

NEW WOMAN Struggle

WAND'S Bi-monthly News Bulletin

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STRUGGLE HIGHLIGHTS OPINION ON THE POWER OF THE WOMEN'S VOTE

The Belize Woman, the Newsletter of the Belize Rural Women's Association (BRWA), carried a pertinent message regarding women, in its issue preceding the recent General Election in Belize. However, the message is applicable always - not just at the time of a General Election. Its pertinence to the way of life of women calls for on-going attention to it.

To provide the women's vote with power, the whole sex must rally to a recognition of the potential of women. We must cooperate and collaborate with Government and Non-Government Organisations in the promotion of women's rights and an understanding of women's needs. We must act together in a continuous and relentless demand for participation in decision making at all levels.

The BRWA is a private, non-profit, non-political organisation. Lucia Engleton is a member of the BRWA team. She wrote the feature carried in issue of NEW STRUGGLE.

An Apology

WAND wishes to apologise to the NEW WOMAN STRUGGLE readers for the delay in the production of the news bulletin.

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ISSUES AND THE WOMEN'S VOTE

by Lucia Engleton

I would like for each one of us to reflect on the following scene. "There is a woman crouching down with her head on her arm. One of her feet is chained to a block. She is heavily veiled.

A man comes in with a pencil and a voting paper. As she stands to welcome him with joy the veil falls from her head. She shows him the block and chain but again he pays no attention. Before he leaves he points disapprovingly to her veil and she pulls it over her head again as she bows down despondently."

Let me draw a parallel in the real life of women in Belize. With the upcoming election both political parties are seeking the women's vote by launching women's organisations. I feel good that both are making this move. But at the same time I am saddened because both most likely will forget the promises they made on the rostrum once they gain power. In reality what this means is that in an election year the political parties have again come to realise the significance of the women's vote.

Women deserve more than this. Politicians need to be sensitised on the issues that affect women. We do not wish to be seen only as a number, but instead, as women who are contributing to the development of Belize. We are teachers, farmers, factory workers, midwives, and the list goes on. We are also in many cases unemployed, poor and overworked doing two jobs at the same time, one of which is housework. We are unwell, illiterate, stressed, refugees, abused, raped, prostitutes and seemingly powerless.

At a glance you may say that there are jobs. What jobs? Jobs that take women from their homes from 5.30 in the mornings until 5.30 in the evening, as many of them have to travel long distances to earn a measly \$75.00 per week. Jobs in which the

working conditions are poor and women are given very little time for break and lunch.

Many women cannot find adequate daycare for their children. They leave their children in the care of older children or unattended and locked up in a house for the neighbours to mind. In one such instance a neighbour watched helpless as a house went up in flames with the child engulfed by the fire. The alternative is for the mother to spend most of her small income on daycare that is inadequate.

Because of these problems with employment and inadequate support systems, many of us women depend on our partners for providing support financially, and we feel obliged to tolerate his abuse and bossy behaviour. This in many cases, results in frustration and also making us a victim of the system. Again, many women unable to find jobs turn to prostitution in order to take care of their basic needs. Recent studies indicate that there is a growing number of Belizean prostitutes, some of them are as young as eight years old. Illiteracy, stress and overwork are additional issues that make the block that we must drag along with a chain around our feet, overbearing, and which makes us powerless.

CAN THE POWER OF THE VOTE HELP US?

Yes, it can, but only if we recognise that we have the potential to make a difference.

We need to demand more participation in government, and representation in the legislature to implement legal and policy decisions in our interest. We want to participate more fully in family planning programmes and to have a say regarding the protection of our bodies against dangerous drugs which are used in birth control.

You may say that we have a Department of Women's Affairs which will look after this for us.

This department, according to the Minister of Social Services, Mr Philip Goldson, should serve as a "catalyst" in motivating women's groups into action. They cannot do it alone.

Recently the Cabinet approved a policy on women. This policy mentioned issues of concern including discrimination, injustices, health care, unemployment and physical and mental violence.

Now we need to see an early plan of action; action such as those which have been spearheaded by non-government organisations such as the BRWA. Our activities have included craft promotion projects for women, support of women in our mental institution, and outreach programme for women to share and learn about Belize firsthand, promotion of traditional, healing practices, validating the contribution that women make in development, training women on gender issues, self-help initiatives and women and human rights.

