

BELIZE: COUNTRY REPORT ON
PROGRESS SINCE MEXICO CONSENSUS 2004
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BELIZE

COUNTRY REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

In Belize there have been several motivating factors that have allowed for the implementation of many initiatives especially in regards to policy development and legislative changes. *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, the Outcomes Document, the Commonwealth Plan of Action, the CARICOM Regional Plan of Action, the Millennium Development Goals and the Mexico Consensus* have all guided the work of our Government.

The primary goals of the Women's Department continue to be the need to facilitate opportunities through gender sensitive education and training programs; to minimize the incidence of gender-based violence; to advocate for gender sensitive policies, plans, programs and projects; and to increase/strengthen human and financial resources. These goals have been integrated into the four major areas of work in the Department: economic empowerment and personal development; advocacy and public awareness; policy development; and resource development.

The Women's Department works in partnership with the National Women's Commission which was established in 1982 as a semi-autonomous national advisory and advocacy body appointed by the Government. This sixteen-member Commission focuses primarily on collaborating with all relevant partners in facilitating programs and policy development that will enable people to be self-sufficient, autonomous, responsible and productive citizens.

Our Government remains committed to the advancement of women, the pursuit of gender equality and women's access to justice. As the National Machinery, our Department 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.

LEGISLATION

Thirteen years after the *Domestic Violence Act* was passed the Women's Department spearheaded a six-month review of the Act from February to June 2005. The final report identifies the strengths and weaknesses, and the supportive framework surrounding the Act. It offers recommendations for amendments and additions to the Act and advocates for the expansion of protected persons and persons able to apply for orders; amendments to the powers of the courts and the police and changes to the methods of support services; the creation of a standardised counselling programme for victims, abusers and other members of the household; and increase in the courts powers in relation to occupation orders, namely the addition of tenancy orders. It calls for an integrated response which addresses law enforcement, health, judicial, housing and community advocacy. Suggested amendments to the Domestic Violence Act were submitted to the Attorney General's office and in March 2007, at the 2nd Annual Women's Summit, the Attorney General introduced the Domestic Violence Bill 2007 which seeks to repeal the current Domestic Violence Act of 1992, and introduce a new Act which increases the power and jurisdiction of the Family Court and provides more severe criminal penalties in respect to domestic violence offences. The new Domestic Violence Act is expected to be enacted by the end of 2007.

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 nine (9) to twelve (12) and to raise the age of marriage (with the consent of the parents) from fourteen (14) to sixteen (16) years.

Belize has passed a *Trafficking in Persons Act* to address growing concerns regarding the coerced labour 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 corresponding protocol for suppressing trafficking in persons focuses explicitly on protecting the rights of women and children. The passing of the 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.

Other legal 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 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 the law on Trafficking in Persons.

In 2001 Legislation was passed to criminalize the wilful transmission of HIV, although currently this law is being reviewed in the context of a National HIV/AIDS Policy and Legislation Project.

In the amendment to the criminal code, recognizing rape by the male partner, the woman or girl who is a victim is no longer accused of delinquency when she is exploited by men.

A law on sexual and reproductive health was adopted by the government in 2002. It provides increased protection for women and children, young women and the elderly against all forms of violence and abuse.

From February to June 2005, there were debates, conferences and discussions among various agencies active in society with an interest in the issue of violence against women, for the purpose of discussing promotion of the Belem do Para Convention.

Under the *Families and Children Act Revised 2000*, children born to unmarried women are under the legal custody of the mother unless the mother is proven to be unfit.

The Women's Department is presently preparing for the review of The *Protection Against Sexual Harassment Act*. The revision of this Act will be done through a consultative process with key partner agencies and the general public.

POLICIES, ACTION PLANS AND OTHER INITIATIVES

The production of the *National Gender Policy* represents the culmination not only of a progressive body of work in Belize over the past decade and more, but also of a global evolution in the conceptualization of gender relations and its central place in the pursuit of human rights and human development. It refers to developments in Belize, alongside the transition in global understanding which has led to current initiatives in gender mainstreaming in the following priority areas: Health, Violence-Producing Conditions, Sexual abuse provisions, Access to justice, Domestic violence and child abuse registration system, Domestic violence framework, Victims and survivors of abuse, Perpetrators of abuse, Sexual harassment, Child abandonment and neglect and Commercial sex work.

