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NATIONAL REPORT
SAINT LUCIA



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(CIM)**

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NATIONAL REPORT SAINT LUCIA

Introduction

Saint Lucia is a 238 square mile (616 square km) island in the West Indies, with a population of approximately 165,000, of which 51% is female. Saint Lucia is an independent state and is a member of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

The Government of St Lucia in its commitment to providing accessible and affordable health care for all is beginning the implementation stage of a process of health reform, which began almost nine (9) years ago. *The health sector reform is based on the premise 'that a people who are well holistically will be maximally productive and therefore in a position to fully develop themselves, their families, their communities and the nation.'* The process ...*has been informed by the need to response to an increasing resource gap compared to both health needs and population expectations"...and " by the need to sustain health gains and protect the poor and vulnerable."* An important component of the health sector reform is the introduction of a national health insurance system, the Universal Health Care (UHC). While most developing countries are moving towards the privatization of health care, which can result in a reduction in the quality and accessibility of health services especially to women who are poor, the introduction of universal access through the UHC proposes to reduce the impact of poverty by making quality healthcare and services affordable and accessible to all.

Women and health continues to be an area for priority action for the Government of St Lucia, and every effort is being made to ensure that gender issues are explicitly addressed within the health sector reform framework.

The report will highlight some of the socioeconomic developments that impact the status of women, with a focus on the gender aspects of HIV/AIDS in the context of the National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan for St Lucia. A summary of the best practices undertaken regarding this issue will also be provided.

Socioeconomic Situation

In 2005 St Lucia experienced a real GDP growth rate of 5.4%, a continuation of the growth pattern over the five-year period 2001-2005. The economic growth was largely driven by activity in the construction and services (hotel, restaurant, banking and communications) industries. In contrast the agricultural sector, which is largely dominated by the banana industry, continues to register significant declines, with banana exports falling by 29.1 percent, and export revenue falling by 23 percent. Mean while, the prolong negotiations for the conversion of the European Union (EU) banana import regime from a multi quota and tariff regime to a single tariff structure, is continuing to add uncertainty to the industry. Many persons within the agricultural sector, particularly small farmers, are finding it extremely difficult to cope with the downturn in that sector. There is the need to build capacity within individuals and communities to effectively cope with these changes, and to train and retrain the displaced farmers to effectively make the transition into the more buoyant economic sectors. This is particularly important for women who worked in the agricultural industry, and are

now experiencing the negative impact of these changes. These women are now extremely vulnerable as most of them are heads of households and are solely responsible for the care and maintenance of the families.

Women and Poverty

In 2005, the overall unemployment rate was recorded at 18 %, with males representing 17.5% and females 25%. Although trends indicate a decline in the overall unemployment rate, the pattern of a higher level of unemployment among females continues, with the highest level among young women between the ages of 18-34. As a result intervention programmes have focused mainly on re-educating and providing skills training for young persons. Women are specifically targeted through these development initiatives, in an effort to alleviate poverty and reduce their vulnerability.

The National Skills Development Centre is continuing its Youth Apprenticeship Programme to provide unemployed youth with skills to enable them to be gainfully employed. Most of the training is provided in tourism and hospitality, the sectors of the economy with the highest growth. The National Skills Development Centre provides participants with a stipend to facilitate their attendance. The programme also provides childcare facilities for young mothers while they are attending the Centre.

A Human Resource Development Programme focusing on formal tertiary level training and informal entry level training for skills development in rural communities will soon be implemented. The programme is designed to combine training with other employment services, such as job search assistance. It is hoped that when fully implemented this programme will assist in the creation of a more skilled and marketable labour force.

Recognizing the importance of small business development in increasing economic activity and reducing unemployment, a Rural Small Business Credit Facility was established to provide grant funds to assist with accessing business loans from established financial institutions. Additionally, the National Development Corporation is also embarking on a programme of assistance for micro business development.

Women and Education

The goal of Universal Secondary Education was achieved in September this year, when all children were provided with a place at a secondary school. This is a major achievement given the importance of education and human resource development to the country's overall development.

Female enrolment continues to outnumber that of males at all levels of the education system, including enrolment in the adult literacy programmes at National Enrichment and Learning Centres.

