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**DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER INSTITUTIONS IN THE CARIBBEAN:
CHALLENGES FOR THE 21st CENTURY**

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Development of Gender Institutions in the Caribbean: Challenges for the 21st Century

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Introduction

This paper is prepared for discussion at the Ninth Session of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mexico City, June 10-12, 2004).

The objective of this paper is to review the process of how the institutions responsible for promoting gender equity have evolved in the Caribbean region. Also the challenges that face the women in these small nation states will be highlighted.

The Possibilities of the Beijing Platform for Action

The search for women's empowerment in the Caribbean has had a long history that dates back to the many desperate acts at gaining freedom that were taken by many women in the days of slavery.

The Beijing Platform for Action was a very important milestone in the search for equity and social justice by women in general and Caribbean women in particular.

The Platform clearly articulated the core assumptions that are important to women's advancement and the achievement of gender equality. These include a gender mainstreaming strategy; a life-cycle approach; partnership between men and women; women's rights as human rights and the integration of gender concerns in policies and programmes for sustainable development.

The motivation of the initial goals of the UN Decade for Women was to strengthen government's capacity to assess or detect the impact of public policies on women. The Platform for Action moved the agenda further along by pinpointing strategic objectives for action. Furthermore, it clearly assigned responsibilities to an exhaustive range of stakeholders at international, regional and national levels. These include governments, policy makers, NGOs and all institutions of civil society.

In so doing, the Platform for Action overcomes the charges of ambiguity that was an obstacle to the implementation of the NFLS, and proposes the concrete steps that are important in creating an enabling social policy environment for social and economic development.

The major contribution of the Beijing Platform of Action to the gender institutions in the Caribbean lies in the fact that it moved the agenda for women's empowerment beyond a set of prescriptions to an ideological base which underscores the notion that *women's rights are human rights*, and that the harmonious relationship between men and women are critical to democracy, community-building and the essential inter-personal relationships that are the base of healthy family structures.

The Platform also put an emphasis on the eradication of poverty as a major plank for women's development and change. Most importantly, it emphasized the need for political commitment, the involvement of civil society and the need for men to be integrally involved in changing the forces that have resulted in the lack of equality and equity in all societies.

Five years after the important Beijing Conference, the United Nations convened a five year review of the progress that had been made globally. This meeting took place in New York in 2000. All regions of the world took a close look at their progress. The CARICOM region used the opportunity to see how the member states had progressed in terms of the directions given in the CARICOM Post Beijing Regional Plan of Action to the Year 2000.

THE CARICOM PLAN

The importance of the **CARICOM Post-Beijing Regional Plan of Action to the year 2000**, lies both in the detailing of the pre-Beijing process, which led to a united position on the issues that affect the women of the sub-region, and a forward looking plan that could accommodate all the priorities of the individual nation states.

Documents that were integral to the preparation of the CARICOM plan include:

- The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,
- The Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development
- The Regional Programme of Action for the Women of Latin America and the Caribbean
- Towards Equity in Development: A Report on the Status of Women in Sixteen Commonwealth Countries
- Gender and Development: Towards an Improved CARICOM Policy
- The Draft Regional Policy on Gender Equality and Social Justice

CARICOM, in this Post-Beijing analysis, found that all of the nations of the region had some form of machinery and policy statements which reflect their government's commitment to equity for women in all aspects of development. Additionally, all the machineries had a heightened awareness that gender mainstreaming has to be the central strategy to influence and impact positively on all government policies, programmes and spending.

The Beijing preparatory process, which was described by the writers of the CARICOM Plan to 2000, helped to clarify the regional approach to gender issues, but it also brought into focus the problems with the ideological shift from the Women in Development (WID) to the Gender and Development (GAD) approach.

This fundamental shift represents a transformation in the understanding of women's issues. It forces us to recognize that in our region women are already integrated into development and the real issue is that prevailing forms of development are built on structures of inequality between men and women. In spite of this understanding, many of the national women and/or gender machineries were, up to 2002, oriented to the traditional WID approaches and their work was exemplified by projects and programmes that impacted on relatively small groupings of women rather than on the national economic, social and political agendas which impacted on the lives of all women and men in very unique ways.