National Gender-Based Violence Plan 2007-2009 is a contribution to the realization of the mission and goals of the Gender-Based Violence Committee which was revitalized in 2005. It makes reference to international commitments made by the government combined with other regional and international instruments, which are being used to mount a national vigorous effort to halt gender-based violence in all its forms in Belize. It is designed to also serve as a basis for advocacy work, and as a tool to assist policy and decision makers to contribute to the achievement of the national and international goals. Belize is signatory to a number of international commitments in regards to the elimination of gender-based violence. This plan has been developed with these commitments in mind. The aim is to ensure that

over the next five years Belize moves towards the goals and objectives of the leading documents in these areas, namely the *Millennium Development Goals*, *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*. It is a tool whose aim is to outline the problem of gender-based violence, elaborate its linkages to poverty, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and discuss its impact on the nation's development by complementing the policies addressed in key National documents such as: *The National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents in Belize 2004-2015*, *Belize's National Gender Policy 2002*, *the Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy* and *the National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan and Policy*. It is widely acknowledged that in order to effectively tackle gender-based violence in Belize a coordinated and cross-sectional integrated approach is required to address the cultural, social and economic obstacles to achieving lives free from violence. This National Plan for 2007-2009 looks to create a fully comprehensive strategy, encompassing law enforcement, health, justice administration, housing, community advocacy and education. The discussion on the issue of gender-based violence is one of development priority.

In 2005 the *Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy* was launched which 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. The *Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy* recognizes the need for special attention to issues of adolescent health. The Policy includes eleven commitments aimed at: protecting the rights of adolescents regarding sexual and reproductive health information and services, eliminating discrimination against young pregnant women, ensuring pregnant women's right to return to school, providing counselling and mental health services to adolescents and building the capacity of those who provide them with these services.

A *Maternal and Perinatal Mortality Reduction Plan* was developed in 2005 through the efforts of the *National Mortality Committee* to develop a mechanism which will help to increase pregnancy spacing and reduce the number of children per women; to

increase the access to information on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights and Safe Motherhood to people particularly those in the rural area.; and to put in place programs for the empowerment of women in Sexual and Reproductive Health issues.

Through the Ministry of Health, the Government initiated the *Safe Motherhood Initiative* to improve maternal and child health in the country. Since 2005 efforts have focused on strengthening the Safe Motherhood planning and programming in Belize, by improving the collection of data and the analysis of information that will guide improvement of maternal care and safe motherhood. Safe Motherhood Committees have been established at the regional and national level and surveillance of maternal mortality has improved significantly. Training has also taken place for thirty (30) medical doctors and nurses from Regional Hospitals to ensure mandatory reporting of maternal death. Members of the Safe Motherhood Committee have also received training and have been sensitized as to their roles and responsibilities. Statistics for 2004 indicate 97% skilled birth attendants and 3% untrained personnel.

The *National Policy on Health and Family Life Education* (HFLE) was introduced in 2004 by the Ministry of Health and Education. The HFLE Program is a comprehensive life-skills based program that educates children, youth, and adults through guided experiences to become contributing and productive citizens. This program also establishes life-skills that emphasize effective interpersonal and informed sexual and reproductive choices as well as fosters the development of skills, attitudes and knowledge that result in health social and family values and lifestyles. The HFLE Curriculum is incorporated into schools countrywide, giving youths an opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and values that will enable them to make healthy lifestyle choices. The success of the HFLE Program has been determined by the vibrant and sustainable active collaboration between the Ministries of Education, Health and Human Development. This multi-faceted approach has resulted in maximizing of limited resources, human, technical and financial. It has also led to the execution of more effective programmes for young persons, including at risk girls. The implementation of the HFLE

Policy has sought to provide an appropriate avenue to address the health and social ills affecting young people – one of those being teenage pregnancy.

The *Gender Integration Program Action Plan 2007-2009* is a two-year action plan that focus on increasing the support and participation of decision-makers in the Gender Integration Program, increasing the general population's awareness of and support for the Gender Integration Program and increase awareness and advocate for the enactment of the National Gender Policy so as to facilitate the implementation of the program

This *National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents (2004-2015)* is a comprehensive plan which prioritizes actions on behalf of children, in the areas of education, health, child protection, HIV/AIDS, family and culture, over an eleven year period.

The *National Policy on HIV/AIDS 2005* provides a framework, based on human rights for the prevention of HIV and the reduction of its impacts at all levels of society.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING INITIATIVES

Gender developments in Belize have so far focused on women for historical reasons and because of the need to address priority areas of concern. The *National Gender Policy* sets out to identify the inequalities experienced by both men and women and suggests action for the correction of gender disparities as well as giving direction for the coordination and implementation of the policy. The Policy recognizes that the situation of women cannot be the sole focus as women do not live and function in isolation. 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 in an effort to address the challenges faced by women in the areas of education, health, violence, decision making and wealth and employment generation.

