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**GENDER POLICY : CONCEPTS, CONTEXT AND OUTCOMES**  
**LATIN AMERICAN AND THE CARIBBEAN:**  
A Brief Overview of the Third Decade for Women

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DAWN – Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era

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## **SUMMARY**

This paper has been prepared for the “Expert Consultation on Regional Perspectives in the

## **THE THIRD DECADE OF WOMEN: CONTINUATION AND CHANGE**

### ***Common threads***

In few key aspects, the evolution of Third Decade of Women (1995-2005) in Latin America and the Caribbean present many similarities to what has been experienced in the period ranging from the Mexico City Conference (1975) to Nairobi (1985) and from there to Beijing (1995). Each of these three conferences created in national societies – and particularly among women themselves – cumulative ripples of awareness about gender based inequalities and discrimination. In Latin America, each cycle has created the opportunity for sectors of women who had not been previously involved to be engaged. This would mean the gradual inclusion of rural, indigenous, black, lesbian women and young women, in both nati

*What is distinct in the post-Beijing era?*

Despite the common threads identif

A last comment must be made with respect to transformation at play in regard to the conceptualisation of gender as acknowledge is made of other manifestations of inequality and discrimination. Very clearly in the second half of the decade, particularly under the impact of World Conference against Racism and specially in Latin America, greater attention is being given to issues of class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, in order words the challenge of consistently tackling inter- sectionality. Last but not least it is necessary also to underline that in both regions the number of feminist academics and activists devoted to deepening the knowledge and understanding of gender and macroeconomics has definitely expanded. This is a very positive trend as it may in the years to come fill the gap mentioned above in regard to gender analysis in macro-policy domains.

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## Conceptual Frameworks: The Human Rights of Women

Women's rights have been part of the political vocabulary in Latin America and the Caribbean long before Beijing. Particularly in the case of Latin America, from the late 1970's the call for women's rights evolved interwoven with the notion of citizenship rights and has become a critical discursive tool in the democratizing processes that transformed the regional and political landscape. Nevertheless it is important to underline that after 1995 the idea of women's human rights has expanded both in terms of contents and boundaries. Probably the most striking illustration of this expansion is the understanding of violence against women as a human rights issue and the gradual legitimization of sexual and reproductive rights as a non negotiable dimension of human rights. Although the emphasis on sexual and reproductive rights is more clear and easily found in the discourse on NGO's and social movements, these two terms already appear in official documents and in the speech of policy makers.







The political climate of the CARICOM community continues to uphold democratic principles. Changes in government have not led to dramatic changes. But at the same time, the ‘marketization’ of governance – corporate influences and pressures to privatize the public sector – has created gaps in the relationship between the state and civil society in many countries with implications for transparency and accountability. Emphasis on market liberalization and foreign investment has also introduced levels of corruption previously unknown in these countries, and a widening gap between rich and poor.

#### **SOUTH AMERICA (FEW GLIMPSES BEYOND)**

After 1995, the political and policy context in Latin America can be grossly said to be divided in two phases. The first ranging from 1995 to 1999/2000 corresponded to a period of reasonable economic and political stability. By and large the democratic gains of the previous decade have consolidated in terms of both institutional frames and state-society accountability. But this was not always the case, as the Peruvian experience under Fujimori demonstrates. It is also important to observe that in the particular case of Mexico a late political transition has taken place in the second half of the 1990’s which led to the first multiparty elections (after 70 years of PRI rule) in 2000. Lastly it is important to remark that despite the fact that progress has been observed in regard to political and policy accountability, problems of corruption have not been fully resolved.

Even with the limitations listed above the 1990’s were a period of relative political stability that allowed for a gradual consolidation of democratic governance, meaning more that institutional democratic rules and periodic elections. Pratts (apud Guzmán, 2003) says that democratic

stringent structural adjustment policy was implemented since the early 1980s, some space has been open under the new democratically elected government (1990) to address poverty. Mexico by 1994 was already experiencing an advanced stage of privatization and liberalization when it was caught by an acute financial crisis, the first in a series that later would negatively affect the region as a whole. While many countries have extended privatization to all social sectors, this has not been the case everywhere (Brazil is a clear exception). Lastly not all countries have fully privatized the state owned economic sectors; the best example is Uruguay where a referendum in 1992 has greatly limited the scope of privatization.

By 1995 liberal economic frames were already in place in practically all countries of the region and signs of the instability inherent to globalization were becoming palpable. But national economies were growing, even if rates were not exactly astounding (ranging between 2.5 and 5.0 per cent year), and relative stability was experienced in 1994 – 1995 and right after Beijing. However the regional economic scenario will radically change after 1997- 1998 when the spill over of the global financial crisis initiated in Asia would lead to the turmoil of currency devaluation in Brazil that then spread to Mercosul countries and associates. A sequence of economic crisis resulted, which had a cascading effect on the entire region.

