

**XIV Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean**  
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**St. Kitts and Nevis – Contribution to High Level Panel Discussion (29 January 2020)**

The development of the National Gender Equality Policy and Action Plan brings new opportunities for the country to accelerate the implementation of the Montevideo Strategy in synergy with the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The experience of St. Kitts and Nevis in this process, including the involvement of the public/private sector, civil society, and non-governmental organizations will be reflected upon. In addition, following the recent Social Protection Bill, consideration will be given to the progress made, and challenges faced regarding the feminization of poverty, including the implementation of gender-sensitive social protection measures.

As a member state of the United Nations, the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis is involved in a number of UN (United Nations) strategy plans and goals and works steadily towards achieving those objectives. These include institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, measures to address women and poverty, provision for the education and training of women; normative frameworks which incorporate the sustainable development goals; specifically gender equality. Improvements in the quality of the lives of women are evidenced in the success of measures introduced in response to inequalities.

The Department of Gender Affairs is a unit within the Ministry of Community Development, Gender Affairs & Social Services. The Department has major responsibilities for raising awareness; monitoring and improving the status of women and girls in the country through the implementation of a number of International Conventions and declarations; as well as the Constitution of Saint Christopher and Nevis which speaks to equality between men and women. The Department's priority areas include the formation of a National Gender Policy, the empowerment of women and girls, the reduction of all forms of gender based violence and poverty elimination.

Situation in St. Kitts and Nevis

Many families in St Kitts and Nevis are headed by women who are the bread winners of their families; and bear the burden of raising families single-handedly. Data reveals that 60.2% of households registered with the National Household Registry are headed by women; and 53.8% of the women registered had more household members than men. Women and children can slip into poverty easily mainly for health and economic reasons and also experience different types of abuse. Income disparity exists between men and women as females tend to be employed in the lowest paid occupations. Although females graduate from institutions of education in greater numbers than men this is not reflected in leadership roles within employment.

The Country Gender Assessment for St. Kitts and Nevis (2014) conducted by the Caribbean Development Bank, highlighted issues that affect women who face obstacles in the access to, and control of resources associated with the challenges of employment, poverty and violence. Existing socio-economic practices affect the life chances of women and continue to perpetuate disadvantages. The following examples describe how the implementation of international and regional strategies has been adopted, given the national context and priorities.

## St. Kitts and Nevis National Gender Equality Policy and Action Plan

The formation of a national gender policy is a key priority; the objective of which is to provide an institutional framework that will assist the government of St. Kitts and Nevis in facilitating gender equality and empowerment, in keeping with the Sustainable Development Goals and other international instruments to which the state is a signatory. A national Gender Policy for St. Kitts and Nevis would be useful in addressing the many social issues that were highlighted in the Country Gender Assessment (2014). The policy is intended to address men's and women's biological and culturally constructed differences and bring equity to various situations to ensure developmental benefits for all.

In November 2018, the Ministry of Community Development, Gender Affairs and Social Services formally launched the St. Kitts and Nevis National Gender Equality Policy and Action Plan. All participating agencies and the wider community were encouraged to become involved and take ownership of this very important national initiative. The Department of Gender Affairs is the lead agency in this project and actively sought citizen participation through the creation of channels for dialogue with the general public and civil society to create an enabling environment for effective

Widespread consultations produced valuable qualitative data through stakeholder discussions and focus groups which formed a significant component of the process. The target groups included women's and men's organisations, public and private sectors, non-governmental organisations, community and faith-based organisations; civil society, the media, and female-headed families. The focus groups actively sought the views of stakeholders and participants contributed information where they identified the main issues affecting women and girls, men and boys, barriers to gender equality; and what they wished to see in a national gender policy. A total of 17 focus groups were held.

The initial project proposal was designed for a period of two years. Partial funding for twelve (12) months was received from the St. Kitts and Nevis National Commission for UNESCO. The first phase of the project was completed in December 2019, and the Ministry is currently seeking funding for a second phase to complete the gender policy in 2020.

