

ABSTRACT

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Paper Title: The Status of Rural Women in the Caribbean: 30 Years after CEDAW

Panel/Topic: Vulnerable populations, social exclusion, poverty and inequality / Gender, Health, ageing and disability

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The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 18, 1979. This Women's Convention promotes women's rights in the areas of social, economic, cultural, civil and political. The CEDAW was ratified by most Caribbean countries in the early 1980s.

After 30 years of implementing CEDAW, strides have been made in various areas for women in the region. However, women as a group is not homogenous and most rural women remain marginalized to these rights and benefits. Skewed national development perpetuates the exclusion of these vulnerable groups.

The current global economic crisis is projected to push more persons below the poverty line. In pointing the way forward, regional Governments are reminded of their commitments, under CEDAW, to the development of rural women.

Keywords: Siddier Elizabeth Chambers; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); rural women; Caribbean.

The Status of Rural Women in the Caribbean: 30 Years after CEDAW



The Commitment...

“Governments will ensure that the particular needs of rural women are met in relation to access to services, training and employment opportunities and social equity schemes, and act to eliminate discrimination against them.”

- CEDAW Made Easy, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2004

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 18, 1979.¹ December 18, 2009 marks the 30th anniversary of the Convention. CEDAW, which is also referred to as the Women's Convention or the Women's Bill of Rights is an international treaty/agreement that seeks to improve the status of women, in a bid to achieve equity between women and men. In essence, gender equity is the ultimate goal of the CEDAW.

Over the past thirty years, implementation of the CEDAW has helped to transform the lives of many women around the world. To date, one hundred and eighty-five countries have ratified the Convention. In Egypt, the Egyptian CEDAW Coalition, backed by the Egyptian National Council for Women, has been instrumental in enforcing CEDAW as a mechanism to advance women's rights and gender equality in Egypt. As a result of their effort, Egyptian women married to foreigners now have the right to pass their nationality on to their children; women can now apply for divorce without their partner's consent; and women can now apply for passports without seeking the approval of their husbands.² In Jamaica, the Convention influenced an amendment to the Domestic Violence Act (1995) in 2004³; the passage of Trafficking in Persons Act in 2006; and the draft Sexual Harassment Policy in 2007.

The Women's Convention has thirty (30) articles, with the first sixteen (16) articles focusing on the promotion of women's rights in areas such as social, economic, cultural, civil and political. The remaining articles provide details on the establishment and function of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Articles 17-22), and the administration of the Convention (Articles 23-30).

Article 14 specifically addresses discrimination against rural women. The Governments of the Caribbean (and all other signatories) who ratified the CEDAW committed to:

“take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:

- a) To participate in the elaboration and implementation of **development planning** at all levels;
- b) To have access to **adequate health-care facilities**, including information, counseling and services in family planning;
- c) To benefit directly from **social security programmes**;
- d) To obtain all types of **training and education**, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all

¹ CEDAW came into force September 3, 1981.

² See full story in Gender and Development – INBRIEF, Bridge Bulletin, Issue 21, March 2009 at www.bridge.ids.ac.uk

³ The amendment to the 1995 Act allows women in relationships to seek redress under this law if they find themselves being battered or violated.

community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency;

- e) To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to **economic opportunities** through employment or self-employment;
- f) To participate in all **community activities**;
- g) To have access to **agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology** and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in **land settlement schemes**;
- h) To enjoy **adequate living conditions**, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.

All the other fifteen Articles address discrimination against women as a group; however, the special needs of rural women are outlined in Article fourteen. The formulators of the Convention recognize that there are additional barriers and limitations for rural women to enjoy their rights. Therefore they included an entire article of preferential treatments for them. Embedded in this Article is the principle of equity, because it was clear to the framers of CEDAW that rural women will find it difficult to enjoy the same rights as other groups of women, without these special provisions. Rural women have two major hurdles – they experience discrimination because of their sex and location/development planning. It could be argued that this article addresses the hurdle of location/development planning.