The “*Women’s Agenda*” 2003-2008 commits the Government of Belize to implement the recommendations of the National Gender Policy; provide for gender sensitivity in development planning; raise gender awareness through education on the need for equity and respect among men and women in every facet of their life and ensure budgetary allocations for programs geared to end gender-based violence. It also makes specific commitments in the areas of Health and Social Services, Economic Development, Legal Protection, Education, Housing, and Political Participation of Women.

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.

In the area of service delivery the Women’s Department as well as the National Women’s Commission have lobbied and advocated for the implementation of programs which promote women’s empowerment. For example the National Women’s Commission 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. Skills training and entrepreneurship development programs have been delivered to women countrywide.

An Institutional Strengthening Project funded in April of 2005 by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has sought to enhance the capabilities of the members of the National Women’ Commission so that they can lobby, advocate, create awareness and ensure that the Gender Policy is taken into account in the development of national plans and programs. This project has also contributed to strengthening the capacity of the Commission to be a more effective agency for the realization of gender equality and equity in Belize. Through the Canada/Caribbean Gender Equality Programme (CCGEP) seventeen (17) projects were implemented between the years of 1996 and 2006 with the primary beneficiaries being women, men, youth and implementing agencies. In Belize the programme focused on the following priority areas: economic empowerment of young women for social change, poverty reduction and employment; gender mainstreaming and

institutional capacity-building.

As part of its effort to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, the Women's Department has, as one of its major objectives, the mainstreaming of gender into all government policies and programs. To facilitate this process, the Department established a *Gender Integration Committee (GIC)* which has representation from the government and non-government sector. Each Ministry was invited to identify a Gender Focal to participate in the mainstreaming process. Through the GIC, a major communication strategy was developed and implemented to stimulate public awareness on gender mainstreaming. In addition to this communications strategy, the GIC developed a *Gender Training Manual* to be used to build public officers' capacity for integrating a gender perspective into their work, regardless of their sector of employment. In August 2005 a Gender Integration Training for Public Officers was held to sensitize officers from each government ministry in gender analysis. All officers received certificates from the Women's Department for attending the training. 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 2007, a *Gender Focal Points Handbook* was developed to guide Gender Focal Points working in partnership with the Women's Department of Belize, Gender Integration Program. The Handbook is intended to provide advice, inspiration and guidance as well as provide ideas and suggestions that can help enhance the impact of Gender Focal Points work within their different ministries, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, schools and businesses.

In January 2005 the Department introduced a *Gender Awareness Safe School Programme* geared at providing the foundation for more equitable relations between girls and boys in our society. The target groups are students in Standard Five and Second Form. The sessions are facilitated by Women Development Officers and officers from partner agencies. Topics covered are Gender Sensitization, Domestic Violence, Sexual Harassment, Self-Esteem and HIV/AIDS. Sessions are held once a week per school. A total of 2789 students have

benefited from this program since its inception in 2005. In 2007, a Gender Awareness Safe School Manual was developed to provide a foundation for more equitable relations between girls and boys inside and outside of the school setting. The guide which is intended for the use of Women Development Officer, teachers and facilitators of the Gender Awareness Safe School Program, provides an overview of the program and outlines sessions that focus on gender awareness, domestic violence, sexual abuse, self esteem and HIV/AIDS. Important facts and information are incorporated using a youth-friendly and skills-building approach

A Guidebook for Primary School Teachers was developed on how to address the concept of gender in their everyday work and how to build children's self-esteem was published. Cabinet members and senior policy makers have also participated in gender awareness sessions. Furthermore, the Department spearheaded a study to look at the issue of the termination of unwed pregnant teachers and the findings were launched in collaboration with the Women's Issues Network of Belize. This issue has now been addressed.

INITIATIVES FOCUSING ON MEN

Through initiatives of the Women's Department a Men's Forum was held on November 29th, 2005 to sensitize men on issues relating to sexual and reproductive health so that men can better understand their role as it pertains to their partners and their families. The forum was intended to provide men with an opportunity to dialogue among themselves as well as with key stakeholders as to the active role they must play in helping to eliminate such problems as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse, rape and sexual harassment. The forum focused on formalizing the Men Against Domestic Violence Committee, which should play an active role in advocating and lobbying for men to become more involved with key organizations that are focusing on the issues of domestic violence. As a result of this forum, a *Men Against Domestic Violence Committee* was formed.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE INITIATIVES

In 1999 the National Machinery, the Women's Department, spearheaded The *National Plan to Address Family Violence*. Through efforts of the Women's Department and National Women's Commission a multi-sectoral committee was established on September 7th, 2005 to develop a renewed *National Plan of Action (2006-2009)* to address gender-based violence.