Women in Power and Decision-Making

The political landscape in Saint Lucia continues to be male dominated. There is only one elected female parliamentarian. However, there are only three women participating in the upcoming

general elections, out of a total of seventeen (17) candidates for each of the two political parties. Although women makeup the majority of members of political parties, they continue to be reluctant to participate at the highest level. There is need for action to educate and encourage women to become more actively involved to ensure a greater level of gender equality, and to be in the position articulate the women's issues and concerns at the highest political level.

Violence Against Women

The Division of Gender Relations is continuing its efforts to promote zero tolerance of violence against women. The Women's Support Centre Programme, which provides a safe place for victims of domestic violence and their children has been operating successfully for the past five years. The programme includes counseling for the clients as well as a special programme for the children who witness the violence. A crisis hotline is also available on a twenty-four hour basis. Community support for the Women's Support Centre is being provided by a number of gender-based violence Community Response Teams. These Teams comprise specially trained community volunteers who provide support at the community level in situations of domestic violence.

Counter human trafficking activities are continuing. The focus has been on raising the level of awareness on issues of trafficking in persons. Research conducted during the implementation stage of the project indicated that there was a general lack of awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of trafficking in persons in Saint Lucia. The public was unaware that such a crime may be occurring and it was therefore important to raise awareness and sensitize the public on the issue. The Division of Gender Relations has also developed a data collection tool to assist with tracking incidents or cases of trafficking. The data collected will provide a more accurate picture of the situation in St Lucia.

The country was represented at meeting of National Authorities on trafficking in persons which was held earlier this year. The meeting examined areas of cooperation and to develop policies and strategies for the prevention of human trafficking. One of the significant outcomes of this meeting was the commitment by member states to implement legislative measures designed specifically to address all criminal activities involving trafficking in persons.

While it has been observed that trafficking in persons is not very prevalent in St Lucia, as a small developing country we must be prepared for that eventuality. Events such as the Caricom Single Market and Economy (CSME), which will allow the free movement of persons throughout the region, and the 2007 Cricket World, the increasing demand for adult entertainment as the country's tourism industry continues to expand, make us even more vulnerable to trafficking in persons. We must therefore continue to provide information to raise awareness, lobby our legislators to ensure that there are laws to address the crime, and form creative partnerships to combat human trafficking.

The Saint Lucia Medical and Dental Associations recently launched a national programme to raise awareness on the issues of child sexual abuse. The programme entitled "Good Touch Bad Touch" includes education and awareness building, and the promotion of mandatory reporting of cases of child abuse.

Women and Human Rights

The right to work is a basic human right to which every eligible individual is entitled. Worker rights are enshrined in the Saint Lucia's Constitution, as well as other international conventions acceded to by the Government of Saint Lucia. The Equality of Opportunity and Treatment in Employment and Occupations Act was legislated to protect workers from all discriminatory practices in the workplace. The Act ensures that employees are not discriminated against because of: religion, sex, marital status, age, colour, ethnic origin, race, disability, family responsibility, political opinion or pregnancy. The Act also criminalizes sexual harassment in the workplace.

In an effort to create awareness on the provisions of the Equality of Opportunity and Treatment in Employment and Occupations Act, the Division of Gender Relations has collaborated with several organizations to develop sexual harassment policies for their workplaces.

In May this year, Saint Lucia was finally able to fulfill its reporting obligations to the Committee for Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, after having been a signatory to the Convention since 1982. The combined reports are now being reproduced for public dissemination and discussion.

Gender Aspects of HIV/AIDS: Best practices in Saint Lucia

HIV/AIDS in St Lucia: A PROFILE

The first case of AIDS in St Lucia was reported in 1985. Since then the number has increased significantly, and at the end of 2005 there were 546 reported cases. St Lucia is at the low end of the scale among Caribbean nations with an HIV prevalence rate of 0.12 percent. Twenty-five (25) percent of all reported cases are through heterosexual transmission, but in a vast majority of cases the mode of transmission is unknown.

Early intervention programmes focused primarily on prevention, but in spite of these efforts the number of infected persons continued to increase. A major concern is the impact of HIV/AIDS on young females. Cultural practices such as multiple partnering among men, age mixing and low levels of condom use, women's poor sex negotiation skills, their limited access to information on sex and HIV/AIDS, and their high levels of economic dependency and poverty make women more vulnerable to the disease. Of the known reported cases 47percent are female, with the highest prevalence in the 25 -34 age group. The fatality case ratio is high, 8.6 percent between 1995 to 1999. Although more men have died over the period 1985 – 2001, the trend in the last ten years has been towards a higher mortality among women than among men.