Article 14 of the CEDAW highlights the need for equity among women and not only between women and men. This article is built on the fact that women as a group is not homogenous and efforts need to be made to meet the needs of different groups of women. This unconditional equity was also put forward by Mondesire and Dunn (1995) when they stated that, “the concept of gender equity shapes a new paradigm of development – one which demands a balanced approach to development planning, and one in which the theory and practice of human relations is based on a code of justice for all.”⁴

⁴ Towards Equity in Development: A Report on the Status of Women in Sixteen Commonwealth Caribbean Countries. Prepared by Alicia Mondesire and Leith Dunn. Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat, Georgetown, Guyana, 1995. Pg 5-7, 17-18.

The Reality...

“Rural communities, especially in Jamaica, have suffered economically as a result of an imbalance in development between rural and urban sectors. These communities are not able to support their own development because the economic base of those communities, which is agriculture, is so impoverished that it is not able to generate the resources to sustain its own development”

- Prime Minister of Jamaica, the Honorable Bruce Golding (The Gleaner, Friday, October 30, 2009 (News) pg.B8).

The level of equity in development planning for many countries in the Caribbean are called into question, whether it be equity among women or between rural and urban areas. The reality of the situation is that “in several countries, rural populations face higher levels of poverty, and higher unemployment. This condition and shortages of critical social services and infrastructure, combine to render rural populations a particularly vulnerable group” (Mondesire and Dunn 1995).

The situation of rural poverty is supported by the Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions 2006, which states that “consistent with the data of previous years, of all the persons who were classified as poor in 2006, the majority (65.7 per cent) was located in the rural areas.” In fact, a trend analysis from 1996 to 2006⁵ reveals that over 60 per cent of poor Jamaicans reside in rural communities. The analysis also reveals persistent underdevelopment in rural areas, based on the relatively steady increase in the distribution of poverty over the period, ranging from 64.2 per cent to 74.0 per cent.

Equity among women is critical to the full implementation of the CEDAW. In fact, the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)⁶ might be jeopardized if the needs of rural women are not fully considered and addressed because rural people experience higher levels of poverty and most of them are usually women.

Data on women are often presented as one general group, but this aggregated data sometimes hide the condition of vulnerable groups of women, such as the old, poor and rural. The needs of vulnerable groups, such as rural women, are better addressed when their conditions are assessed separately.

Status of Rural Women in the Caribbean

Article fourteen of the Convention sets out eight rights to be enjoyed by rural women, which Governments are committed to facilitate. The rights are summarized into eight areas:

1. Participation in development planning
2. Access to adequate health-care facilities

⁵ See Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions 2006, pg 15.

⁶ Especially Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) one (1) – eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and goal three (3) – promote gender equality and empower women.

3. Benefit from social security programmes
4. Access to training and education
5. Equal access to economic opportunities
6. Participation in community activities
7. Access to agricultural land, credit, loan and marketing
8. Adequate living conditions

An assessment of the selected countries' latest National Report⁷ to the CEDAW Committee provided information on the status of rural women under the eight rights. Below is a summary of the findings.

1. Participation in development planning

Overall, six (6) of the countries (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago) made provisions for rural women to participate in development planning. In Belize, development planning is hierarchical and its bureaucratic obstacles make rural women invisible. Barbados and St. Vincent and the Grenadines did not provide any information on rural women's right to participate in development planning. St. Kitts & Nevis did not provide information on rural women in general because there is no sharp distinction between rural and urban areas due to their small size. Antigua and Barbuda did not provide information on rural women and no explanation was given for the exclusion.

2. Access to adequate health-care facilities

Rural women in Barbados have access to adequate health-care facilities, this was also the case in Cuba, Jamaica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Limited service is provided to rural women in Belize and St. Lucia. Dominican Republic, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago did not provide information on rural women's right to adequate health-care.

3. Benefit from social security programmes

Social security programmes are provided to rural women in Cuba, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. Barbados, Belize, Dominican Republic, Guyana and St. Vincent and the Grenadines did not provide information on rural women's right to social security programmes.

4. Access to training and education

Barbados has made provisions for rural women to access training and education, also Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago. Belize, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Vincent and the Grenadines did not provide information on rural women's right to training and education.