Through funding from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) the Women's Department embarked on a Violence Against Women Awareness and Advocacy Campaign from November 25th, 2005 to June 2006. The documentary entitled "*Domestic Violence: The Belizean Reality*" featured testimonials from domestic violence survivors, perpetrators, legal prosecutors and social workers. To further draw public awareness to the issue of domestic violence the Department along with The National Women's Commission teamed up with The National Institute of Culture and History to present on June 2 and 3, 2006 the one-woman stage play "*Who Will Sing for Lena*" written by Janice Liddell and directed by Jamaican actress and TV personality, Fae Ellington. The play based on the life of Lena Baker, the first and only woman ever put to death in Georgia's electric chair, was performed by Makeda Solomon, Jamaica's 2006 Best Actress Awardee.

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

On August 9th, 2005 the first *Support Group for Survivors of Domestic Violence* was formed. Since then five other groups have been formed through the Department. The groups focus on issues such as: Dynamics of domestic violence (Power and Control Wheel); Healthy Relationships (Equality Wheel); Stockholm Syndrome; Female Sexual Reproductive Health Issues. Through funding from Global Fund, the facilitators of the Women's Support Group were provided with training on incorporating the issue of HIV/AIDS and Persons Living with HIV/AIDS into the support group structure.

The Family Court of Belize has conducted many training sessions for judges, court staff and all other court professionals on the issue of gender.

Battered Women's Shelter and Transitional Houses: The country has only one institution for battered women and their children. The shelter can accommodate fifteen (15) persons at any given time. It provides food, shelter, counselling, court advocacy and assistance in job-identification. In an effort to provide women leaving the security of the battered women's shelter with a place for them and their children to live temporarily while being re-integrated into the society and the workplace, the Women's Department and Haven House have embarked on the construction of Transitional Houses. To date, one house has been completed and is presently being furnished.

Gender-based Violence Surveillance: The Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health using a surveillance system generates statistics on a quarterly basis on reported cases of gender-based violence. These statistics are distributed to stakeholders on a quarterly basis. The area of gender-based statistical analysis requires primary quantitative and qualitative research to be conducted to ensure sound gender awareness and sensitivity. The unavailability of data disaggregated by sex and the analysis of such are areas of concern. There is certainly a need for an improvement in sex-disaggregated data collection.

Trafficking of Persons: The *Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act No. 18 of 2003* provides the template for combating human trafficking. Several crucial changes have occurred since the enforcement of the Anti-TIPS Act. As a result, the Government has strengthened the Ant-trafficking in Persons Committee by including civil society and has developed a three year strategic plan 2007-2010 that focuses on prevention, prosecution and protection. It has also allocated resources for the operation of the committee and several project proposals have now received funding that will assist with public awareness, capacity building and victim protection. A preliminary descriptive qualitative research project, commissioned by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2004, indicated that there are distinct points of vulnerabilities in Belize with respect to human trafficking. These points of

vulnerabilities include porous borders; need for strengthened public institutions to address all aspects of anti-TIPS; and need for greater allocation of resources. On June 5, 2006 Belize was informed of its “Tier 3” ranking and received a 60 day Mini-Plan proposed by the United States of America for implementation to demonstrate that significant efforts were being taken against trafficking in persons. In July of 2006, Belize welcomed officials from the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. The U.S. officials met with a cross-section of Belizean society including government officials at the forefront of the campaign against trafficking, non-governmental organizations and academia. In August 2006, Belize’s status was upgraded from *Tier 3 to the Tier 2 Watch list* based on improvement during the 2006 six-month period in 2006. In the U.S. State Department’s June 2007 report, Belize was placed on Tier 2. Presently, there is an IDB Communication Strategy Project being undertaken. The second part of this project will focus on strengthening the country’s national referral mechanism. This will involve an assessment of the country’s response and recommendations for improving the response. The consultancy should be completed by the end of 2007.

The National Assembly approved a key amendment to the *Intoxicating Liquor Licenses Act* which came into force on 15 July 2006. It bans persons convicted of trafficking in persons from holding a liquor license and from owning shares in a company or business which holds a liquor license.

In April of 2006, Belize signed on to participate in the *Latin American Network for Missing Persons (Red Latinoamericanos Desaparecidos)* the purpose of which is to identify and reunite thousands of Latin Americans or migrants, especially those who might be in high risk of being trafficked, particularly minors. Training of police officers and social workers in the management of the network was conducted through National Organization for the Protection of Child Abuse and Neglect with technical assistance from the National Committee For Families and Children and funding from OAS. In June of 2006, members of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Committee participated in the IOM’s Caribbean Counter-Trafficking Initiative meeting to discuss counter-trafficking strategies. The purpose of the meeting was to

discuss mechanisms for regional cooperation. As a direct result of the meeting Belize was able to access public education materials and training.