### Feminization of Poverty

Poverty affects men and women in different ways. Income disparity exists between men and women as females tend to be employed in the lowest paid occupations. Employment figures for the years 2016 and 2017 show that of the earned wages in the Federation, females represented 48.6% and 48.3% respectively. The Government, through institutional frameworks, provides equitable access to a range of quality social protection programmes which are important to safeguard families from the impact of economic shocks, natural disasters, and other crises. Government interventions enhance the ability of the poorest and marginalised to manage economic and social risks and to ensure a basic standard of living.

### Social Protection Bill

In March 2019, the Government introduced a Social Protection Bill into Parliament. At its core, the Bill seeks to establish a social protection floor to guarantee each citizen a minimum standard of living which enables them to maintain their dignity by putting measures in place to alleviate poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion. Its purpose is to establish an institutional framework and administrative mechanism to improve efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery, in

addition to enabling good governance. Under this Bill an Inter-Agency Commission for Social Protection will be established with responsibility for portfolios which include social development, housing, finance, education, health, labour etc. The main duties of the Commission are to advise the Minister on the social protection floor, taking into account the objectives and priorities of the state, social policy needs, economic constraints, and fiscal space. It is intended to extend social protection cover based on eligibility criteria that will enable those in need to access essential health care; and the minimum income to enable access to nutrition, education, care and other necessary goods and services for a child; income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income in case of sickness, maternity, disability and employment; and income security for adults over retirement age or disabled persons of whatever age.

The Bill should shortly be the subject of a final national consultation before debate and passage in Parliament.

### Poverty Alleviation Programme

The Government, through its Poverty Alleviation Programme, seeks to improve the socio-economic status of citizens and residents in the Federation. The programme seeks to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2 and 10, namely no poverty, zero hunger and reduced inequalities.

Launched in August 2018 the Poverty Alleviation Programme, designed to provide monthly financial support to households with a total gross income below XCD \$3,000.00 (three thousand East Caribbean Dollars). The Programme was implemented in three phases; commencing with a data collection exercise, followed by assessment to verify eligibility; which culminated in payments to qualifying households on 24 December 2018. Qualifying households receive a monthly stipend (subject to receipt of other social assistance) of XCD \$500.00 (five hundred East Caribbean Dollars) by cheque or direct bank deposit.

As at December 2019, 4,000 households across St. Kitts and Nevis were benefiting directly from this social assistance initiative which has brought financial relief to vulnerable households.

### Teenage Mothers

Pregnant teenagers are a cohort who have been identified as an at risk group the require support. Data obtained from the Ministry of Health reveals that teenage mothers represented 12.2% of live births in the time frame 2016 to 2017. Teenage mothers in particular face multiple forms of discrimination and are negatively impacted by social and economic risks, e.g. lack of sexual education, early exposure to sexual activity and lack of life skills. Early pregnancy often disrupts education and entry to the labour market, and the possession of minimal skills limits earning potential. Data suggests that early pregnancy is often the start of a cycle of poverty.

The 1997 Cabinet policy decision which clarified the right of student mothers to continue their education led to the establishment of Project Viola in St. Kitts (2002) and the 'Second Chance Teen Mothers Program' in Nevis (2007). These longstanding programs, run by the Departments of Gender Affairs cater to school girls aged 14-19 who become pregnant; and aims to provide an enabling environment in which teenage mothers can complete their secondary education. Program activities include workshops on parenting skills and professional development, career exposition and financial assistance to facilitate educational advancement. Over 200 girls have benefited from this programme and are employed in careers such as medicine, teaching, nursing and law.

Social assistance is provided to remove financial barriers to education, e.g. cost of day care for babies, extra tuition, books and uniforms. Job attachments have facilitated teen mothers' entry to employment. In 2018, five of the 13 teen mothers (38%) in Project Viola were enrolled at continuing and tertiary education institutions. Students advancing to further education may receive additional financial support and benefit from scholarships.

