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REPORT OF BAHAMAS

Statement
The Commonwealth of The Bahamas
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Since the landmark adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, twenty years after the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), The Bahamas has made strides to close the gender gap through legislative and programmatic initiatives. Significant progress was achieved in several areas to promote and protect the rights of women under the Millennium Development Goals and we are fully committed to the implementation of the 2030 agenda, including sustainable development Goal 5, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Constitutional Referendum

The Constitution of The Commonwealth of The Bahamas came into effect on 10th July, 1973, and despite guaranteeing basic rights, contained several gender unequal provisions related to inheritance and nationality. Several initiatives were undertaken to bring the Constitution in line with international standards and The Bahamas' commitments under international treaties to which it is a Party. At the time that The Bahamas ratified the CEDAW Convention in 1993, the Inheritance Law of The Bahamas was governed by the rule of primogeniture, which did not permit women to inherit from a person who died intestate, until or unless the entire male line of the family had been exhausted. In 2002, the Government enacted new inheritance legislation which permits men and women to inherit equally. Subsequently in February, 2011, the Bahamas withdrew its reservation to Article 16 1 (h) of CEDAW.

The first attempt to amend the Constitution was undertaken in a national referendum held in 2002 which was unsuccessful. In August 2012, a Constitutional Commission was appointed to conduct a comprehensive review of the Constitution of The Bahamas and to recommend changes thereto. A report from the Constitutional Commission tabled in Parliament in July, 2013 recommended that:

1. the amendment of the citizenship provisions to achieve gender-neutrality and full equality between men and women with respect to the acquisition and transmission of their nationality, and
2. the expansion of the definition of discrimination in Article 26 to include “sex” as a prohibited ground.

Four Bills to amend the Constitution was laid on the table of the Parliament by the Prime Minister in July 2014. One month later, in August 2014, the Constitutional Commission created a public education committee to move throughout the archipelago to disseminate information and to engage the public in discussion and dialogue on the proposed amendments. On June 7th, 2016 a referendum was held, which was unsuccessful.

Rural Women and Economic Empowerment

In observance of International Rural Women’s Day, (15 October 2015) the Bureau of Women’s Affairs partnered with the Huairou Commission and The Bahamas Network of Rural Women Producers (BAHNROP) on an initiative which focused on rural women’s contribution to sustainable development. The objectives of the initiative were to (i) explore the challenges faced by rural women, particularly in their entrepreneurial pursuits; (ii) show-case best practices with respect to food security and sustainable development and to (iii) develop new strategies to sustainable development through training, with particular focus on train the trainer programmes. The Honourable Melanie Griffin, Minister with responsibility for women’s affairs, led a delegation, including a representative from the Women’s Bureau and BAHNROP to Cat Island to meet and dialogue with women in agriculture, craft, agro-processing businesses. Some of the challenges experienced on that island include: (i) the need for a processing plant; (ii) a bottling factory; (iii) training for food processing and consistency; (iv) tomato processing training; (v) gravity feeding system, and (vi) the control of wild goats that disrupt produce.

During National Women’s Week, November, 2015, the Bureau of Women’s Affairs in partnership with the Institute for International Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), The Bahamas Agricultural and Industrial Corporation (BAIC) and the Exuma Foundation, held a workshop for female farmers on the Island of Exuma. Since this workshop, it has been proposed that the farmers be provided with drip irrigation systems, which would reduce the physical and psychological burden on elderly female farmers and provide a simple adaptive approach for those that still rely on subsistence farming.

Gender-Based Violence

Some global estimates state that up to six out of ten women will experience physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. While significant steps have been taken through national legislation and policies to address gender-based violence in The Bahamas, one of the hallmarks of these efforts has been the development of a concise, coordinated and measurable action plan that has been adopted by the Government and which will guide implementation of the legal framework, while seeking to eradicate the root causes of gender-based violence.

The National Strategic Plan to Address Gender Based Violence, which was produced by the Gender-based Violence Task Force appointed by the Rt. Hon. Prime Minister and co-sponsored by UN Women was tabled in the House of Assembly in February of this year. The Implementation Plan for the Report, which speaks to costing and ministerial responsibilities for the implementation of the “Ten Low Lying Fruit” and other aspects of the Task Force Report, would be finalized within a few months. To support the Government in finalizing the draft implementation plan, representatives from UN Women along with the National Task Force and the Bureau of Women’s Affairs held multi-sectoral meetings on April 7th and 8th, 2016. Additionally, funding has been earmarked in the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development’s 2016-2017 budget for the implementation of several programs in the Strategic Plan.

Women in Poverty

The Government has demonstrated to this segment of society further by its establishment of the Social Safety Net Unit (SSN) with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank, to oversee the implementation of an improved social safety net. The laying of the groundwork to guarantee a high quality of service to beneficiaries of the programme began in the latter part of 2013. Then, in June 2015, the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development launched the new social safety net programme called Renewing, Inspiring, Sustaining, and Empowering (RISE), a conditional cash transfer programme, which aims to reduce the number of Bahamians living at or below the poverty level – the number of which rose from 9.3 per cent to 12.8 per cent from 2001 to 2013.

In addition to consolidating existing social programmes for ease and efficiency of service provision and access, conditions to ensure academic achievement and promote healthy lifestyles have been tacked on to qualifications for receipt of programme benefits. Enrolment of clients into the RISE Programme began in March 2016 and by May 2016, 382 households had enrolled. The importance of this programme to women can be demonstrated by the results of a status quo survey conducted at one of the centres on New Providence which revealed that 72.16 per cent of the clients who accessed the services to be consolidated in the RISE Programme were female.

Elevation of the Bureau of Women's Affairs to a Department

The Bahamas' National Women's Machinery was established in June, 1981, some 35 years ago as a Women's Desk. Over the years, it evolved into the Bureau of Women's Affairs and currently undergoing a transition to the Department of Gender and Family Affairs. The Department, the formation of which was recommended in the draft gender policy and Strategic Plan on Ending GBV, includes the expansion of the Bureau's mandate, which primarily focused on women and girls to include men and boys and indeed the entire family.

The expanded mandate will also include alleviating gender-based violence, along with empowering women and girls and facilitating their access to resources and opportunities across sectors; engaging men and boys, particularly those marginalized and at risk of falling into deviant and/or criminal behaviours; strengthening the family as the fundamental unit of society; and generally improving the quality of life of women and girls and men and boys, families and communities throughout The Bahamas.

Bahamas Represented on the CEDAW Committee

Mrs. Marion Bethel-Sears, noted Bahamian attorney and writer, was successfully elected to the CEDAW Committee on 21 June, 2016 for the term, 2017 to 2020. She is the first Bahamian to be elected to a UN Treaty Body. Mrs. Bethel-Sears was also the 11th woman to receive the prestigious regional CARICOM Tri-annual Award for Women in July 2014.