



Women's Issues Network of Belize

Belize's Oral Statement presented to CEDAW

In relation to the 3rd and 4th Period State Party Report
of Government of Belize
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Madam Chair,

My colleague Karen Cain and I Carolyn Reynolds, are representing the Women's Issues Network of Belize and its member agencies. The WIN-Belize Secretariat consulted with the majority of its 15 member agencies, other women's groups and individual activists to get feedback for the writing of this report. We will be presenting some critical issues identified in our Shadow Report. I will be presenting on Inadequate Political Will to Implement Policies for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and Women's Economic Empowerment, while Mrs. Cain will be presenting on Rural Women and the Lack of Information Sharing, Inadequate Information and Decision Support Systems.

Issue 1: Inadequate Political Will

The Government of Belize has enacted Acts and policies to address the rights of women at all levels. However, there is a need for more political will for although policies and Acts have been developed, the sustainable implementation of their contents has not been successful. Despite the National Gender Policy developed in 2002 and ratified by Cabinet in 2003, various Ministries have yet to formulate their macro-planning, public policies and budgetary management. The political will has to be transcended into the prioritization of critical issues affecting Belizean women.

Programs to combat violence against women and to alleviate poverty among women continue to dominate the agenda of the women organizations in Belize. Much of the work to be done is stifled by a lack of political will and limited financial resources. For example, Belize has only one Shelter for battered women, which serves women from the six districts and two major island communities. The shelter is poorly subsidized by

Government which reveals that there is no regard and respect for and protection of women's human rights.

In an effort to mainstream gender into the country's national budget, the Women's Department, in partnership with UNIFEM Caribbean office, engaged in a gender responsive budget initiative aimed at the national budget of Belize. This initiative began in 2003 and was an attempt to further explore the gendered impacts of budgetary allocations and revenues. It was a step toward demonstrating political will to reduce gender discrimination at the policy level. However, this initiative was put on hold since the Women's Department was going through a transition stage and lacked the human resources to carry on the work. Additionally, other key departments displayed low interest in participating in the initiative.

The resulting Institutional Framework Analysis found that there are a number of significant barriers to carrying out a gender budget process at that time. The researchers found that the budget management process is not well defined; there is a serious lack of transparency and accountability; existing legal requirements are not met; and civil society does not effectively participate in the budget process. Although some changes have occurred since the report was completed, these issues continue to pose problems for a gender budget process.

WIN-Belize and its member agencies continued this initiative and in doing its research, the team concluded that the Ministry of Human Development received less than 1.5% of the total recurrent and capital expenditure during the years 1998 to 2004. This meager amount of funds limits the execution of duties and productivity of personnel, which are primarily women. It also shows a growing disconnect between program planning and financial management processes.

We ask you now to urge our government to demonstrate greater political will to increase the financial and human resources for the Ministry of Human Development and to ensure that future budget processes are done from a gender perspective.

Issue 2: Women's Economic Empowerment

In its 1st and 2nd periodic report, the Government of Belize stated its commitment to establishing a single minimum wage. To date, there are still different rates for different categories of workers. With much pressure from WIN-Belize, the minimum wage for domestic workers and shop assistants was increased from \$1.75 per hour to \$2.25. This issue was on the front burner for WIN-Belize again in 2006 before the Government (Minimum Wages Council) also took on the challenge of reviewing the minimum wage.

The Wages Council was comprised of:

- a. Independent members (appointed directly by the Minister responsible for Labor)*
- b. Workers' Representatives (appointed by the Minister upon the recommendation of the Labor Unions)*
- c. Employers' Representatives (appointed by the Minister upon the recommendation of the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) and of the Belize Business Bureau (BBB))*

Domestic workers and shop assistants were not represented on the Wages Council.

In January 2007, cabinet approved a gradual increase in hourly minimum wage to \$3.00, eventually having a single minimum wage by 2010. The new rate is applicable to the aforementioned group and agricultural workers. ***Despite this increase, it is still insufficient.*** There is little public awareness by the Labour Department informing the public of their rights, partially due to insufficient financial resources to employ much needed staff. Although there is some progress in the affirmation of women's economic

rights in Belize, there remain gaps which are as a result of limited human and financial resources for the mechanisms responsible for monitoring gender equity.

Therefore, we recommend that Government revisit the real cost of living from the perspective of workers in relation to income and determine a more appropriate minimum wage.