The effort to shift from the WID to the GAD approach has been a "work in progress" for all the national machineries of the Caribbean region. Both of these approaches create different agendas proponents of WID work to meet women's practical needs through projects to improve their conditions, while the GAD approach is consistent with a focus on addressing women's strategic needs through programmes and policies to change their status, in the framework of development. As the process of shifting developed, there is a growing awareness on the part of the current national machineries and the active NGOs in the CARICOM region that they must find a balance between projects and policy development if sustainable change in the status of both men and women is to be achieved.

To this end, the CARICOM Plan of Action to the Year 2000 emphasized that all nation states in the region need to keep in focus the following issues:

- Gender socialization and its impact on the educational choices and performance of females and males;
- The relationship of the reproductive and sexual health issues of female and male adolescents to the continuing rise in sexual and domestic violence;
- The attitudes and cultural norms that impact negatively on women's full participation at all levels of the society;
- The recognition that unwaged and low-waged work are features of women's lives;
- The need for legislative reform that will guarantee non-discrimination and the protection of rights for all social groups;
- The understanding that equality in political representation is intricately linked to issues of governance and democracy;
- The urgency to find effective ways of mainstreaming gender in policy-making and in planning by governments;

-The efficacy of cross-sectoral planning and timely implementation of the projects and programmes that are designed to bring about gender equity in the society.

Efforts at Assessing the Progress Achieved on the Beijing Platform for Action

It is within the framework established by the CARICOM Plan that **ECLAC's Study for Gender Mainstreaming in the Caribbean** made its most significant contribution to the understanding of the gradual progress that was made up to the year 2000. This study highlighted the gender mainstreaming strategies that were employed by ten Caribbean countries: Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. It also reiterated the concerns about the shift in ideology from the Women in Development to the Gender and Development approach which was raised by the writers of the CARICOM Plan.

The study pointed out that by 2000, the ten countries under review had made some effort to strengthen the numbers and levels of staffing in the national machinery and had begun the process of the ideological shift from women as the main focus to a critical analysis of how to plan in order to mitigate the negative impact of gender socialization on men and women.

Another interesting trend, identified by the ECLAC study, was the effort to change the names of Ministries to include the term "gender affairs" in their mandate. In spite of this, it is interesting to note that the majority of the national machineries of the region are located in the full range of the ministries which deal with social issues. Up to 2000, none of the machineries was identified as being located in the traditionally male-focused areas such as finance, agriculture, commerce or industry.

Another opportunity to review the progress that members of the CARICOM region had made was at a recent training workshop on **Gender Analysis in Agricultural Policy and Planning in the Caribbean** convened by ECLAC and held in Trinidad from November 26-28, 2003. On this occasion, St. Kitts and Nevis, Jamaica, Guyana, Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, and Grenada started the process of reviewing the progress that they had made on the "road from Beijing" and the efforts to transform their agenda from Women in Development to Gender and Development. All of these nation states clearly demonstrated that there had been important, positive shifts in the following areas:

1. The effort to improve the quality of staff in their national machineries;
2. The relative improvement of the physical facilities and more adequate office space;
3. The recognition that gender issues need to be mainstreamed in all ministries including Ministry of Finance;

At this particular meeting, the Heads of the National Machineries came to the conclusion that more effort and greater political will must be assured if they are to move from these fledgling initiatives to a more sustainable path that will result in gender equity and social justice for all.