*The social expenditure with respect to GDP rose to more than 12% although there were no advances in the reduction of inequity to more acceptable levels”.*

Despite the depth and extension of these critiques and even if concrete policy measures contradicting the rules of the Washington Consensus have been adopted by the Argentinean government in 2001-2002, no substantive changes were observed in the conduction of macroeconomic policies in the region. And – as available official data indicates – the effects of these policies have been ravaging particularly in regard to employment. The economic stagnation – or in some cases open crisis has – unequivocally translated into political institutional instability. The Argentinean default political turmoil can be seen as an icon of the political scenario prevailing in South America in the second half of the Third Decade of Women, as it was preceded or followed by similar crisis in other countries: Ecuador, Venezuela, Paraguay, Bolivia.

Not surprisingly the perception of the population with respect to the benefits and cost of democracy is rapidly changing. Signs of discredit in democratic procedures, which were already identified by the Latino barometer since the late 1990s, have been strongly confirmed in the recently launched UNDP Reports “*Democracy in Latin America*”. The poll conducted by UNDP detected that in average the percentages of those who describe themselves as consistently democratic is of roughly 40 percent, while those who would approve an authoritarian regime that would provide economic security turn around 35 per cent. The collected data also informs that there is no substantial difference between male and female perceptions with respect to the gains and benefits of democracy. The factors lying behind these preoccupying figures would be the following:

*The main problems are poverty and inequality, which do not allow individuals to express themselves on matters of public concern as citizens with full and equal rights and which undermine their social inclusion. A key issue is unemployment, since work is one of the principal mechanisms for social inclusion and the very exercise of citizenship, which has*

assumed in the Caribbean and Latin America a different form than what is observed in other regions of the world, these forces are present in the two regions. They have expanded within countries but also influence the policy dynamics from outside. Moral conservative strands affect mentalities, social norms and the formation of policies, particularly in the domain of sexual and reproductive health and rights. In fact since 1999-2000 – when ICPD and IV WOW reviews occurred – and with greater intensity after 2001 these forces have, in each and every UN negotiation, tried to undo the 1994-1995 global consensus on gender equality and women’s human rights. Even if the whole they have not had much success within this ongoing trend one important gain they have made was the exclusion of ICPD and Beijing sexual and reproductive health and rights goals from the MDG indicators frame. More recently pressures to promote retreats in sexual and reproductive health existing policies are being exerted through bi-lateral agreements and donor assistance, particularly in the case of funds directed to HIV-AIDS prevention. Internally the expansion of moral conservative views on women’s roles, autonomy and particularly sexuality is identified in both Catholic and Evangelic manifestations. As it happens elsewhere fundamentalist forces build up on the spaces left open by lack of employment and social protection and are particularly appealing to male youth and very concretely pose a threat to the principle of secularity that is to be seen as a cornerstone of democracy.

## **ASSESSING IMPLEMENTATION: SOME ILLUSTRATIONS**

### **THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE**

Since the Beijing conference in 1995, three ministerial conferences on women have been held in CARICOM: Guyana (1997), Trinidad & Tobago (1999), & St. Vincent (2004). These Ministerial meetings are attended by Ministers responsible for Gender Affairs (the new designation for the former Bureaus of Women’s Affairs), heads of the Bureaus of GA, and officials from UN agencies and invited NGOs (e.g. CAFRA – DAWN has never been invited, partly a reflection of our lack of visibility in this region). This session draws on documents prepared for the 2004 Meeting, and incorporates my own observations and analysis. At these Ministerial meetings government commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action are reaffirmed and new recommendations made for more effective implementation. Although these are the expected official moves; they do not reflect either serious commitment by governments or by women’s organizations to effectively make the platform meaningful to women’s lives.

In the meantime, Beijing, along with all the other PoAs from the global conferences of the 1990s, has been upstaged by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs – renamed by Peggy Antrobus as the ‘Most Distracting Gimmicks’). The MDGs emerged at a time when the backlash against women’s equality and equity was already becoming evident. Given weakness of indicators on gender equality included in MDGs and the lack of a feminist consistent gender perspective on other goals (which are just as important for women) the use of the MDGs as the main frame to orient resource allocation by CARICOM governments is rapidly removing the technical coherence and political power that the Beijing PoA represents for women.



this includes large sections of the working population which is becoming increasingly informalized, casualized and lacking in protection for the most vulnerable categories of workers.

In the Caribbean the overwhelming majority of poor households (as high as 96% in St. Vincent and the Grenadines) are headed by women. The link between women, poverty and the economy is well understood in this region and a number of initiatives have been taken to address the needs of poor women. These include:

- (a) Gathering of statistical and other information on poverty and situational analyses of women
- (b) National Development Strategies that explicitly refer to the gendered face of poverty
- (c) Provision of public assistance to neediest groups
- (d) Enhancement of women's access to credit and savings mechanisms.