5. Equal access to economic opportunities

Rural women have access to economic opportunities in Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, although in varying degrees. Dominican Republic, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Vincent and the Grenadines did not provide information on rural women's right to equal access to economic opportunities.

⁷ See table 1 below for year of reports.

6. Participate in community activities

Rural women in Belize participate in community activities, except the Mayan and Ketchi Indians. Cuba, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and St. Lucia have made provisions for rural women to participate in community activities. Barbados, St. Kitts and Nevis and Trinidad and Tobago did not provide information on rural women's right to participate in community activities.

7. Access to agricultural land, credit, loan and marketing

This is considered the basic right for rural women because their main form of livelihood is usually agriculture. Rural women in all the selected countries enjoy this right, although in varying degrees.

8. Adequate living conditions

Only Barbados and Cuba provide adequate living conditions for rural women. The living condition of rural women is significantly hampered by extreme poverty. In Dominican Republic, extreme poverty is five times greater in rural areas; Guyana – rural women represent the poorest and disadvantaged of all women, with less access to social services; Jamaica had mixed results – improvement in access to water and electricity but decline in toilet facilities; St. Vincent and the Grenadines – mixed results – improvement in transportation, most areas have access to telecommunication and electricity, but water access is limited in some areas as also affordable child care facilities. The condition is woeful for rural women in St. Lucia – poverty is more pronounced, living conditions are very deplorable: poor sanitation, sub-standard dwellings, lack of basic infrastructure services, such as road, communication systems, pipe-borne water and electricity, basic social services either unavailable or inaccessible. Belize and Trinidad and Tobago did not provide information on rural women's right to adequate living conditions.

Table 1
National Reports to the CEDAW Committee – Submitted and Outstanding

Country	Year of Ratification / Accession	Latest Report (year)	Outstanding Report ⁸
Antigua and Barbuda	1989	Combined 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd (1995)	4 th , 5 th and 6 th
Barbados	1980	4 th (2000)	5 th and 6 th
Belize	1990	Combined 1 st and 2 nd (1996)	3 rd , 4 th and 5 th
Cuba	1980	Combined 5 th and 6 th (2006)	-
Dominican Republic	1982	5 th (2003)	6 th
Guyana	1980	2 nd (1999)	3 rd and 4 th
Jamaica	1984	5 th (2004)	6 th
St. Kitts & Nevis	1985	Combined 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd and 4 th (2002)	5 th
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	1981	Combined 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd (1994)	4 th , 5 th and 6 th
St. Lucia	1982	Combined 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th , 5 th and 6 th (2005)	7 th
Trinidad & Tobago	1990	1 st (2001)	3 rd and 4 th

Sources: CEDAW Made Easy (UNIFEM 2004); <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>; http://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en#EndDec

The information above provides only baseline knowledge of the status of rural women in the selected Caribbean countries. Additional research is needed to better understand the conditions of this vulnerable group of women. However, inference can be made from the information provided about the conditions of rural women.

First of all, rural women's right to agricultural land, credit, loan and marketing appears to be priority for the countries in the region. This is based on the fact that all the countries, despite challenges in other areas, ensured that these women enjoy this right, although in varying degrees. It also highlights the interdependence of agriculture and rural development. However, the benefits to rural women, of the close connection between agriculture and rural development need to be explored.

Secondly, most rural women in the Caribbean enjoy the right to participate in development planning and community activities. These women have been able to influence policies and programmes that affect their lives. This participatory approach to governance is purported to make beneficiaries more receptive and possibly have a positive impact on the outcome of policies and programmes.

⁸ Under the provisions of CEDAW, States have to prepare and submit a National Report one year after they have ratified the Convention. After that, reports are to be submitted every four years or when the CEDAW Committee requests them.

Thirdly, the challenge for rural women in the Caribbean relates to their right to basic social services such as health-care, training and education and economic opportunities. Most rural women lack these rights. These rights are critical to transforming the status of rural women. The lack of basic social services has directly impacted their living conditions, which for most is in a deplorable state.