It is believed that underreporting of HIV cases makes it difficult to provide a true picture of the epidemic in the country. The underreporting has been attributed to:

- an inadequate reporting or surveillance system
- the avoidance of testing, and
- the high level of stigma and discrimination.

The situation required a stronger infrastructure and systems to manage, monitor and keep the epidemic in check. As a result a National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan was developed to guide the country's response to HIV and AIDS over a five-year period (2005-2009). The government of Saint Lucia received assistance from the World Bank to develop and implement the Plan. A National AIDS Coordinating Council (NACC) was established to coordinate the national HIV/AIDS response. The chairperson of the NACC is the Prime Minister of Saint Lucia, thus ensuring political support for the programme at the highest possible level. A fully operational National AIDS Programme Secretariat (NAPS) was also established to administer the programme.

Non-Government Organizations such as the AIDS Action Foundation (AAF), established in September 2000 to help mitigate the spread and impact of the HIV/AIDS in Saint Lucia, also play an important role in the national response to the disease.

Best practices in Saint Lucia

Addressing Gender and Cultural Issues in HIV Prevention Among Young people.

Saint Lucia is currently participating in a policy -oriented research project, which seeks to promote positive change in the gendered perceptions and attitudes of the youth population towards interpersonal relations, reproductive health and rights. One of the projects strategies is to develop and support strategies and services to help young people understand, and change gendered social norms and behavioral pattern that are correlated with increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The overall goal of this project, which is being supported by UNAIDS through its Programme Acceleration Fund facility, is to provide a supportive and youth friendly environment that facilitates open dialogue on sexuality, reproductive health, gender dynamics and HIV/AIDS. Specifically the project seeks to:

- ❑ Strengthen the capacity of youth in community-based organizations and networks, local government and civil society organizations to develop programmes that promote HIV risk-free behaviours
- ❑ Empower young people, especially young women and girls, to claim and practice their sexual and reproductive rights to ensure safe sexual behaviours and practices, and
- ❑ Increase the ability of girls and boys, women and men to assert themselves within relationships and to negotiate safe sex.

Capacity Building for Mainstreaming Gender Analysis in HIV/AIDS Programming in the Caribbean

This is another regional project implemented locally by UNIFEM with a number of supporting partners, in response to the escalating prevalence rate of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly among young women, to support capacity building on gender and HIV/AIDS.

The growing rates of HIV/AIDS among women in the context of the important role that they play in Caribbean households, often as primary heads of households, could result in potentially devastating impacts on the stability of Caribbean households. The escalating prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS is driven by gendered behaviours, including violence against women and women's access

to change oriented programmes. This initiative was developed out of a series of discussions lead by UNIFEM to address not only the feminization of HIV, but the need for policy makers to have a better understanding of gendered causes and consequences of HIV/AIDS.

The objectives of the project include:

- ❑ Advancing gender mainstreaming of HIV/AIDS programmes at regional and national levels.
- ❑ Investigating gender differentials in the formation, implementation and impact of HIV/AIDS policies, processes and outcomes.
- ❑ Catalyzing and strengthening the understanding of gender differentials in the formation and implementation of HIV/AIDS at national and regional levels to improve gender equity outcomes and reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- ❑ Building capacity for training in gender-based analysis for all key professionals and workers.
- ❑ Ensuring that national machineries for women, women's organizations and social and health planners make inputs into and monitor policy and implementation consistent with gender equity goals.
- ❑ Strengthening inter-agency collaboration in HIV/AIDS programme design, implementation and monitoring from the gender perspective.

The National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan 2005- 2009

The overall goal of the Strategic Plan is to reduce HIV transmission and to mitigate the impact of HIV and AIDS on all levels of the society.

