts in this area have focused on family violence but due to an increase in reported cases of rape and other sexual offences against women recently, work has been expanded to encompass other forms of violence against women.

Since the passing of the Domestic Violence Act in 1993 and the national consultations, several initiatives have been undertaken. In an effort to address the area of family violence a multi-sectoral committee was established to assist with the development of a plan of action and to assist with monitoring its implementation. The plan has as its goal the promotion of healthy relationships and non-violent home environments. Activities undertaken focused on prevention, early detection, attention and public awareness. To date, Family 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. Police officers, social workers and community leaders have been trained in the dynamics of family violence and basic intervention techniques. This has enabled the formation of local committees in each district who facilitate the implementation of local plans. The Ministry of Health, through its health information system manages the data collected on family violence by relevant agencies using the registration form. Annual reports are produced and disseminated contributing to new policy and program areas. The Ministry of Health and the Women’s Department have both developed and now implement a protocol for the management of family violence cases in their respective units and Departments including hospitals and health centers. Presently the Police Department has embarked in a similar process and they now have a draft protocol being circulated for comments. Several publications on domestic violence including a basic counseling manual have also been produced.

Ongoing public awareness and education programs have resulted in a number of public service announcements via radio, television, newspapers, brochures and pamphlets. Posters, magnets, pens, pencils, ribbons and post it note pads have all been distributed, and rallies and candlelight vigils have been held with the aim of creating awareness and putting an end to violence against women.

The recent passing of the Trafficking in Persons Act has resulted in the setting up of a Taskforce to implement and create public awareness in an effort to convict those persons who are involved in human trafficking. Women and young girls who are involved will now be seen as victims and afforded protection under the law. In the past, these women and girls were arrested and charged and the perpetrators were not.

Belize has also ratified the Inter-American Convention, Belem do Para which it considers in the development of programs as well as in commemorating International Day to End Violence Against Women.
3. **Health:**

A number of advances have been achieved in the health sector in recent years including improved local access to health services, reductions in mortality and fertility rates, and increases in infant vaccination rates. The introduction of iron and Vitamin A supplementation programs and pap smear testing and cervical cancer screening are expected to produce further marked improvements in health standards.

The introduction of a health plan, which was developed from a life cycle and gender approach, provided the necessary awareness and will to pursue activities in the health sector from a gender perspective. The Ministry of Health has placed much emphasis on the issue of family violence and has provided training to health care providers, developed its protocol for response, manages the data through its health information system and provides counseling services.

HIV/AIDS is also of major concern but efforts have taken a multi-sectoral approach since it is considered not only a health issue but as a developmental one. The first reported case of HIV/AIDS in Belize was diagnosed in 1986. At the end of 2003, Belize had a total of 2471 HIV infections, 662 AIDS cases and 431 AIDS deaths. Factors contributing to the rise in HIV/AIDS cases are attributed to promiscuous behaviour by both sexes, but particularly by men (the main mode of transmission is heterosexual contact), lack of knowledge in the ways in which HIV is transmitted, failure to take preventative action (even among people who know that they are at risk), initiation of sexual activity at an early age and cultural practices which put women at risk.

To address this epidemic that is affecting our population of reproductive and productive age, a National AIDS Commission has been legally established to coordinate activities. The Ministry of Health continues to provide the services through its voluntary testing and counseling centers, mother to child transmission program, and the provision of antiretroviral. District committees have been established to coordinate activities at the local level. 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 “Powerful Women” group that focuses specifically on HIV/AIDS issues.

However, still a challenge is the issue of poverty and dependency of women on men. This leads to women not being able to negotiate safe sex etc. It is therefore imperative to address the economic empowerment of women alongside HIV/AIDS and violence.

4. **Education:**

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 (WIN). This has resulted in the setting up of a group made up of organizations and concerned individuals who are lobbying and advocating to end this discrimination. A case against the Catholic Management is presently being appealed before the Courts.