Subsequent to the meeting in Trinidad, all members of the CARICOM region represented by ECLAC were asked to supply the following information:

1. The initiatives taken on women's empowerment since the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing Plus Five Review;
2. The priorities of their Strategic Plan
3. The major successes in the path to gender equity
4. The major challenges
5. Strategies for the "way forward"

Substantive feedback was received from a representative grouping of the independent states and one dependent territory ranging from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Dominica, Guyana, the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN THE SEARCH FOR GENDER EQUITY IN CARICOM

The CARICOM Regional Plan of Action to the Year 2000 report identified the lack of adequate financial resources and the relatively marginalized position of most national machineries for women/gender as a serious systemic problem in the effort to mainstream gender and to find social justice and equity for all men and women. This finding is still relevant to all the national machineries of the region. While it is true that some have made significant gains in institutional strengthening and there is a heightened awareness of the necessity of gender mainstreaming, the majority are still struggling to have meaningful impact at all levels of the operation of their government.

The challenges that confront the search for gender equity in the countries represented by ECLAC and CARICOM must be located and analyzed within a broad ideological framework of gender relationships in the region; cultural and attitudinal structures that have been resistant to change, especially to the changes that women are demanding and the complex influence of religious institutions on the workings of the State.

Eudine Barriteau succinctly captured these centers of resistance in her contribution to the book **Confronting Power**. Her insights on these difficult issues were captured in the chapter entitled “Theorizing the Shift from “Woman” to “Gender” in the Caribbean Feminist Discourse.

Barriteau contends that utilizing and theorizing social relations of gender as the main and sometimes only analytical framework to examine “chronic conditions of inequality in women’s lives” creates “conceptual confusion”, political deception and fragmentation in the search for progress towards the empowerment and upliftment of women.

She also argues that shifting to use the social relations of gender as the main analytical framework for women’s empowerment creates ambiguities, unexamined questions and confusion.

Barriteau cautions that we must be always aware that the use of a gender analytic framework does not mean that we must abandoned our focus on the continuing inequalities that are reflected in the lives of all women. In fact, within a truly scientific gender analytic framework the initiatives that are important to the lives of both men and women must be clearly identified, and applied in a way to ensure that all the systemic barriers that have been created by the unequal forces of gender socialization, are dealt with once and for all.

Such an ideological framework is not only necessary but urgently needed if the nation states are to face the challenges that have been identified by all the **national machineries** of the region. Overall, the Heads of these machineries have identified the following as areas that need immediate attention:

- the need to acknowledge and clarify gender issues in all ministries, agencies and public sector institutions including schools, colleges and other partners in education and training;
- the urgency to find strategies to mainstream gender as a fundamental aspect of planning and development;
- the recognition that national gender/women machineries need sufficient resources to give them the authority and the capacity to work effectively with the lead ministries to bring about the fundamental changes that are needed if gender equity is to be achieved;
- the importance of ensuring that there is sex disaggregated data in all public sector areas;
- the continuing debilitating impact of poverty on the physical and human environment;
- the rising cost and impact of violence in general and gender-based violence in particular in all the nation states;
- the social, economic and cultural factors that are implicated in the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region. These include: the stigmatization of the victims of the AIDS pandemic and the overrepresentation of women as the victims of HIV/AIDS;
- the impact of globalization on the economic and social realities of the region; the challenge to find a balance between the positive contribution of the information age and the negative values that are present in much of the content that the youth of the region encounter on the internet;
- the weakening of the NGO communities through the lack of sustainable funding and the shift in priorities by the international, regional and local funding agencies;
- finding the right mix of policies that will ensure the empowerment of women and guarantee their presence in critical masses at all levels of decision-making.
- Sustained efforts of legal and social reforms that will guarantee women and children equity and justice at all levels of Caribbean societies.
- finding ways of engaging young men and boys in the educational systems.

While it is clear that incremental changes have taken place in the status of women in the Caribbean region, the consensus is that it is the area of *Women in Power and Decision-Making* that has been the most problematic.

While the constitutions of the nation states of the region guarantee equal participation of men and women in the public sphere including the arena of politics; the progress towards participating at the highest levels of decision-making has been very slow.

The structures and working of the political parties and the very nature of politics in the region are areas that need serious evaluation and intervention.

