**Women in Power and Decision –Making
in the Caribbean**

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<u>Introduction</u>

This report is based on responses from agencies in seven independent states and in one dependent territory in the CARICOM Caribbean, representing 40% of targeted respondents.   As such, the comments have to be taken as preliminary, awaiting a broader data base. It is however expected that the findings so far will generate discussion and lead us to a sharper focus on the issues related to this goal of the Platform of Action, namely advancing women's position in power and decision-making within the formal structures of Parliaments in our region.

The report examines the range of actions/strategies taken to advance this agenda and the institutional changes which have taken place . Attention is placed on the challenges and limitations that are encountered in efforts to move this critical issue forward. The report puts forward the recommendations of the Bureaux of Women's / Gender Affairs as well as of the Consultant.

A report on this theme invites comments on a number of related issues: what we mean by 'political participation' at the level of parliaments; who, participates...looking at questions of class and race/colour , geography-town or country. The matter of the allied areas, for example, as Permanent Secretaries where women do have a higher participation, for example...how do these aspects of public responsibility speak to the issue of decision-making? What of political participation the level of local government ? And to what extent is any do women have decision-making authority in the private sector (of business) which they can yield in the 'political' arena. This latter question comes to my mind in the context of Jamaica where the presidents of the Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica, and of the Jamaica Manufacturers' Association are females.

Examination of these issues might not so much lead us to new conclusions. It may moreso assist us to take a more nuanced assessment, examination the spaces outside of the parliament where women 'political' influence might be exerted. The question of what difference this may make is a related issue.

Range of Actions Taken.

- context of greater visibility of women,
The reports reveal that in the majority of cases, while the goal remained a priority, outside of the long established Policy Statements on Women, no major   policy provisions were made in the review period that have spoken explicitly to the goal of women and decision-making.

What we can say is the issue of women's entitlement and capacity for leadership has been coming to the fore. On the one hand, women are gaining some visibility and demonstrating competencies in sports. Anguilla speaks to the excitement generated by women in football and sailing; in The Bahamas and in St. Lucia , the Heads of State is are women.   While these are highly symbolic, they do confront socially embedded ideas about the place and role of women.

 Women are also gaining visibility also because of our growing and greater vulnerability in the age of globalism and its adverse effects on our states in the growth of poverty, health and HIV/AIDS, and violence. Women and children are the

main persons affected. The regional responses, for example through legislation that seeks to safeguard women's interests have created wider awareness of gender inequity. The picture of a man speaking to issues of equity and women's rights can be of tremendous value in this regard.! [1]   At the same time, we must note that such legal measures can harden opposition to women's gender interests, and the intent of the law is not fulfilled without the machinery for their effective implementation. These are issue that are more fully explored in other sections of the overall report and link with obstacles that are discussed later in this report.

We need however to consider how the wider global, regional and national context might influence actions that are taken to advance the specific goal of women and decision-making and the impact on the outcomes of such actions.

- increased recruitment of women as election candidates
The responses examined point to three levels of actions taken to support women in politics and decision-making. The first is recruiting more women to contest national elections. This direction however is rooted not so much in a conviction expressed in policy to promote gender equality and empower women as much as in what one could call political expediency on the part of political parties. In the case of The Bahamas which did not even as the women in politics goal as a priority and still does not even have a policy statement on women, the change towards increased numbers of women candidates emanated from the political parties from 1992, intent to gain the reputation of being 'first' in respect of promotion of women in one sphere or another. - a trend that has continued.

The closest one comes to a policy linked to a perspective based on a consciousness of women's need to be involved , representing a tendency towards some level of 'affirmative action' finds its clearest expression in Dominica, at the local government level. Here the government enunciated a policy of nominating women to fill at least 2 of the 3 positions on councils if they were not among those elected.

-training/mentoring of female leaders
The second level of action is in the area of training/mentoring of women leaders and public sensitization on the issue of women and politics.   Of significance in this aspect, is the work of civil society organisations for example, in Trinidad and Tobago, in Anguilla (preparing for elections in 2005) and in Jamaica. The initiative of one of the   'women's arms of political parties, as in the case of St. Lucia where some mentoring is taking place, significantly takes the struggle towards the inside of the party itself.