In other efforts, a manual on gender and self-esteem has been developed for primary school teachers. This is 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 publication on the definition of gender from a Belizean perspective has also been developed to assist agencies with the integration of gender into their policies and programs. It is anticipated that the training with public officers on gender analysis and planning will also benefit the gender integration efforts.

The provision of training opportunities for women and girls has also been addressed through various forms and by government and non-governmental organizations. A non-traditional training program for women was implemented by the Center for Employment Training. This enabled women to acquire skills in carpentry, auto-mechanics among others and was complemented with personal development sessions that would assist in the process. This was a regional programme in which other Caribbean countries participated. The Youth Enhancement Services and the Young Women’s Christian Association and the Women’s Department also offer skills training to women and girls at risk. This equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to become self-employed or to get a job.

The National Gender Policy approved last year, addresses this area and puts forward commitments in the following areas; literacy, pre-school education, corporal punishment, pregnant teachers (already being addressed), and non-traditional training.

5. **Power and Decision-making:**

It is surely indisputable that men hold key positions of power and decision-making, in government, commerce, trade, economic production – and in domestic settings. Most effort to redress this crucial dimension of inequality has occurred within the public sphere, where men have continued to hold the vast majority of key positions, as women have been more likely to occupy secretarial and clerical positions, and professional occupations of teaching and nursing.

This imbalance is not for women’s want of trying – whether in parliamentary or senior public administration spheres. The National Women’s Commission conducted a study in an effort to identify the reasons for the low participation of women in leadership and political spaces and to put forward recommendations that would encourage, enable and empower more women to participate. The survey results indicate that although women
are interested in political leadership, there are factors that deter their active involvement as per following:

“that women are interested in political leadership but lack access to it because of family obligations, male impediments, lack of skills and lack of training. Women’s intentions for seeking power are more to make improvements in social systems (e.g. schooling, health, sanitation). They are less focused in analyzing systems per se, or in changing them.

Those who have achieved positions of political leadership have been troubled by a tendency not to be heard, or to be heard but not taken seriously.” (Rosberg & Catzim (2001), p10)

Even so, compared to other nations, Belize is performing comparatively well. In 2001, Belize was ranked 35th and 9th respectively, out of 64 nations, in women’s share of parliamentary seats and ‘female legislators, senior officials and managers’. This may have been as a result of the “Women’s Agenda” in which the government made a commitment to appoint 30% of women to leadership positions.

Not only do women continue to be under-represented in positions of power and decision-making, but women continue to be under-represented in their share of public budgetary provisions: which perpetuates the secondary position of women throughout society and reinforces the notion of women as secondary in socio-economic relations.

Such persistent inequalities have prompted various responses, including action by the Women’s Department to achieve:

• Greater recognition of the need to recast policy analysis within a gender framework

• The associated adoption of measures to ‘mainstream’ gender into management positions

• The undertaking of gender-based analysis of national budgets.

At the political level, there has not been uniform consensus about the merit of setting quotas. If a major motivation for women to be more politically involved has been a desire to ‘make a difference,’ or to inject some different perspectives and priorities into policy decision-making, the experience has been rather equivocal. Across the English-speaking Caribbean, the entry of women into political office has often been perceived as leaving the status quo unchanged, likely due to the pervasive nature of party politics. (ibid, p72)

In the 2003 general elections, one woman was elected, and was appointed to a Cabinet position. At the city/town/village councils level, women comprise less than a quarter of elected officials, and this is seen as a potentially valuable point of entry for more women into the political process. Some recommendations put forward by the consultants in the study of women’s participation of women in leadership in an effort to increase and improve the situation included the following:
• Mobilizing women’s candidates through media campaigns
• Training potential female political candidates
• Educating young women about government and its formal and informal operations
• Earmarking more money for women’s campaigns

Finally, cultural factors require different strategies in different parts of Belize, in particular, the nature of family and community structures in the lives of rural women.