These challenges exist at a time when many of the nation states of the CARICOM are plagued by high interest rates and skyrocketing fiscal deficits. Wage freezes and cuts in the public sector are likely options in many jurisdictions. Within these difficult economic scenarios, National Machineries mandated to take the lead on gender equity and women's

empowerment, must find new and creative ways to do more with less. They also must collaborate more broadly across the public, private and non-governmental sectors and encourage the transformation of attitudes to the human and physical environment at the level of the community.

The Way Forward for National Machineries

In 2001, the World Bank in a policy research report entitled “Engendered Development,” pointed out that “gender inequalities undermine the effectiveness of development policies in fundamental ways.”

The study also underscored the fact that policy makers are reluctant “to deal with topics that they deem inextricably associated with societal norms, religion or cultural traditions.” Furthermore, the World Bank reminds us that “in no region of the developing world, are women equal to men in legal, social and economic rights,” even though it is well recognized that “gender equality is a core development issue.”

In light of these findings, the CARICOM region will need to guarantee that:

1. Attention is paid to reforming all institutions in order to establish equal rights and opportunities for women and men. In this process, the needs of the poorest in the society must be given priority.
2. The process of legal reform, which is underway in most jurisdictions, must be speeded up.
3. The issue of gender-based violence must continue to be a priority issue and more collaborative efforts across all sectors of society should be encouraged. In particular, there needs to be a more highly developed public education programme that target men and boys in order that they can accept their responsibility to control their predisposition to the use of violence in resolving conflicts. On this issue and on the issue of the spread of HIV/AIDS, all educational institutions, the family, the church and all other sectors of civil society must be encouraged to play a proactive role.
4. The recognition that the shift from WID to GAD will necessitate the development of new policies to guarantee gender equity and justice is clearly articulated by the majority of the CARICOM members. The highly collaborative process that has been established by the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago could serve as a model for the other states. It is therefore important for the funding agencies, which supported the Trinidadian model, to put in place a plan to assist all the jurisdictions that wish to replicate this process.
5. National machineries should be encouraged to collaborate with each other and share practices that have proven to be successful, however, the information

gathered in the grid that reflects the strengths of the machineries points clearly to the fact that most of these bodies continue to be marginalized, under funded and the majority lack the staffing to carry out the mandate of Beijing.

6. Cross-border mentoring and internship should be encouraged, in light of the fact that some machineries are further along the way to gender mainstreaming than others.
7. More strategic technical assistance should be sought from the Commonwealth Secretariat and other agencies that have the capacity to train in gender analysis, sex disaggregated data gathering and gender mainstreaming strategies.
8. A stronger public education programme on the definition and role of gender socialization and the impact on national development should be developed and integrated in both the formal and informal educational sector.
9. In light of the economic constraints in the region, funding agencies should take seriously the concerns identified by the national machineries and make every effort to assist financially and technically in a more organized and collaborative mode.
10. Ministries and Ministers with Responsibility for Gender/Women's Affairs, should be encouraged to lobby their governments to make gender mainstreaming a priority and to hold all public sector managers responsible for ensuring that all plans and programmes are reflective of their governments' commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action,. Having said that, there has to be political will to staff the national machineries with persons who have high level technical skills in order for them to command the respect and authority which is needed to ensure that senior policy makers across the public sector take responsibility for the commitments that their governments have made nationally, regionally and internationally.

Conclusion

In carrying out this review of the progress that has been made in CARICOM since the ratification of the Beijing Platform for Action by all the nation states, it has become clear that the concerns, constraints and ideological struggles are the same in all the jurisdictions. While it is true that ethnic and religious differences are strong characteristics of some countries such as Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname, these differences do not mask the commonalities of the issue that have been identified in this paper. It is these commonalities that will provide the unifying themes on which the entire region can move forward on the path to gender equity and justice for all.

Clearly, what is needed is greater political will, serious commitment to equality and justice and the removal of all systemic barriers that are still standing in the way of development and progress in the CARICOM region.