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REPUBLIC OF GUYANA

COUNTRY REPORT TO CIM/OAS

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MINISTRY OF LABOUR, HUMAN SERVICES AND SOCIAL SECURITY

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GENERAL OVERVIEW

Enshrined in the 1980 Constitution of Guyana, which was revised in 2003, is the principle of equality of men and women which has been fully recognized by the Government of Guyana. This was reinforced with the ratification of Conventions such as CEDAW (1981); and Belem do Para (1995), and by the various legislative reforms which were subsequently enacted by the Government. The outcomes of various World Conferences of women further strengthened the Government's resolve in pursuing its objective of gender equality.

The Government of Guyana has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the CIM Strategic Plan of Action, the Beijing Platform For Action, the CARICOM Plan of Action and the Guyana National Plan of Action, all of which share the common goal of advancement of women. In this regard the Government accorded the promotion of women into leadership and decision-making positions, their increased involvement in both the traditional and non-traditional areas of the workforce, and in more general terms their empowerment as high priority areas of concern. The combination of Constitutional reform, legislation which ensures that women enjoy all their human rights, the formulation of policies and various administrative measures, training and education has created the framework within which Government has progressively accelerated its programmes for improving the status of women at multiple levels of our society across the ten administrative Regions into which Guyana is divided.

With the environment created, there has been a concentration of efforts on sectoral growth and development based on policies which promote full and equal participation of women and sensitivity to gender issues both within government and at the wider national level.

There have also been sustained efforts aimed at the elimination of gender based violence and the reduction of poverty among women. Although women have continued to maintain an appreciable level of success in the fields of politics and decision-making, it must be noted that challenges still persist in the form of cultural practices which discriminate against them as well as the continued existence of patriarchal norms which are not easily changed.

JURIDICAL

The participation of women in the JURIDICAL System has been progressively increasing. The highest ranking position in the Judiciary that of Chancellor, was held by a woman (2001 to 2005). One of the three Justices of Appeal is a woman. At present, there are four (4) female judges out of a total of 9 judges. Female magistrates account for 9 of the existing 17 magistrates. Women lawyers continue to out number men in the field.

It is of interest to note that the woman who held the position of Chancellor is now the first woman to have been appointed to the high position of a judge of the Caribbean Court of Justice.

POLITICAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC SITUATION

Guyana has continued to adhere to the concept that equality in political participation and the decision-making process is critical to the advancement of women. Constitutional reform, and the Electoral System which has mandated the requirement of one third women on the list of all political parties contesting the elections, have given impetus to the increased participation of women in politics. The number of women in the 65 member Parliament increased from 12 (18.5%) in 2000 to 20 (31%) after the 2001 elections. This is well in keeping with the recommendations in the Beijing Platform For Action. There are now four (4) female ministers in comparison to 2 in 1997. The Deputy Speaker of the House of Parliament of Guyana is a woman.

At local Government level women's representation increased from 20% in 1997 to 30% in 2001.

Even though between 1998 and 2005 the number of female Permanent Secretaries increased from 3 to 5, they are still under-represented compared to their male counterparts who account for more than 64% of the Permanent Secretaries. A similar trend exists at the level of Deputy Permanent Secretaries.

In relation to National Commissions the situation is that women are highly represented on the National Commission on the Rights of the Child and the National Commission on Women but are noticeably absent, or disproportionately represented on Boards and commissions such as the Public Service Commission and the Police Service Commission.

The improvement recorded in women's representation at some levels of senior public offices between 2003 and 2005, indicates that these numbers are still relatively low. Based on statistics (2003), women are overtaking their male counterparts at the middle management level and now account for 52% of all such positions as compared to 42% in 1993. In the varying occupational categories, women continue to dominate at the lower levels of the public Service.

In the Private Sector in Guyana it is to be noted that women are increasingly acceding to top executive management positions such as Directors of Banks and Corporations.

Notwithstanding the position of women in the workforce generally, they have benefited from various salary increases and other wages and salary adjustments. Unfortunately in spite of these increases the high cost of living has increased the burden some women face in managing their families.

The situation with respect to women's unwaged work has remained unresolved.

In other developmental areas women have been able to access loans and mortgages and credits from established lending agencies. In this regard Reports have indicated that 45.5% of loans negotiated were granted to women. One loan agency has provided special arrangements for women. Loans are granted for various activities such as agricultural production, micro-enterprises, food processing and rural outreach programmes.

THE CONSTITUTION

The 1980 Constitution which established the principle of equality for men and women and which was amended by the Revised Constitution (2003) underpins all public policy and legislative reforms. It has enshrined as a fundamental right to every woman “equal rights and status with men in all spheres of political, economic and social life” as embodied in CIM Strategic Plan of Action. The Constitution Reform Commission in recognition of the priority status accorded to women’s issues provided for the establishment of the Women and Gender Equality Commission which is an integral part of the Human Rights Commission which replaces the National Commission on Women.