- advancing women's agenda through partnership of state and civil society.
This third area of action to advance women in politics and decision-making, also finds its best expression in the Bahamas which reports a high level of contact and cooperation between the Gender Bureau and civil society organisations. Through monthly meetings and joint events, women's potential and contributions are highly visible and attracts interest from the political parties. The rising prestige of women

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[1] The Jamaican Senate recently passed the Family Property (Right of Spouses) Act which will give to common law unions, the same property rights granted to married couples. The law recognises the rights of common-law spouses who have lived together for at least five years. Commenting Senator Dorothy Lightbourne "looked back at 'old days' when men controlled the money and the woman's contribution was not recognised". Senator Keste Miller's comment, coming from a man, was perhaps more forceful: ... "gone are the days when a man could say to his wife, 'come outta mi house' ", he said. See **Senate passes law to recognise common-law unions**, in **Daily Observer**, Saturday February 7, 2004, p. 5

as competent managers is clearly linked to their being sought after as 'winnable' candidates, in a society which places a lot of emphasis on hospitality.

It seems that the presence and active involvement of National Advisory Councils of Women with the National Machineries do provide a basis for building copperation with wider sections of civil society. This in turn can assist the National Machinery to adopt a stronger posture in promoting women's gender interest. However it seems that fear of either the political independence of such a body and of its possible alliance with opposition forces might be among the factors inhibiting the appointment of such body. Could this be the case in Jamaica where assurances have been given but no action taken? Information on the existence, functioning and potential of these bodies need to be further explored.

Institutional Changes

In this section, we examine the extent to which changes in the composition of parliaments have taken place over the past five years since 1998.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 below, provide data that indicate aspects of the changes that are taking place at the level of institutions of power and decision-making, specifically within Parliaments (lower and upper houses) and governments at the level of the Cabinet

Table 1 - Women's Representation in Parliament in the Caribbean 2004*

COUNTRY	LAST ELECTION	LOWER HOUSE		UPPER HOUSE		TOTAL (%)
		#	%	#	%	
Anguilla	March 2000	0/7**	0	0/12	0	0
Bahamas	May 2002	8/40	20	7/16	43.7	26.8
Belize	March 2003	1/29	3	3/13	23	9.5
Dominica	January 2000	2/19	10.5	4/9	44.4	21.0
Jamaica	October 2002	6/60	10	4/21	19	12.3
St. Lucia	December 2001	2/17	11.8	4/11	36.4	21.0
St. Vincent & The Grenadines	2001	2/22	18	2/?	-	-
Trinidad & Tobago	October 2002	7/36	19.4	11/31	35.4	26.8

*Data available for only 8 territories.
**Numerator of each fraction (e.g. 0) denotes no. of females; denominator of each fraction (e.g. 7) denotes total no. of Parliamentarians.

Table 1 above shows that both The Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago, have equal numerical standing in terms of women's representation at the highest level of decision-making. A closer examination will put The Bahamas ahead from the fact that more women won their seats in direct electoral contests and have a larger presence at the level of the Cabinet (table 3) than their Sisters in Trinidad and Tobago.

Numerically, Dominica and St. Lucia are standing side by side, but Dominica does have a better gender balance at the level of the Senate than St. Lucia does.

Table 2 below, looks comparatively at the levels of women's participation in Parliament in 1998 and at the present time. The picture emerging for each territory is as follows:

Anguilla
- The situation has not changed over the years

The Bahamas
- Moving forward…from 15% in 1997 to 20% in 2002…in elected positions and at Cabinet levels from 12.5-25%
- Nominated Senate falls from 50% in 1997 to 44% in 2002.
- Women comprised 23% of candidates in the 2002 elections, hence the results show a high level of acceptance of women

Table 2 - Women's Representation in Parliament in the Caribbean
A Comparison of 1998 and 2004