However, many of these are sporadic, rhetorical, small scale, dependent on project funding and in no way compensate for the macroeconomic policies and global trends that exacerbate the problem of poverty. While gender analysis is applied in studies and surveys that are about women it is se3res002 Tw(itiatives have been sJ1]TJ)]TTJ TDgile nse3res002]TJnt4 Tc-0.83023 Tw{nerab)5.7(



responsibilities to women.”

Source: Report of Caricom Ministerial Meeting of 2004

### Violence against Women

While it has been impossible to collect hard data on the subject, feminist in the region have a general impression that the level of violence in all societies have increased, and with it violence against women. Much of the violence is understood to be drug-related, while in Trinidad and Tobago kidnappings of the relatives of prominent business families are common. The ending of violence against women is a priority area for Caribbean women and, with support from UNIFEM and other regional institutions (including the Caribbean Development Bank!) there has been an on-going campaign, an expansion in services such as ‘hot lines’ and shelters. There have also been comprehensive and apparently effective training programmes with the police in all the countries. CAFRA serves as the focal point for both the campaign and training.

### Sexual and Reproductive Health

The Caribbean faces a unique challenge in the global health arena due to the diverse body of countries found in the region. One cannot provide an overview of health without acknowledging the differences in investment and investment capabilities in the health care systems. For example, only 24 percent of women giving birth in Haiti do so with a skilled birth attendant while other countries such as Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have 100% of births attended by a skilled birth attendant (HDR 2003). Average life expectancy in the Caribbean ranges from 50 in Haiti to 77.3 years in Barbados. For women the life expectancies are higher ranging from 50.5 in Haiti to 79.6 years in Barbados.

The Caribbean is second highest in prevalence of HIV/AIDS to sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to prevention interventions in investment



The language for the Beijing Platform for Action on health was initially defined through the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action. The Programme of Action defines the right to reproductive health:

*Everyone has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States should take all appropriate measures to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, universal access to health-care services, including those related to reproductive health care, which includes family planning and sexual health. Reproductive health-care programmes should provide the widest range of services without any form of coercion*

conceived as sexual and reproductive related mortality and morbidity programs at the ground level could be more effective in responding women's needs.

While some in the development sector acknowledge the necessity to incorporate HIV/AIDS programs into a larger sexual and reproductive health rights framework there is little political will to do this—a problem further perpetuated by the similar challenge of funding streams. In addition, a gender perspective is lacking in the majority of HIV/AIDS programs.

An illustration of these flaws can be seen in the recently published document on the Health Reform Strategy for Barbados that acknowledges that women do not have easy access to family planning services. In the same strategy however reproductive health is defined purely in terms maternal health and demographic growth, neglecting to acknowledge that women's health is dependent on access to quality health services outside of the scope of maternal health, including family planning services. The section on women's health discusses dynamics in the family contributing to women in the workforce, breast and cervical cancer, and obesity, leaving aside the critical sexual and reproductive health and rights dimensions emphasized by the recommendations of the Beijing PfA.

Reproductive cancer is also an important health issue for Caribbean women. Death by cancer is one of the biggest killers of Caribbean women; in Jamaica breast cancer is listed as the number one cause of death for women followed by cervical and stomach cancer. Cervical cancer rates are

Barbados, this law serves as a distinct barrier for young people's access to sexual and reproductive health services. In addition to limiting service provision to young people in existing clinics youth do not have any access to youth friendly centres, which distribute contraceptives, because they simply do not exist given the current policy. In Trinidad, "Rapport", an adolescent reproductive health facility exists for young people but many young people do not have access to these services. These programs seem to exist in some cases, within gray areas of the law.

In sexual and reproductive health and rights, abstinence based programmes clearly distract policy makers and young people themselves from the critical issue of an individual's choice (ability to choose) to make decisions in an environment free of moral coercion and with access to quality information. As articulated earlier, all sexual education is seen as needing to be done in an 'age appropriate' way—often governed by the age of consent law. This means that young people under the age of 16 often do not have direct access to information around sex and sexuality but rather are the focus of abstinence-based programming.

In addition, one can argue that abstinence based programming does not address the reality of young people's lives in the Caribbean, in a region where recent studies (PAHO) show that in some groups of young people around 40% have engaged in sexual intercourse before the age of 10. (A significant number of these young people reported being coerced at their first intercourse. This data points to a number of issues that need to be addressed in regards to the sexual health of young people including violence and sexual abuse).