While in 1998 the female labour force participation rate was one half that of men, today the female unemployment rate is roughly twice that of men even though more females are gaining access to education.

Access to credit is still very difficult for women in Belize although they have their own legal persona. They experience difficulty due to lack of confidence or in providing collateral. Government has recently embarked on a lending scheme through the Ministry of National Development. However, our focus group sessions revealed that women as individuals cannot access these funds due to specific criteria requirements.

We ask you to insist that more low-interest lending institutions be established to facilitate women with the acquisition of funds and the transferable of rudimentary business practices that would enhance the possibility of success.

Karen will now present.

Article 14 – Rural Women (Presented by Karen Cain - Belize)

Issue 3: Rural Women

In Belize rural women total sixty-eight thousand four hundred (68,400) and account for forty-eight point nine percent (48.9%) of the total female population. Undeniably rural women are still at an alarmingly high disadvantage compared to their counterparts living in the urban areas of Belize City and Belmopan City. These disadvantages include: high

rates of poverty, unfavorable living conditions, non-potable water, lack of access to education, poor access to adequate health care, and few opportunities to access employment and credit to properly provide for themselves and their families.

Rural women live in extreme **poverty** and there is a dire need to raise their standard of living. *Many of these women have not applied for loans due to the fear of not meeting the criteria. For example, they may not have collateral such as land or a guarantor to access credit to start a small business.*

Access to **education** up to primary school is mandatory for all Belizeans. However, the drop out rate and the cost of secondary and tertiary education is very high for grassroots families and women in particular. It is recommended that the scholarship portion of the Ministry of Education budget be revisited, particularly to increase scholarships provided to young women of the Southern region of Belize. It would also be advisable to put in place a mechanism to identify and train village women to disseminate various types of updated educational information and training to communities.

Adequate **health** care is not reaching rural women, because rural health care is not favourable to women. Mobile health clinics that visit the villages on a monthly basis deliver pediatric vaccinations, but are not equipped to handle medical conditions that affect women. Additionally, rural women do not understand much about the various infections they can contract and prefer to suffer silently and hope the situation would resolve itself. Some women were unaware of the use and benefits of contraceptives or

condoms. In the Southern region of Belize, community health workers, or, nurse assistants, in villages that provide such services, are primarily male. This made women too embarrassed or fearful of seeking medical assistance. In the Northern part of Belize, women were generally more educated about women's health concerns, but were not comfortable seeking advice or assistance because they lacked confidence or trust in the medical services available at the public clinics or hospital in their area.

Mayan women are still not allowed or included in major decisions concerning their finances, community, sexuality, or education. However, some women from this area are becoming a bit more liberal and are making decisions to seek further education and make better choices for their children, particularly in regards to early marriage. There are still some cultural influences/pressures on young women (15 years old) to leave school and marry or to begin a family of their own.

Rural women's involvement in community development is still very minimal due to cultural pressures. As part of the focus group a number of women shared similar experiences of receiving invitations to attend their village meetings, but the men, their partners, did not feel that they belonged so they did not attend the meetings. Similarly, persons going into the villages to conduct women's sessions indicated that men served as translators, thus making the gathering uncomfortable for the presenters and the women participants.

Issue 4: Inadequate Information and Decision Support System

Generally, there is a fairly large amount of information circulating in the urban centres of Belize. However, it appears that this information is not being trickle down to rural women and communities. This causes women in these areas to be ignorant about serious issues such as HIV/AIDS, condoms and contraceptive usage, gender equality and other policies and laws designed to protect them. *Moreover, the majority of the support systems, such as counseling centres, micro-credit offices, the Belize Family Court, and health centres are all located primarily in urban areas; leaving no, or, very little, support to rural women.* The government of Belize certainly needs to invest much more finance in its human resources and place people particularly women, children, and other vulnerable groups as a genuine priority on their agenda.

At present there is a serious lack of proper documentation for analysis and forecasting in order to assess the problems and needs of people living in certain areas and conditions.

It is extremely difficult to obtain timely data and accurate statistics. Data collected by various government and non-government agencies is widely varied in the way it is collected, stored, and disseminated. Data collection is concentrated primarily in the Belize District, hence there is a need for a National Data Based where information can be compiled for comprehensive decision making at the appropriate government level.

We urge the committee to recommend that the Government of Belize Implement a National Data Base System, and provide more access to education, employment, health care, credit and better living conditions for Rural women.

Thank You!