“This fact must affect any strategies undertaken to increase the participation of women as political leaders. For example, it would be difficult to work with many rural women around the issue of economic activity if their male partners saw this as a threat to their economic predominance.” (ibid, p 29)

As much as anything, this is a reminder of the central place of gender-aware education in providing the necessary condition for effectively tackling such barriers to women’s equitable access to power and decision-making. But education may need to be complemented by more interventionist measures, as the notion of ‘power-sharing’ may provoke a reaction in some quarters in terms of who may be seen as having something to ‘lose’ in this process.
PART THREE

INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In 1979, in response to the 1st World Conference on Women, the Government of Belize established a unit in the Ministry of Social Services which was responsible for addressing the needs of women. It focused however, on the implementation of training with the aim of promoting income generation. In doing so, the programs promoted women’s traditional role of mothers, wives and caretakers. Focus was placed on facilitating home economic programs and women were taught to sew and cook. In 1986, this unit was upgraded to a Department. Staff increased but these officers were only trained as home economic officers and so the role and functions of the Department remained similar to that of the Unit. During that same year, the National Women’s Commission established. The role of the Commission was primarily to advise government on women’s issues. The Commission is still functioning today but its role has been expanded to include monitoring and reporting on the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In the early 90’s the Department was restructured and new staff was hired. It began focusing on projects that addressed women’s strategic and practical needs to some extent and emphasized personal development sessions, began working on issues of violence, promoted income generating activities but also began to facilitate business training and credit opportunities. During this time, work on policy development or legislative changes was limited. The preparations for the Beijing Conference gave a much-needed push to bring the issues of equality to the forefront. Much awareness was created and it enabled the identification of priority areas as well as strengthened or began networking with other Ministries, mainly Education, Health, Home Affairs, Family Court and non-governmental organizations such as the Women’s Issues Network of which the Department is a member.

Since 1999 the Department has continued to provide services delivery but now also addresses policy development and legislation. The service delivery focuses on the development, implementation and evaluation of women specific projects while the policy development section assists with the gender -mainstreaming component. This new initiative increased staff by one since we now have two coordinators, one dealing services and the other with policy. The Department is headed by a Director, and this position has the status of a head of department. The budget of the Department has increased in particular for programs. The Department now falls under the Ministry of Human Development and although it has changed Ministers and the Ministry has changed its name over the years, the Department has remained in this Ministry since its inception.

Below is the organogram of the Department.
Efforts have been made to establish focal points in each Ministry but the challenge has been the lack of human and financial resources at the Women’s Department to follow up and provide training. Presently a manual on gender analysis and planning has been completed and it is anticipated that this year training will be conducted. The National Gender Policy however, speaks to the issue of coordination and implementation and puts forward the gender management system which includes the focal points as a mechanism for the promotion of women’s empowerment and gender equality.
PART FOUR

MAIN CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THEM

As may be noted all five critical areas require future action. The National Gender Policy is an excellent document that will provide the avenue for further developments. However, the development of a plan of action to give effect to the policy commitments requires immediate attention. The National Women’s Commission and the Women’s Department will require strengthening in order to undertake the development of the plan as well as to be able to monitor its implementation. 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.

Ongoing training for development workers from a gender perspective and equipped to address the inequalities as a result of gender relations is crucial to the work to be carried out. Being able to lobby and advocate to maintain the political will as well as the resources from international agencies requires well-prepared staff. A major challenge continues to be the decrease in non-governmental agencies that focus particularly on gender and women’s issues. Due to a shift in priorities by funding agencies as well as the lack of mechanisms to ensure sustainability, many agencies have ceased to exist. This places a particular challenge with regards to lobbying and advocacy efforts which prove to be more effective when pursued by these agencies.

Limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms also pose a challenge and the availability of data disaggregated by sex and the analysis of such, are integral to this process. The establishment of the Social Indicators Committee can facilitate this component in the very near future.

Traditional stereotypes, attitudes, expectations of society are perhaps the greatest challenges to overcome. Until we are able to change the way we raise our boys and girls, we will continue to experience gender inequalities.

The Government of Belize is committed to the advancement of women and the pursuit of gender equality. Despite the challenges, through the Women’s Department it will continue to move toward the attainment of a just and equitable society.