The Strategic Plan is defined by four broad strategies:

1. Advocacy & Policy Development

Priority areas under this strategy include:

- ❑ advocacy and the development of policy and legislation
- ❑ socioeconomic development
- ❑ protecting the human rights of people living with HIV and AIDS

2. Comprehensive HIV/AIDS care for all persons living with HIV/AIDS

Priority areas under this strategy include:

- ❑ treatment care and support
- ❑ eliminating stigma and discrimination

3. Preventing further transmission of HIV

Priority areas under this strategy include:

- ❑ services that must be implemented
- ❑ specially targeted groups for risk reduction programmes

4. **Strengthening national capacity to deliver an effective, coordinated and multi-sectoral response to the epidemic**

Priority areas under this strategy include;

- ❑ research and surveillance
- ❑ institutional strengthening and management

A major activity of the Strategic Plan is the Prevention of Mother -to-Child Transmission programme. This programme is ongoing and it is expected that by December 2006 all pregnant women will be routinely counseled and screened to determine their HIV status. Also by year end all pregnant women who are found to be HIV positive will be provided with complete treatment and guidance for the Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission, additionally, all clinically ready HIV positive antenatal clients will be referred to post delivery antiretroviral treatment. Studies indicate that antiretroviral treatments such as these can reduce the rate of transmission by half. Most importantly, all of these services will be accessible to all those who need it. These services will be available free of charge to the clients.

Activities of the National Strategic Plan also include increasing students participation in gender sensitive life skills and HIV and STI (sexually transmitted infections) prevention and education programmes. Gender sensitive human sexuality, life skills and HIV and STI prevention training are also being provided for teachers and principals to increase their capacity to inform students on such issues.

There are also plans to strengthen community-based HIV prevention programmes for women and girls, by providing training to women's groups and organizations to enable them to use the knowledge gained to inform and educate their members and communities in order to reduce their vulnerability.

Support for HIV infected children

Children who are infected very often do not receive the quality of care they require. Many of them have lost a parent or both parents, leaving them in situations of extreme poverty and need. The Government of Saint Lucia has instituted a special programme of assistance for children who are HIV positive and in receipt of public assistance. In addition to receiving the required medication free of charge, these children are now receiving an increase in monthly allowance from \$60 to \$250 towards their care and maintenance.

Understanding the link- Improving the Response: Violence against women and HIV/AIDS

Agencies working with women who are victims of domestic violence report that many of their clients indicate that the abuse usually includes some form of sexual violence. The unequal power relations, which results in violence and intimidation prevents women from taking measures to protect themselves, adding another devastating dimension to the issue of violence against women.

In response to this growing concern about HIV/AIDS and the connection with violence against women, the Division of Gender Relations through the Women's Support Centre (a shelter for female victims of domestic violence and their children), with financial support from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) conducted a training workshop on HIV/AIDS and violence against women for persons working with victims of domestic violence and girls at risk.

The objectives of the training workshop included:

- ❑ Sensitizing participants to issues of HIV/AIDS and its link with gender-based violence.
- ❑ Sharing information on gender-based violence with agencies working on issues of HIV/AIDS
- ❑ Establishing a programme support network among agencies/organizations working with victims of gender-based violence and those working on issues of HIV/AIDS.

The training has resulted in increasing awareness among women who are victims of gender-based violence, with agencies providing additional support and services for them. Additionally, all participating agencies working with victims of gender-based violence are now including issues of HIV/AIDS in their programming.

Know Your Status Campaign

The Saint Lucia Medical and Dental Association (SLMDA) in a programme aimed at promoting safe and healthy sexual lifestyles to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS implemented a ***Know Your Status Campaign***, which began in July this year during the carnival season. The SLMDA used the carnival season, which is generally seen as a time when people tend to adopt a carefree attitude, to encourage the public to test for HIV.

The campaign, which ran until September, was a tremendous success. Over forty (40) medical doctors and dentists were trained in Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) and Rapid HIV testing. Women outnumbered men in accessing this free service 3:1. The average age of the individuals tested ranged from 15 – 45 years. It was reported that an average of 550 individuals were tested per month, and over one thousand tested during the month of August. The national HIV Testing increased over 200 percent during the campaign period. This programme provided an excellent opportunity to promote openness about HIV/AIDS, and to empower the individuals who tested to take control of their lives and sexuality.

Conclusion

Mainstreaming gender in all national policies, programmes and projects to combat HIV/AIDS presents opportunities to focus on the needs of the entire population. It is essential to understanding HIV/AIDS transmission and initiating appropriate responses. Its application is important in countries such as ours, with limited resources to create an environment in which women and men can protect themselves and each other, and benefit from national interventions equality and equitably.

Never before has it been so important and urgent, for our nation to ensure mechanism are set, organizations, agencies and individuals are sensitized and enthused to make the attainment of social justice a reality for all. Social justice can only be realized when women have equal access to all resources including quality health care and education, are free from violence and the fear of violence, and are in positions political power.

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