### Highly Vulnerable Populations

Last but not least, groups such as sex workers and MSM experience situations of great vulnerability yet are further marginalized through policy, which makes their actions illegal. In some cases the HIV pandemic has spurred public discourse on the decriminalization or legalization of sex work or the laws that criminalize MSM behaviour. This is exemplified in a recent public debate on sex work and homosexuality in the Barbados. However, such dialogue is still thwarted by conservative forces despite the knowledge that improving the policy environment could decrease the vulnerability of groups high at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS such as sex workers and MSM.

It is also relevant to note that the CARICOM Pan Caribbean Partnership on HIV/AIDS Strategy, a key document in the regional programming on HIV/AIDS, does not identify women as a vulnerable group in their own right.

### Integration of a gender perspective

On the whole there seems to be a severe shortage of programmes, which openly address STIs, HIV/AIDS and sexual and reproductive health issues with a gender perspective. In most countries and institutional settings there seems to be a general confusion about what gender and gender integration really means. As it has been mentioned before gender approaches are constantly confronted by emphasis put on 'male marginalization', that derives from the data informing that young women are excelling men in education (exemplified by the greater number of women in the University of West Indies System). This idea has proven to be problematic as it seems to be taking attention away from some of the core gender issues that

women face: gender discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment, and violence against women including but not limited to domestic violence. It is imperative that programs and policies consider a gender perspective in order to maximize effectiveness.

#### **THE CARIBBEAN: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

There are clear limits to the implementation of any of the strategic objectives of the Beijing PoA in the Caribbean. Political will is critical in order to design and implement effective and credible policies and programmes that can substantively address the Strategic Objectives of Beijing. However, this is largely dependent on an active women's movement. The inertia of the movement in the Caribbean at present remains an important obstacle to progress in this area. The absence of advocacy efforts is particularly critical in the area of sexual and reproductive health given the dramatic impacts of the HIV-AIDS pandemics. Nevertheless, it must be said that few women's organizations have continued to take initiatives and to keep the Beijing PoA 'on the table. Indeed, the fact that it continues to be a point of reference is thanks to the reminders of the United Nation, the continuing struggles of the transnational/global women's movement that worked on these issues for and the efforts of individual women, some in local organizations, many linked to transnational networks, and some operating out of their own deep commitment to gender justice.

#### **SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRIES: MEASURING POLICY COMMITMENTS**

The post Beijing new wave of measuring and monitoring was particularly creative in South America. In most countries civil society networks and mechanisms emerged to monitor policy implementation in the most diverse areas. In few cases, this was done in articulation with formal accountability bodies that either existed before or were created after Beijing. Great investment was made in the design of methodologies, one example being the ICC, the Index of Fulfilled Commitment developed by the Gender Unit of FLACSO Chile.

Social Watch originally created an index to measure the fulfilment of country commitments to the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD, Copenhagen, 1995) and the Beijing PfA in 1997. The methodology examined elements of political will, indicators of implementation and distance in relation to outcome targets. Later on "Iniciativa" the Chilean feminist civil society network created to prepare for Beijing has adopted the index adjusting and expanding it in order to cover diverse areas and not just the few that were considered by the original Social Watch frame. The frame was then expanded by the FLACSO Gender Unit to be applied to other countries in the region. The Index of Fulfilled Commitments frame combines sets of information/data on policies and programmes in three baskets of pondered indicators – which in many ways are similar to the conventional index used to measure consume. These baskets cover three strategic areas of the PfA: Women's Political Participation and Access to Power, Women's Economic Autonomy and Poverty; and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (that encompasses gender based violence).

way to cope with existing differences in the national databases as well as to take care of the greater or lesser relevance of indicators in each country. Just as an illustration, in the case of Women's Economic Autonomy and Poverty: Argentina included information on male to female unemployment ratio; Brazil has an indicator on white and black women wage gap, Colombia measured the percentage of women earning more than one minimum salary, Ecuador emphasized access to credit and Uruguay included data on female employers.

The indexes were defined in relation to goals established for each variable. As an example the goal that provides the parameter to measure progress in regard to political participation is to achieve 50 percent of female parliamentary seats at all levels. In the economic autonomy area, one goal is that female salaries should one day reach 100 percent of male salaries. The original

ICC –Index of Fulfilled Commitment- Synthetic Results

| Country | Participation and Access to the Power | Economic Autonomy and |
|---------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
|---------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|

The existing knowledge about the political and policy environment in the seven studied countries also allow for an exploratory hypothesis in regard to actors, factors and forces that would potentially explain the variations between the indexes. For instance, gains in political participation can be attributed everywhere to a combined investment of institutions – particularly political parties -,state machineries and women´s advocates. On the other hand, the case of sexual and reproductive health achievements, most

the areas of political empowerment and sexual and reproductive health and rights (including gender based violence). In both cases, what ever progress made can and should be attributed to the persistent advocacy role performed by women´ s organizations, in some case operating under great funding restrictions, or else facing extremely unstable political and economic environments at national levels.



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