The IOM sponsored training on “*Psychological Intervention for Victims of Trafficking*” at the request of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Committee in August 2006 which targeted social workers and police.

The Belize Tourism Industry Association in conjunction with *End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes*, an international organization, launched the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in the Travel and Tourism Industry. At the launch twenty-five (25) businesses in the tourism industry signed on to the Code of Conduct. At the Organization of American States’ General Assembly held in June of 2006, Belize promoted a resolution, which was co-sponsored twenty-six (26) member states and adopted by consensus, on “*Migrant Populations and Migration Flows in the Americas.*”

The Government through the Anti-trafficking Committee has acquired two shelters for use by alleged victims of trafficking but due to the small numbers of victims, it is also available for use by gender-based violence victims.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GENDER PARITY

The Government of Belize has amended the Constitution to include the statement “*to ensure gender equality*”. The National Gender Policy of Belize (2002) addresses political participation and gender parity.

In the area of leadership and decision making Belize continues to advocate for equal participation of representation and participation of women in national and local government. The Government made a commitment to appoint women to at least 30% of leadership positions in the public service and other statutory bodies. This policy has

resulted in women now holding a majority of decision-making positions in statutory bodies and 30% of positions as Heads of Departments. It has also led to more women being appointed as Chief Executive Officers in the Public Service, although overall, only five (5) of fifteen (15) such positions are currently held by women. The last two Speakers of the House of Representative were women.

In 2001, the National Women's Commission undertook to investigate some of the obstacles preventing women from participating in political leadership and offering themselves as candidates. The findings of the report were published by the Commission in a book entitled, "*Women in Politics: Seeking Opportunities for Leadership in Belize.*" The report suggests that women are interested in political leadership but lack access to it because of family obligations, male impediments, lack of skills and lack of financing. Women's intentions for seeking power are to make improvements in social systems. Recommendations that came out of that report have led to the inclusion of men on the National Women's Commission and representatives from the rural areas as well as the church. It has also led to the women's political arm of the present government, the United Women's Group, actively organizing women to participate in political campaigns and as politicians.

Municipal elections held in March 2006 indicate an overwhelming increase in female candidates resulting in the election of the first female Mayor in Belize City. Out of nine (9) municipalities there are two (2) female mayors.

In June 2007, the National Women's Commission in partnership with the Women's Department organized a Women's Political Forum. This Forum was facilitated by Professor Eudine Barriteau, Professor of Gender and Public Policy Head, Centre for Gender and Development Studies Campus Coordinator, School for Graduate Studies and Research University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus- Barbados. Professor Barriteau delivered the keynote presentation entitled, "*Caribbean Women and Political Participation in the 21st Century: Reversing Historic Discriminations.*" The primary objectives of the forum was to discuss three topics: Caribbean Women and Gender Relations, Women and

Political Participation, and Preparing Women for Leadership; as well as: to promote greater involvement by women in city/town/village council elections, especially as potential candidates; to develop political skills and knowledge of women interested in being involved in the political process; to provide a forum for women to address the obstacles and challenges that often prevent them from participating in political leadership; and to develop specific recommendations that will result in increased numbers of female aspirants for political office. Over one hundred (100) female political aspirants, campaigners and women with an interest in politics attended the forum.

HIV/AIDS INITIATIVES

In early 2004, the National AIDS Commission became a statutory body making legal its mandate for coordination, monitoring, advocacy action and policy development in relation to HIV/AIDS in Belize. The National AIDS Commission immediately initiated Phase II of its Policy and Legislation Project. Phase II of this Project included countrywide consultations to get input into a National HIV/AIDS Policy which reflects the views, concerns and interests of the multi-stakeholders involved in the National HIV/AIDS response.

This National HIV/AIDS Policy is a synthesis of these invaluable local contributions with the principles and commitments outlined in the Constitution of Belize, the Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy, the Gender Policy and the Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, and the Proposed HIV/AIDS Policy and the World of Work, as well as the International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, the outcome document of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work.