This Gender Equality Commission now strengthens the monitoring and protection of women’s rights as well as the existing safe guards against any form of discrimination. The functions of this Commission are discussed further in this Report.

POVERTY

A Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PSRP) was developed in 2001 on the basis of nation-wide consultations. It has the status of a government policy paper. Using a cross cutting strategy it addresses women’s concerns. In designing the Strategy Paper the need for involving women in the decision-making process, was recognized leading to a gender awareness approach in its consultations. The Women’s Affairs Bureau has considered the PRSP in its policy and programme formulation.

The Women’s Affairs Bureau (WAB) is the principal implementing agency for the component of the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) addressing women’s poverty. Women’s practical gender needs, for example, skills training and entrepreneurial skills, were addressed and programmes implemented in collaboration with the Guyana Women’s Leadership Institute. The WAB continues to network with non-governmental organizations and the Regional Women’s Affairs Committees in all ten Administrative Regions of the country in its thrust at improving the lives of women and promoting poverty alleviation.

An initiative which facilitates some degree of the alleviation of poverty is the establishment of a Difficult Circumstances Unit (DCU) within the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security. It provides food stuff and financial aid as an emergency measure for persons in difficult circumstances, women benefit significantly from this aid programme. Other short term assistance includes disbursements for small business ventures, spectacles, funeral expenses etc.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic Violence continues to be an issue of grave concern to the Government. Despite the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act (1996) and the ratification of the *Belém do Pará* Convention which addresses the Prevention, Punishment and eradication of all forms of violence against women, and the clearly articulated pronouncement that every woman has the right to be free from violence in both public and private spheres, violence against women continues to be pervasive.

Some of the intervention measures introduced have been the gazetting of social workers who are now authorized to represent victims in Court and the establishment of a National Task Force which will advise on the strengthening of existing measures for the protection of women. The Guyana Association of Female Lawyers have assisted in this situation by apprising women of their rights and by the production of simplified booklets aimed at sensitizing persons to the protection offered by the law.

A formative step has been taken by the Guyana Bar Association towards addressing legal and related matters pertaining to women through the establishment of a Gender Affairs Committee within the Association.

Several gender sensitive training programmes have been conducted for building the capacity of the law enforcement agencies to deal with the problem of domestic violence and increasing their efficiency in this area of operations. They were also instructed in developing an understanding and an awareness of the Domestic Violence Act and the importance of its enforcement. Participants of all programmes were sensitized to the requirements of the *Belém do Paáa* as well as the CEDAW Conventions. Some of the Training provided has now become a regular component of the Training programmes for all Police Trainees.

The Guyana Police Force is in the process of formally establishing a mechanism to give a more structured approach to dealing with gender based violence. Specially trained personnel will be assigned to deal with reports of domestic violence received.

EDUCATION

A major focus of attention of the Government has been education and training in which its policy of equal opportunity for all has been rigidly adhered to. The most recent Education Policy (2000) has provided for a more gender sensitive approach to the teaching curriculum and has placed an emphasis on health, family life education, and human rights. It must be noted that with the aid of UNESCO an incentive in the form of a revolving fund has been made available to encourage girls to pursue training at technical and vocational schools. This is intended to address the gender imbalance at these levels in education, and is expected to be ultimately reflected in the workforce.

A notable direction in the area of education has been the focus on educational programmes in rural and hinterland locations. With the assistance of several funding agencies a variety of measures have been put in place to boost the availability of programmes in those remote areas. These have included distance education, the establishment of dormitory facilities, and salary incentives to teachers. A specific difficulty encountered in this device is the tendency of some trained persons to migrate to the coastlands.

A growing concern now is the under-achievement of boys in the education system as well as school dropouts. These are all being monitored and carefully studied.

Increasingly consideration is being given to the institution of programmes which will in the medium term impact on sustainable socio-economic development and poverty reduction through addressing the question of literacy at the early stages of the education. A significant project has been an IDB funded programme in which women have been trained in non-traditional skills which has equipped them with new skills to enter the job market.

The Ministry of Education has taken a positive step towards the promotion of information Technology among schools throughout the country and efforts continue to be directed towards the acquisition of equipment required for there programmes.

In addition to its core responsibilities for teacher training, technical and vocational training and training within all levels of the formal education system, the Government has collaborated with a number of NGO's such as the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education in addressing the needs of women and men outside of the formal school system.

HEALTH

The Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to free medical services. To give effect to this there has been an increase in the budgetary allocation for health from 5.9% in 1998 to 7% in 2001 with a projection to 10% by year 2010. To advance its policies the government has maintained its programme for the establishment of health clinics, health centers, clinics, cottage and major hospitals, reaching out to remote hinterland and rural communities.

