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NATIONAL REPORT: THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

(Item 3 c) on the Agenda



The Commonwealth of
The Bahamas

Report to the

Thirty-third Assembly of Delegates
Of the
Organization of American
States

Inter-American Commission
Of Women

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NATIONAL REPORT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF THE BAHAMAS

I GENERAL ASPECTS

The Bahamas is a 100,000 square mile archipelago situated off the Atlantic Ocean comprising some 3,000 islands, small cays and rocks. Of these, approximately 70 are inhabited, forming 22 island groupings.

The most recent census of population and housing, conducted in 2000, counted the population of The Bahamas at 303,611; 147,715 males and 155,896 females. The population is still a relatively young one with more than one quarter (29.4 %) under the age of 15. The life expectancy of men in 2000 was estimated at 71 while women were shown to be outliving men by six years at an estimated 77.

The 2000 census also revealed that while men head the majority of families on every island, 36% of the 88,107 households in The Bahamas are headed by females.

The Government of The Bahamas remains committed to the full participation of its women in all sectors of the society. Over the past two years, The Bahamas has continued its efforts to enact laws to protect women and their children. Additional programmes have been initiated that aim to empower women, particularly those of the lower economic status.

II JUDICIAL, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STATUS

Since the last Assembly of Delegates of the CIM, there has been a slight shift in the percentage of females in the Senate and the Cabinet of The Bahamas. Females still comprise 20% of Parliament, however, the Cabinet now has 23.5% females and the Senate has 33%. This shift is due to the resignation of a female Senator and an increase in the Cabinet portfolios. The first female Governor General also demitted office this year.

The Constitutional Reform Commission, which was appointed by the Government of The Bahamas to review the existing Constitution, presented its initial recommendations for change in March of this year. Among the recommendations were the proposed amendments for laws involving **Citizenship and Fundamental Rights and Freedoms**.

As a part of its programs, the Bureau of Women's Affairs has spearheaded consultations on the proposed changes to the Constitution in an effort to educate the public and women in particular of the existing inequalities in the Constitution and to discuss possible ways of correcting them.

It is hoped that when the next referendum on the amendment to the Constitution is held, women would have had the opportunity to be fully apprised of the recommendations and the implications to their further development and that of their families.

III MONITORING OF THE CIM STRATEGIC PLAN OF ACTION

A Eradication of Poverty

The Government of The Bahamas has undertaken an Urban Renewal Initiative, which seeks to bring quick response to the social needs of the inner city communities. A large percentage of young women in the inner cities are, unemployed, unskilled and have multiple dependents. Stakeholders from the public and private sectors, including the Police Department, Department of Social Services, The Bahamas Agricultural and Industrial Corporation and The Bahamas Development Bank have forged partnerships to assist such women to become skilled, find employment and engage in entrepreneurial pursuits.

The Bahamas Development Bank, a Government institution, was established to assist local entrepreneurs. In January of this year, the Bank unveiled *The Micro Loan Programme*. The target market is handicraft/souvenir manufactures, seamstresses/tailors, painting contractors, lawn-care/landscape contractors, and similar small business persons who need to purchase raw materials/supplies or equipment. In this programme, which is designed to reduce 'red tape' and encourage the growth and development of micro-enterprises, eligible persons may borrow up to a maximum of \$10,000. Historically, the majority of persons in this category have been women.

The Bureau of Women's Affairs has continued to facilitate workshops on entrepreneurial development for women. All of the government agencies that are able to assist women in this area are invited to participate through the sharing of information and by providing guidance to the women.

B Trafficking in Persons

The Bahamas has been pleased to partner with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on counter-trafficking measures. Since an initial project of the IOM which facilitated research and training, the country has primarily focused on public awareness and training on this issue.

The work of the public awareness campaign was spearheaded by the Department of Immigration, the Bureau of Women's Affairs of the Ministry of Social Services & Community Development, the Eugene Dupuch Legal Aide Clinic and the Crisis Centre of The Bahamas.

Training was carried out in 2005 for existing Immigration officers by IOM officials and local lecturers. Additionally, a component on trafficking in persons has been included in the training module of all new officers. Training sessions have also been held with volunteers of our local Crisis Center, and some of the Social Workers within the Department of Social Services.

Through a Grant from the IOM and with the partnership of the core agencies previously mentioned (Immigration, Bureau of Women's Affairs, Crisis Centre & Eugene Dupuch Legal Aide Clinic) a major workshop was held with approximately ninety (90) participants.

One of the challenges that confronted the agencies involved in organizing the public awareness campaign was the fact that the country is an archipelagic nation. Ideally, the campaign should have been taken to all islands in the archipelago, unfortunately, it was only able to reach the communities outside of the capital through the media. Efforts will, however, be made to extend the existing work throughout all of the communities.

C **Health**

AIDS has been the leading cause of death in The Bahamas since 1994. The National HIV/AIDS Program continues to focus on information, education and communication to prevent HIV infections and reduce stigma and discrimination. The Program has been instrumental in changing risky behavior through behavior change communication and public awareness campaigns.

Between 1994 and 2005 there was a decrease in the HIV incidence rate, with the greatest change noted in the 20-49 year old group. The number of HIV infections among women of childbearing age is also diminishing. There has been a drastic decline in HIV transmission from mother to child from 30% in 1995 to less than 2% in 2005. This remarkable success is a result of The Bahamas' "Prevention of Mother-to-child Transmission Strategy" (PMTCT).

The Bureau of Women's Affairs continues to support the National AIDS Centre as one of the agencies educated for HIV prevention, reduction in stigma discrimination and as a partner in care efforts. Other agencies involved in the area include faith based organizations, trade unions, human resource managers, women's groups and the media.