The project Capacity Building for Mainstreaming Gender Analysis in HIV/AIDS Programming in the Caribbean initiated by UNIFEM impacted Belize through workshops that were held in March of 2007. The primary objective of these workshops was to build organization's capacity to formulate policies and implement programs that are gender sensitive by helping participants to develop basic skills of gender analysis and knowledge of the linkages to HIV/AIDS. The National AIDS Commission spearheaded this initiative along with UNIFEM and collaborated as well with the Women's Department and Women's Issues Network. Representatives from government, non-government organizations, churches, community based organizations and women's organizations participated in the three day workshop.

Mutli-sectoral Response: The Global Fund Project, *Belize's Multi-sectoral Response to HIV/AIDS*, looks at Belize's response to HIV/AIDS in an effort to curtail the epidemic of AIDS. The project recognizes that no one sector can solely address the issue of HIV/AIDS; therefore, it is imperative that the efforts of various sectors be coordinated to effectively curtail the epidemic. The Women's Department is one of the seven sub-recipients of this project with the objective of reducing the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS. Activities under the Women's Department component includes: Negotiation and Decision-Making Training, Peer Counselling Training, Use of Male and Female Condoms; Sexual and Reproductive Health; Social and Health Practitioners: Interacting with Persons Living with HIV/AIDS; HIV/AIDS Capacity Building in Workshop Facilitation and Public Awareness on the link between HIV/AIDS and Domestic Violence. In each workshop session, the subject of gender was integrated to advance gender mainstreaming of HIV/AIDS programmes and to strengthen an understanding of gender differentials in the formulation and implementation of HIV/AIDS programming.

AIDS Policy/ Communication Strategy: In 2005, the National Policy on HIV/AIDS was developed and provides a framework, based on human rights, for the prevention of HIV and the reduction of its impacts at all levels of society. In 2006, the National

Communication Strategy for HIV/AIDS in Belize was developed to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS infection and stigma and discrimination by influencing knowledge, attitudes, practices and behaviour.

WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

In January of 2006 at the opening session of the Supreme Court, Michelle Arana, attorney at-law and notary public was officially sworn in as Belize's first female Justice of the Supreme Court. In January of 2007, Margaret Gabb-McKenzie was appointed as the first female Chief Magistrate. These achievements speak to the reality of a Belizean society that has acknowledged the crucial role women have played and continue to play in the judicial, social, cultural, political and economic arenas within our nation.

As apart of the observance for Women's Week 2006, the Women's Department organised the first Women's Summit under the theme: "*Women: Embracing Leadership with Vision.*" The Week's observance focused on paying tribute to women and their economic, social, cultural and political contributions to Belize's development; while at the same time emphasizing the urgent need for us to create more opportunities for women throughout our country which will allow them to be equal partners in the decision making process. The first Women's Summit provided an important forum for women at a national and international level to give voice to key issues as it pertains to such priority areas as education, leadership and decision and health. As part of Women's Week the National Women's Commission hosted a dinner reception and Outstanding Awards Ceremony. Presentations were made by agencies to honour seventeen (17) women from throughout the country for their outstanding commitment to improving the lives of members of their community. In 2007, the second Women's Summit was held under the theme "*Women and Men United to End Violence Against Women.*" The Women's Week observance focused on acknowledging the contribution of women to the strengthening of equality and development and emphasizing the need for us to unite as women and men to bring about meaningful change. The significance of Women's Week lies in the opportunity it provided us as a nation to reflect on those challenges that face women throughout our country and to renew our commitment and determination to confront

them. The second Women's Summit spoke directly to the Belizean Reality of domestic violence. Representatives from the judiciary, police, ombudsman office, church, media, men's groups, community-based organizations, government and non-government organizations were invited to speak about their role in assisting to end violence against women.

NATIONAL BUDGET AND TRADE UNION/NGO ACTIONS

In 2005, trade unions and private sector organizations protested key budget proposals, and public demonstrations showed that people had a vested interest in the national budget. In early 2005, Women's Issues Network of Belize conducted a focus group to look at how budget decisions affect women and assess general problems with how budgets are developed and implemented. A training programme: *Understanding the Budget* was developed to build understanding of the issue. This training process looked at the issue of gender budget process which recognizes that budget decisions often affect women and men differently.

In May 2006, the Government of Belize appointed a Minimum Wage Council to examine paid domestic work as well other wages. Women Issues Network- Belize, a non-governmental organization, conducted a study in 2006 on paid domestic wage. This study was submitted to the Minimum Wages Council. In January 2007 Cabinet received the recommendations of the Council and approved that wages for domestics would be increased from \$2.25 to \$3.00 per hour.