Despite our limitations, there has been a significant impact made by NGOs as opposed to the little achieved by the Department of Women's Affairs - **which I must remind you is our representation in Government.**

As we approach the general election we must stop to think about why is this department not functioning the way it should. How can we get it to do what it should do? Will a government body be the best form for advocacy for women? Not alone. We need another Women's advocacy group which is not restricted by political biases and the bureaucracy in order to serve in promoting the best interest of women in Belize. And we are all here. The Breast is Best League, the Belize Family Life Association, the Belize Women Against Violence Movement and YOU. I challenge you to take this initiative one step further - to action!

INVESTING IN WOMEN IS KEY TO FUTURE

Investment in Women is crucial to the achievement of slower population growth and environmentally sound economic progress, according to UNFPA's 1989 State of World Population Report.

In many countries, in addition to bearing and minding the children, women spend many hours in productive but unpaid labour. The wide-ranging consequences of ignoring the needs of women include: uncontrolled population growth, high child mortality, a weakened economy, ineffective agriculture, a deteriorating environment, a divided society and a poorer quality of life for all.

The Report says development plans must be completely rethought, so that women's abilities, rights and needs are taken into account at every stage. It recommends, among other things:

- Review the legal system to remove barriers to women's full participation in society and the family on an equal basis with men, and eliminate the legal basis for discrimination;
- Educate both men and women, starting in the school system, to accept the principle that women and men are equal in value and have equal rights in society and the family;
- Promote women's access to decision-making and leadership positions in government and private sector and ensure women's involvement in the programmes affecting them;

Make family planning a development priority, with an allocation of not less than 1 per cent of GNP of the countries concerned.

The Report also lists a number of specific goals for the year 2000, including:

- Extension of family planning services to 500 million women;
- Increase of international assistance for family planning programmes from US\$0.5 billion to US\$2.5 billion per year;
- Reduction of maternal and infant mortality by 50% and 50 per 1000 respectively;
- Expansion of girls' enrolment in primary school to at least 75% and in secondary school to at least 60%;
- Increase of women's literacy to at least 70%.

"Investing in women" the Report says, "will not put an end to poverty, remedy the gross inequalities between people and countries, slow the rate of population growth, reduce the environment, or guarantee peace, but it will make a critical contribution towards those ends. It will have an immediate effect on some of the most vulnerable of the world's population. And it will help create the basis for future generations to make better use of both resources and opportunities."

STATUS OF WOMEN IN DOMINICA

Although the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) improved a sense of awareness in issues affecting women; women themselves benefitted by increased confidence and self esteem; and development initiatives have attempted to increase the participation of women remains to be done as far as mainstream development goals are concerned. Women have not had much opportunity to participate in major national programmes involving roads, electrification or construction. There is need for more sympathetic social planning for improved participation of women in all sectors of national development, if they are to live up to their potential and influence social change.

Women make up 51% of the Dominican population. But, while in the case of Services the female participation exceeds the male very significantly, in the other two main Economic Activities - Agriculture and

Construction - men's preponderance is far greater. In spite of the fact that more than 50% of the voters are women, only 4 of the 30 MPs are women. Under the law, women now have equal status to men; maternal legislation provides for the support of women; and child maintenance is required. However childless women in common law situations have little recourse to financial support under the law.

A number of programmes involve women in a range of activities which include income generating, small business, personnel and organizational development, research and advocacy. Much has been done and much remains to be done. It is essential that programmes be directed to the changing roles and needs of women, if they are to participate fully in Dominica's development.

DOMINICA: JOBS AT WHAT COST TO WOMEN?

Dominica, like other CARICOM States, has attempted to attract enclave-type assembly industries, by offering tax holidays and factory skills. Until recently, the minimum wage was frozen and the unions agreed not to unionize workers for two years, to allow the enterprise to "take off" economically. So far the only enclave industries established in Dominica are Gloves Ltd and the clothing manufacturers Silver Star Ltd. Dominica lacks an adequately developed infrastructure involving airports, seaports etc. There has been greater success in attracting locally owned and local resource-based enterprises, which in any case are more beneficial since they have more direct linkage with the country's economy.