Maternal and Child Health Services have been upgraded. Based on the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2001) conducted by the Statistical Bureau, Guyana has made substantial strides in the reduction of maternal and infant mortality rates as well as malnutrition.

STRATEGIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Underpinning all measures instituted to achieve “de facto” equality for women are a number of policy issues. In this regard there is the National Development Strategy which is a major policy paper developed through joint partnership between the Government and Civil Society, as a blue print for national development. This document which has now been laid in Parliament (2005) contains an entire chapter which speaks to gender issues within the sectoral strategies outlined in this paper. Within education consideration is given to generally enhancing the educational status of girls and women and incorporating gender sensitive material in teacher training. Among the objectives for the employment sector is increasing employment and self employment of women particularly in non traditional areas and the creation of a supportive working environment to help women balance their reproductive roles as members of the labour force.

NATIONAL PLAN OF ACTION FOR WOMEN

A consultative approach was also adopted in the process which up-dated the previous National Plan of Action. This involved consultations with civil society and women in rural and hinterland locations. This revised plan while reflecting the strategic needs of women will constitute a

comprehensive approach to critical issues affecting women such as health, education, employment, gender based violence, trafficking in persons and HIV/AIDS. It will also articulate strategies to ensure that developmental policies are designed to guarantee gender equity and the removal of all forms of gender discrimination.

INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

The principal agency is the Women's Affairs Bureau (WAB) which is the National Machinery responsible for promoting the status of women. Its work is supported by key agencies which are as follows: - The National Commission for Women which will give way to the establishment of the Women and Gender Equality Commission which is a Rights Commission. The ultimate responsibility of these commissions (current and future) is the promotion of national recognition and acceptance that women's rights are human rights, respect for gender equality and the protection, development and attainment of gender equality.

Among the fifteen (15) functions of the Women and Gender Equality Commission are the following:

1. Promote issues related to the enhancement of the status of women, girls and gender issues;
2. Promote the integration of women's needs and interests and mainstreaming of gender issues;
3. Raise the awareness of the contribution of women and problems faced by women including the recognition and value of unwaged work;
4. Recommend training and technical assistance to support initiatives by and for women and girls; and
5. Promote the participation of women in national decision-making.

The Inter-Ministry Committee which also supports the work of the Women's Affairs Bureau continues to be responsible for promoting the formulation of gender sensitive policies within the Government structures and increasing the awareness of the importance of gender mainstreaming in effectively addressing gender equality. In recent years there has been a notable acceleration in the activities of this Committee.

Other substantial areas of support are the Guyana's Women's Leadership Institute (GWLI) and the National Resource and Documentation Centre for Gender and Development (NRDOCGD).

The GWLI has maintained its focus on capacity building, skills advancement and promoting gender awareness among Guyanese women. Its primary objective continues to be the development of the personal and public leadership potential of women in order to enhance their participation in the decision making process at all levels of society.

In the past year it has placed considerable emphasis on gender sensitization campaigns and governance with a view to increasing the participation of women in local government.

The NRDOCGD functions as a vital information resource for issues pertaining to gender, women and development, and the promotion of gender equity. Its core activity is the development and maintenance of an up-to-date information service, and networking with similar centers and women's organization locally, in the Caribbean, and in the wider Commonwealth and the USA. It also publishes a quarterly newsletter and has produced other publications aimed at preserving some of the social history of women. A major development has been the establishment of the Gender and Women Statistical Database which now facilitates the preparation of analytical reports and measuring the status of women.

A critical supporting mechanism has been the functioning of Regional Women's Affairs Desks manned by Regional Women's Affairs Officers in all ten administrative Regions. These posts effectively function as extensions to the Women's Affairs Bureau and deals with issues affecting women within the interior and hinterland Regions.

MIGRATION

Migration, a phenomenon which has affected a number of developing countries has affected Guyana. The level of trained professional specifically in the areas of education and health has posed a significant threat to our society. The continuous denuding of our human resources could seriously affect the quality of services provided and undermine the thrust of programmes aimed at poverty reduction and the positive empowerment of our young people. Urgent measures need to be adopted to restrict this debilitating situation.

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

Future Actions to advance the implementation of the CIM Strategic Plan of Action:

- There will be a strong lobby of women activists and organizations to have 50/50 participation of women in Parliament
- A review of existing legislation to ensure the maximum protection of women's rights and the removal of residual discrimination
- Accelerate establishment of the Family Court
- Emphasis on the removal of cultural barriers and prejudices which affect women through education
- Creation of an environment conducive to socio-economic development based on gender equity
- Promote measures to increase the participation of women in the workforce
- Promote training and education to enable women to secure higher paying jobs
- Advocate for the recognition of reproductive care and maternity benefits to be protected by law

- Reinforce all measures aimed at eliminating domestic violence and the eradication of poverty
- Advocate for gender mainstreaming in economic development policies