National Funding of Women's Agencies: The Women's Department is a government department and receives an annual budget as a part of the national budget. The National Women's Commission is semi-autonomous national advisory and advocacy body appointed by the Government and receives an annual government subvention as does the Young Women's Christian Association, the Youth Enhancement Services (*which works with teenaged mothers*), Haven House Shelter for Battered Women and Women's Issues Network-Belize.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Access to justice is a constant concern of the authorities and there are three primary institutions responsible in this area:

- Family Violence Unit- Police Department;
- The Family Court; and
- The Women's Department in the Ministry of Human Development.

The Women's Department continues to be one of the leading organizations in Belize dedicated to improving the lives of women. The Women's Department has worked to empower women through a wide range of progressive initiatives including training classes for women, the promotion of public education in the schools, facilitating support groups and organizing community events to raise awareness about Domestic Violence and women's issues.

The Belize Family Court keep paces with the ever growing social and legal needs of the family. It plays a vital role in keeping society together. It is responsible for the administration of justices for family and juvenile justice matters. The Family Court has dealt with thousands of cases over the years ranging from domestic violence, legal separation, custody, maintenance and juvenile offenders.

The Domestic /Family Violence Unit of the Police Department deals with, among other things, domestic violence issues and breach of protection orders. The Police Department has also developed a Domestic Violence Protocol. The issue of Domestic Violence is included in the curriculum at the Police Training Academy.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Since 2005 the Women's Department has developed several publications. A *Legal Training Manual* was developed to provide staff members of the Department with the knowledge of pertinent legislation in an effort to equip them to offer comprehensive legal advice to their

clients. A *Gender Integration Manual for Public Officers* was developed that incorporated material on gender awareness and sensitisation; gender analysis and planning. *Women's Handbook on Domestic Violence* offers practical information on the various types of domestic violence, the cycle of violence, myths about domestic violence, warning signs of abuse, and the effects of domestic violence on children. It provides important information on the legal system as it relates to getting protection and occupation orders, pressing charges and going to court. Also included is a list of important numbers that women can call to get help. *Men's Guidebook on Domestic Violence* has seven basic steps that emphasize the need for men to see themselves as partners in a relationship. It serves as an important resource for men throughout the country who may be faced with domestic violence or know of someone who is experiencing domestic violence. *Women's Reproductive Health & Nutrition Trainer's Manual* focuses on three primary areas: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Nutrition; Nutrition Health and Well-being; Budgeting for Nutritional Well-being.

Men's Handbook on Domestic Violence provides men with a source from which they can access information on domestic violence. *Domestic Violence and its effect on Children* focuses specifically on addressing the devastating effects of domestic violence on children. As a part of the Gender Awareness Safe School Program, the Women's Department developed a *Skills Building Resource Guide for Teaching Children and Adolescents* with a focus on Gender, Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, HIV/IDS and Self-Esteem.

Between October 2006 and June 2007, the Women's Department embarked on a skills training and personal development project with the female inmates of the Belize Central Prison. In 2007, the *Behind Prison Walls* was developed from sessions/interviews with female inmates.

Negotiation and Decision-making Skills Training Manual provides the reader with sufficient information, activities and guidance to facilitate HIV/AIDS Negotiation and Decision-Making Skills Workshops for specified target groups. *HIV/AIDS Capacity Building in Workshop Facilitation* is designed to help Women Development Officers and other staff members of partner agencies to facilitate sessions in specific subject areas such as HIV/AIDS

Domestic Violence and Sexual Harassment. *HIV/AIDS Peer Counselling for Girls and Women Training Manual* was developed to heighten the awareness of girls and women to their vulnerabilities to HIV as well as to equip them with the tools and skills required to educate and counsel their peers.

In 2006, the Ministry of Health through collaboration with UNFPA developed a *Sexual and Reproductive Health Booklet for Social Workers*. The purpose of the booklet is to provide social workers with adequate information on Sexual and Reproductive Health in an effort to ensure that accurate information is provided to individuals who access the services of social workers.

WOMEN'S UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK

The *Belize National Gender Policy* through its commitments seeks to accelerate progress in this area by addressing issues such as the unpaid economic value of domestic labor, 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 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 persons are entitled to this benefit. The introduction, by the Belize Social Security Board, of a non-contributory pension for women who are sixty-five (65) years and over has also assisted many women who otherwise may have lived in poverty situations.

Amendments by the Government in 2001 to the *Supreme Court of Judicature Act* provide for the value of unpaid domestic labour, including child-rearing, to be included in the distribution of property upon the termination of a marriage or common-law union.