Between them the companies employ 310 workers - nearly all women. Pay is described as "not much" and a workday starts at 7.30 a.m. and

ends at 4.00 p.m. There are three breaks - 2 for 15 minutes and one for 30 minutes. Working conditions are far from ideal.

The article, by G Rabess concludes:

It is clear that our women, like their counterparts in Jamaica, pay a hard price - low pay, tough conditions, anti-union pressures - as a result of job creation strategies based on enclave industries. We cannot accept any suggestions that "workers must be prepared to accept a little exploitation" for the sake of a few jobs. Our women deserve better at the workplace - decent pay, adequate working conditions and the inalienable right to union membership as a guarantor of both.

• From: *KOUDMEN*, May 1989.

A BISHOP WHO WON'T BE ONE OF THE BOYS

When Barbara Harris is consecrated as the first woman bishop of the Episcopal Church, the ceremony will be conducted according to the Book of Common Prayer. The language will be gender-inclusive only to the extent that the pronouns will be changed to account for Harris's gender. "I did not elect myself," she says, dispelling any notion of a personal feminist crusade. "The church is doing this."

At the age of 58, Harris is comfortable working inside - and outside - the establishment. In the 1960s she went to Mississippi for the voting-rights campaigns; she also marched from Selma with Martin Luther King. Back home in Philadelphia, she joined the Sun Oil Company, and eventually became its chief public-relations executive. In 1974, when a group of Episcopal bishops defied the ban on ordaining women, Harris led the procession at the ceremony and then decided to become a priest herself. After her ordination in 1980, she served as the Philadelphia jail's chaplain and later directed the church's publishing company. In her spare time she took shots at the church's leadership in a

column she wrote under the heading "A Luta Continua" (The Struggle Continues). Along the way, she was married and divorced.

Stately at the altar, powerful in the pulpit, Harris is determined not to provoke Episcopalians who cannot accept a female bishop. For the moment, she is sidestepping controversial issues: she pledges to be concerned with issues of justice while not becoming a "gadfly". Closer to home, her superior in the Diocese of Massachusetts, Bishop David Johnson, has agreed initially not to send her to any parish that finds her presence "painful" - so long as parishioners agree to meet with both Johnson and Harris. And a half dozen traditionalist bishops have warned that they will refuse to accept any priests she ordains in their dioceses. Nonetheless, Anglicans put great stock in tolerance and civility, traits that Harris expects to survive. Will other women follow in her wake? "It's a massive institution," she observes, "and institutions, like elephants, are hard to turn around."

BIRTH CONTROL PILL FOR MEN SOON

A birth control pill for men will be ready for marketing in the 1990s. The World Health Organisation has been sponsoring a three year nine nation test study involving hormone injections. The study has been so successful that researchers expect the treatment to be put into tablet form soon. In a typical test, a group of 28 British couples reported no pregnancies after the first

twelve months of volunteering for the treatment. The sperm count in men given weekly injections of testosterone, a hormone related to sperm production, eventually is reduced to zero. Unlike vasectomy, hormone treatment is reversible. Also, the test produced no known side-effects.

• From: *International Dateline*, May 1989

NEWS from WAND

The Women and Development Unit (WAND) of the School of Continuing Studies, U.W.I, in collaboration with the National Black Women's Health Project (NBWHP), Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A, is organising an international exchange between women health professionals, representatives of both grass roots organisations working on health issues and women's organisations.

The three day meeting begins on August 07, 1990 and participants will be attending from Nigeria, Brazil, U.S.A. and the Caribbean.

This event comes as a follow on to an earlier visit this year to Nigeria by WAND and NBWHP. It is expected that as a result of this exchange further

collaboration between territories will be identified and developed. Attention will also be paid to cultural sharing and exchange.

The specific objectives are:

- To explore issues of women's health in the context of health delivery systems.
- To bridge the distance between women health professionals and women's organisations concerned with health.
- To examine strategies and methodologies for the promotion of wellness through the empowerment of women.



Women and Development Unit
School of Continuing Studies
University of the West Indies
Pinelands, St. Michael
Barbados, West Indies