D **Education**

The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute is a post-secondary open access institution under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Immigration, Labor and Training. It is the primary institution that provides career and technical education and training to the Bahamian population. Females continue to outnumber their male counterpart at the institution. In 2005, females represented 56% of the student population and in 2006, females represented 51%.

IV **FUTURE ACTIONS TO ADVANCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN OF ACTION OF THE CIM**

A **Participation of Women in the Structures of Power and Decision Making:**

The First Regional Conference of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians was held in The Bahamas from April 21st to 22nd, 2006. Women, both nationally and regionally, were challenged to encourage young women to enter politics. Women were further challenged to ensure that political careers are made more attractive for females. To date, The Bahamas has not implemented any quotas to ensure equal representation of women in Parliament; however, the number of women in Parliament and other executive positions in the country is very encouraging. (See Annex I for listing) The Bureau will facilitate discussions for women on increasing their representation in the various national bodies.

B **Violence Against Women/Implementation of Bolem do Para**

Violence against women remains an area of concern to The Bahamas. Approximately 85% of domestic abuse complaints made to the police are made by women. Compounding the problem is the slow justice due to a backlog of cases at the criminal justice system and constant complaint withdrawals by the victims themselves.

The Government of The Bahamas intends to introduce a Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act. The proposed Act will address the shortcomings of the existing Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act, which has been in place since 1991. Areas of particular interest in the new legislation are the expanded definitions of a spouse, harassment and stalking and the ability of the court to mandate counseling for the batterer.

Public consultations on the proposed Act have been held with religious leaders and several ngos already and they are expected to continue before the Bill is presented to the Cabinet for review. The process of consultation is important to the country as it not only wishes to gather as wide a support for the legislation as possible, but also wishes to consider the views of the populous on this area.

C **National Women's Machinery**

The Bureau of Women's Affairs has led active educational campaigns with the public, including local women's non-governmental organizations, on legislations and other issues that impact women. The Family and Child Protection Act, 2006 was recently passed after extensive consultation with the populous. Discussions are now ongoing on the proposed Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act.

The Bureau has also played an integral role in coordinating the national public awareness campaign on trafficking in persons. This included participating on national delegations to workshops on this area and making presentation to ngos and other agencies that requested information on this area.

The collaboration on this particular area has been quite strong and the Bureau intends to remain a part of the national committee on trafficking in persons.

In general, the Bureau of Women's Affairs will continue to collaborate with the relevant agencies both nationally and internationally to address the challenges that face the women of The Bahamas.

D **Regional Cooperation**

In order to train personnel to appropriately address the critical issues facing women, financial and technical assistance from regional and international agencies must be made available on a continual basis.

The Government of the Bahamas is grateful to the IOM, UNIFEM, UNFPA and the Commonwealth Secretariat for the various training opportunities they have provided to the staff of the Bureau of Women's Affairs through workshops. We anticipate that this commitment will continue in the future.

ANNEX I

**WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE POSITIONS
(MINISTRIES AND STATE INSTITUTIONS)**

Female Cabinet Ministers

The Hon. Cynthia Pratt	Minister of National Security
The Hon. Allyson Maynard- Gibson	Attorney General
The Hon. Melanie Griffin	Minister of Social Services & Community Development
The Hon. Glenys Hanna-Martin	Minister of Transport & Aviation

Senators

Sen. The Hon. Sharon Wilson (President of Senate)
Sen. The Hon. Yvette Turnquest
Sen. The Hon. Paulette Zonicle
Sen. The Hon. Michelle Pindling-Sands
Sen. The Hon. Gladys Johnson-Sands

Members of Parliament

Hon. Cynthia Pratt (Deputy Prime Minister)
Hon. Allyson Maynard-Gibson
Hon. Glenys Hanna-Martin
Hon. Melanie Griffin
Mrs. Agatha Marcelle
Ms. Veronica Owens
Mrs. Ann Percentie
Ms. Pleasant Bridgewater

Parliamentary Secretaries

Agatha Marcelle – Ministry of Immigration & Training
Veronica Owens – Ministry of Education
Ann Percentie - Office of the Prime Minister (Grand Bahama)

Other Women in Executive Positions

Dame Joan Sawyer	President of the Court of Appeal
Anita Allen	Justice of the Supreme Court
Jeanne Thompson	Justice of the Supreme Court

Other Women in Executive Positions cont'd

Ruth Millar	Financial Secretary
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Elma Garraway	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health
Leila Greene	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Youth, Sports & Housing
Anita Bernard	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Works
Thelma Beneby	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Immigration & Training
Dr. Patricia Rodgers	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Jacqueline Murray	Permanent Secretary, Office of the Attorney General
Irene Stubbs	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Public Service
A. Missouri Sherman-Peter	Permanent Secretary.
Barbara Burrows	Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Services & Community Development
Camille Cartwright	Permanent Secretary
	Ministry of Energy & the Environment
Coleen Nottage	Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries
Sheila Carey	Ministry of Financial Services & Investment
Mellanie Zonicle	Director of Social Services
Michaela Storr	Managing Director, Public Hospital Authority
Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis	Chief Medical Officer
Dr. Iva Dahl	Manager, Bahamas Technical & Vocational Institute (BTVI)
Debbie Fraser	Director of Legal Affairs
Wendy Craig	Governor, Central Bank of The Bahamas
Verniece Walkine	Director General of Tourism
Denise Tynes	Deputy Commander of the Drug Enforcement Unit of the Royal Bahamas Police Force

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