Fourthly, lack of data has significantly restricted the analysis of the status of rural women in the Caribbean. In fact, the condition of rural women in Antigua and Barbuda is unknown because of lack of information. Also, all the countries, except Cuba, Jamaica and St. Lucia, did not provide information on one or more of the eight rights of rural women. This lack of data is also reflected in the outstanding National Reports. All the countries, except Cuba, have outstanding reports. Lack of data was also a challenge to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) while assessing social development in the region. ECLAC noted, "...lack of strong quantitative data was hampering policy analysis and advice in many member States. Thus, poverty assessments and poverty reduction strategies were constrained by the lack of access to reliable, high-quality data" (The Newsletter of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee, Jan-June 2006, www.eclacpos.org).

Finally, this review also highlights underdevelopment of rural areas in general. In countries like St. Lucia where over 50 per cent of the population resides in rural communities, it can be argued that approximately half of its population is under-developed. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Governments of the Caribbean have not invested enough in rural development and have failed to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against rural women. After thirty years of implementing the CEDAW in the Caribbean, there has not been any significant improvement in the status of rural women. This appalling conclusion calls for immediate evidence-based and rights-based interventions to rescue this vulnerable group of women from the effects of the global economic crisis. Also, this is not the picture one would want to see with only five years before the target date of the Millennium Development Goals.

Going Beyond Survival...

“The [global economic] crisis has opened challenges that our policymakers will be forced to address and opportunities they will be foolish to ignore.”

- Marcelo Giugale, Director of Policy and Poverty Reduction Programme for LAC at the World Bank

Caribbean women are depending on their governments to put their commitments into practice. These women are waiting on their governments to fulfill the commitments they made to them when they signed the CEDAW. The basic survival of impoverished rural women of the region hangs in the balance. They have waited for many years to benefit equally from their government’s resources. The provision of social services for the disadvantaged and vulnerable is one of the functions of governments.

In charting the way forward for rural development, Dr. Chelston Brathwaite, Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture highlighted the main challenge when he declared that “current development modules have created a rural bias in which the approach to growing the economy is to develop the urban sector. In developing the urban area we have ignored the rural communities” (The Gleaner, Friday, October 30, 2009 (News) pg.B8). However, the current international economic crises and global landscape require the countries of the Caribbean to chart a new course for development in general and rural development in particular. This new development approach must be built on the foundation of equity for all.

The current trend in the global socio-economic landscape requires Caribbean governments to implement a more inclusive approach to development. Regional integration is merely a concept for most leaders, but it needs to become a reality if the region is to move beyond survival. Diversion of fund from the region, decline in interest by developed countries such as UK, low standard of living for most citizens of the region, and the state of most economies renders integration a viable option. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) also recommended the need for a regional approach to social development in its Social Development Framework (SDF)⁹ for the region.

The SDF recommended some approaches that could possible help the region move beyond survival:

1. Deepen the thrust for gender equity and equality
2. Reduce inequality and promote social justice
3. Strengthen cohesion in poverty reduction programming
4. Ensure quality education and skills training are available
5. Reform public health systems to increase quality, efficiency and availability

⁹ See www.eclacpos.org for details of the Social Development Framework.

6. Engage in social impact assessments of poverty initiatives
7. Support policy analysis and research
8. Review legislation (with a view to regional harmonization) that address social protection, in light of the free movement of persons in the CSME

In an assessment of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) after the 2008/2009 global financial and economic melt-down, Marcelo Giugale, Director of Policy and Poverty Reduction Programme for LAC at the World Bank, reminded the region that it cannot be *la vida loca*. He outlined some challenges and opportunities and warned that it will take years to fix the problems, but the new global reality will make reform unavoidable.¹⁰ Below are some of the challenges and opportunities he stated:

Challenges	Opportunities
Invest too little in research and development	Focus on equality of opportunity (give everybody the same chances rather than the same reward – equity rather than equality)
Lack of protection for intellectual property	Demand more of the State – spend more, regulate more and protect more.
Lack of innovation	Rebuild the relationship between our State and our people
Universities are disconnected from their businesses	Multilateral lenders promised larger lending capacity and fairer representation

¹⁰ The Gleaner, Wednesday, January 20, 2010 (Business Commentary), pg.C12