POVERTY/UNEMPLOYMENT

The Women's 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. Women have benefited from credit opportunities through the Small Farmers and Business Bank, the Development Finance Corporation and the Belize Enterprise for Sustained Technology. The Commonwealth Secretariat has 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 Employment and Enterprise Development Unit of the Ministry of Labour assists jobseekers to find employment and employers to recruit the person they need for employment. Services offered to jobseekers are: Training in Job Preparedness, Identifying your Skills, Setting Employment Goals; Resume and Cover Letter; Sitting an Interview, Keeping your job, Managing your Money and Customer Service. Through the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) project Government anticipates to improve women's labour force participation in non-traditional areas such as the technology and manufacturing industries, where there has been an increase in the demand for labourers. The role of TVET is to equip women with the skills that will enable them to tap into job markets that have been predominantly dominated by men.

Poverty reduction forms the centerpiece of the Government's development strategy. This strategy addresses rural poverty by developing appropriate financing and credit for small producers, supportive services and incentives for small, medium and micro enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas, strengthening the capacities in the rural areas, and promoting small-scale agricultural and rural enterprises. To this end, the Government of Belize presented its

country strategy and National Indicative Plan (NIP) for the 9th EDF under the EU-ACP Cotonou Agreement. In November 2005, the Belize government signed a financing agreement with the European Commission for the Belize Rural Development Program at a total budget of Euro 10.675 million, to which the EU commits Euro 9 million. In February of 2006, the Government of Belize and the European Commission signed a contract with ICON Institute to provide the technical assistance to the Belize Rural Development Program (BRDP) and agreed on 1st March 2006 as the start-up date for the BRDP. The overall objective of the BRDP is to support the sustainable economic growth towards the alleviation of poverty in the rural areas. A specific target is for BRDP, to increase average monthly rural income from \$620 to \$780 and to decrease unemployment from 9.4% to 8.9% per annum. One specific objective of BRDP is to facilitate development of efficient small, medium and micro enterprises at community /village level; the target is to produce three hundred (300) to six hundred (600) development plans and projects accepted by PMU, and 10% of rural families should benefit from BRDP, of which at least 30% should be women and youth.

Through the National Machinery, women's groups throughout the rural areas of the country have been able to access funding from BRDP to initiate their own small business enterprises. Women Development Officers, staff members of the Women's Department are representatives on BRDP District Committees and play a critical role in securing funding for rural women.

Other initiatives are those of the Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology (BEST) and the Small Farmers and Business Bank which both continue to play a crucial role in ensuring rural women's access to credit. It is to be noted, however, that rural men continue to receive more loans than rural women because they make more applications

CONCLUSION

Belize remains committed to the objectives set out in the *Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995)*, the *Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994)*, the *Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995)*, and the *Millennium Declaration (New York, 2000.)*

The Government of Belize and the NGO community have worked in successful partnership to address the needs of women. The international community has been very supportive providing technical and financial assistance. Over the past few years the funding received from international agencies has led to major improvements in strengthening the capacity of organizations working for and with women. There has been increased community awareness at a national level and new programs have been delivered in rural areas that allow for increased participation of disadvantaged women. What is crucial now is ensuring sustainability, and the reality of the situation is that we have not reached that point as yet. 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, Ministry of Human Development it will continue to move toward the attainment of a just and equitable society.

Community Outreach Programs, especially in the rural areas, will continue to play an important role in women's empowerment initiatives. In rural areas, girls at a young age continue to be deprived of an education simply because they are girls and are believed to contribute more in their ability to help with cooking, cleaning, washing and taking care of other children. The necessity to ensure that young girls are given the opportunity to attend school and receive an education must be foremost in our objectives. The Women's Department continues to develop and coordinate services that are primarily aimed at assisting women to take on greater roles and responsibilities within the rural community and to enhance their skills, education, economic independence and participation at all levels of the economy.

The Women's Department continues to work in partnerships with schools, churches, 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. Belize remains committed to achieving strategic national goals and objectives which call for continuing to raise gender awareness through education and public awareness campaigns; developing and increasing measures to promote women in non-traditional vocations; and continuing 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. Traditional stereotypes, attitudes and expectations of society, however, continue to pose challenges. Women's daily reality of survival after domestic abuse continues to be a major issue. 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 counselling. This will take a multi-sectoral response, which the Department will actively pursue in 2008.

Belize continues to advocate for the involvement of men in the promotion of gender equality and emphasize the need for men to contribute to change. Matters of primary concern to men are now slowly being brought to the forefront of public discussion. As more integrated gender activities are developed there will be the increased need for better communication and dialogue between men and women. 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.

It is our hope that through continued partnerships with our regional and international partners we will continue to make significant strides in achieving our common goals of attaining gender equality and in ensuring that we work towards finding solutions to the many challenges our girls and women face within the region of Latin America and the Caribbean.