The programmes are two of the most significant poverty reduction initiatives, which have had long lasting and far reaching effects. Project Viola is recognised by UNICEF as a best practice model in the Caribbean region.

### Women's Prison Programme

Incarcerated women are a group who face multiple forms of discrimination. Women are often the primary carers of children who are impacted by parental detention and imprisonment. The Prison Programme facilitates short term skills training and education for female inmates of Her Majesty's Prison to assist them with their personal and career development. The women received intensive training to develop business ideas and business plans and learned skills to start their own businesses upon their reintegration into society. Upon release some women are faced with unemployment challenges due to the stigma associated with incarceration; but with the assistance from the Department gainful employment is often secured. One example includes one woman who owns a Day Care facility which operates successfully

Prior to the start of the school academic year, and before Christmas incarcerated women are given an opportunity to spend quality time with their children and extended family. The donation of back-to-school supplies and small gifts at these events assists children who would otherwise be disadvantaged by having an incarcerated parent. Since the Prison Programme was re-started in 2017 there have been no repeated offences. Currently there are eight women in prison. Where appropriate, the Department of Gender Affairs provides advocacy services on behalf of inmates.

### Employment and Education

Women and girls are provided with access to economic and educational opportunities and designed to empower them to break the cycle of poverty. Women's economic enhancement is assisted by the island-wide network of Early Childhood Development Centres which helps women to balance work, caregiving responsibilities, and facilitate their entry to the workforce.

The National Skills Training Programme (NSTP) facilitates the Skills Training and Empowerment Programme (STEP) which has an emphasis on certification to increase participants' marketability in the workplace nationally and regionally. STEP aims to develop entrepreneurial and human resource capabilities and integrate participants into the workforce.

Vulnerable workers were granted protection following a minimum wage revision in November 2014 which increased wages to XCD \$9 (from XCD \$8) an hour or XCD \$360 per week; an 11% increase. Negotiations are currently ongoing for a further increase in the minimum wage.

With regard to education, indigent households have access to support such as a school meals, and programmes for uniforms, shoes, textbooks and assistance with the cost of examinations.

More women are ascending to leadership positions. In the public sector more women are occupying senior leadership positions and are particularly dominant at the level of Permanent Secretary (47.8%) with responsibility for important ministries such as Finance and Legal Affairs.

### **Legal Framework for Social Protection**

Current legislative commitments in Social Protection nationally and internationally which provide protection for women and girls include:

<b>Area</b>	<b>Legislative Commitment</b>
Social Services	Social Development Assistance Act (1977) The Domestic Violence Act (2000); and Domestic Violence Act (2014)
Social Insurance	Social Security Act (1988)
Child Protection	Criminal Law Amendment Act (1887) Offences Against the Person Act (1873) Maintenance of Children Act (1919) Probation of Offenders Act (1921) Adoption of Children Act (1944) Juvenile Act (1949) Age of Majority Act (1983) Status of the Child Act (1983) Probation and Child Welfare Board Act (1994)
Employment	Employment of Women, young persons and children Act (1938) Trades Union Act (1939) Factories Act (1955) Labour Act (1966) Holiday with Pay Act (1968) Apprenticeship and Tradesperson Qualification Act (1971) Protection of Employment Act (1986) Protection of Wages Act (1986)
International	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ratified in 1990 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) ratified in 1985

The provision of low-cost legal services for women living in poverty has been strengthened. In 2016 the Legal Aid Advice Centre in St. Kitts began a thrust towards Legal Aid Clinics in rural areas. Organised clinics covered a range of legal areas were accessible to persons unable to afford an attorney at the private bar. A total of 36 Legal Clinics were conducted by the Legal Aid and Advice Centre in 2016.

To conclude, the Government of St. Kitts and Nevis has worked diligently to accomplish a number of achievements in relation to women's autonomy and gender equality. State interventions incorporate the goals of the Montevideo Strategy in synergy with the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and illustrate commitment to the implementation of gender sensitive policies and social protection measures aimed at reducing inequalities and that realise gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.