COUNTRY	% 1998*	% 2004	% CHANGE
Antigua & Barbuda	8.8		
The Bahamas	19.6	26.7	7.1
Barbados	20.4		
Belize	15.8	9.5	(6.3)
Cuba			
Dominica	13.3	21.0	7.7
Dominican Republic			
Grenada	18.5		
Guyana	18.5		
Haiti			
Jamaica	17.3	12.3	(5.0)
St. Lucia	14.3	21.0	6.7
St. Kitts/Nevis	14.3		

St. Vincent & The Grenadines	9.5	18.0**	
Suriname			
Trinidad & Tobago	20.9	26.8	5.9
Dependent Territories			
Anguilla	0.0	0.0	0.0
Aruba	-		
British Virgin Islands			
Montserrat			
Netherlands Antilles			

* Source –Linnette Vassell, **Women , Power and Decision-Making in CARICOM Countries: Moving Forward From a Post-Beijing Assessment** in Gender Equality in the Caribbean: Reality or Illusion , Edited by Gemma Tang Nain and Barbara Bailey, Ian Randle Pulishers, UNIFEM & CARICOM Secretariat, 2003.
** Lower House only.

Belize

Shown reversal since 1998 when women held 15.8% positions in Parliament (Lower House – 6.9% and Upper House 44.4%).

Dominica
- Overall increase in Parliament from 13.3% in 1998. Area of progress is in Senate selection.

Jamaica
- Reversal in both elected House of Representatives and nominated Senate. 1998 showed overall 17.3% but presently there is only 12.3% - a 5% decrease.
- Women also saw decrease in their representation at the Local Government level. Women were 24% of elected Councillors in 1998 and currently 16%, an 8% decrease.

St. Lucia
- Shows advance in the nominated element over 1998.
- Note - "an unprecedented number of women (9) ran for office" in 2001.

St. Vincent & The Grenadines
- Appointment of 2 women to the Senate marks an advance over 1998. Data on total number of Senators needed to complete the computation.

Trinidad & Tobago
- Shows advance over 1998 figures…mainly in elected element…from 4 to 7 female members of Parliament.

The main questions that arise are:
  i.   What accounts for the dramatic decline in women's participation as candidates and as winners of the electoral contests in Belize and Jamaica? and

  ii. Can we speak of an overall trend towards increased participation across CARICOM Caribbean.. and if so, what are the key factors at work…and what are the conditions for sustaining the trend?

These are issues that can be more fully addressed when additional data are available and particularly when the issues are discussed with partners in the respective territories. The reversal in Belize comes after a period that exhibited great potential for change.[2]

Women at Cabinet Level

Table 3 below examines the extent to which women are at the table of decision-making at the highest level of government and the areas in which they hold portfolio responsibility.

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[2] See Vassell, 2003, pp.21-23.

Table 3 - Women holding Cabinet Positions in the Caribbean 2004

COUNTRY	# in Cabinet	% in Cabinet	PORTFOLIOS HELD
Anguilla	0/7	0	
The Bahamas	4/16	25	• National Security • Financial Services and Investment • Social Security and Community Development • Transport and Aviation
Belize	1/13	3	Was Minister of Defense and National Security; now Minister of Human Development
Dominica	0/8	0	Two women are Parliamentary Secretaries assisting with the Ministry of Community Development and Gender and the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth. There is a reversal of women's participation at this level for there were 2 female Ministers in the previous administration.
Jamaica	3/17	17.6	• Community Development and Sports • Industry and Tourism • Education and Culture
Trinidad and Tobago	4/19	21	• Legal Affairs • Education • Community Development and Gender Affairs • Culture and Tourism

The data show that there is a broadening of the portfolio responsibility that female Cabinet Ministers are now holding in the territories reporting to date. While women still hold positions to do with the human sciences and development, areas such as defence and national security, industry and tourism and financial services bring forward women's competencies in areas traditionally reserved for men. The appointment in The Bahamas of the first Female Deputy Prime Minister is seen as politically significant as well.

Issues of the class composition of the female leaders emerging is of importance. There is indication from the Bahamas that more women from the working class are coming forward and being accepted into leadership and positions in the state. There is need for more information across the territories on this, because we have to be

more penetrating of the issue of 'participation', to ask ourselves, which women are participating…and what is the nature of women's participation …what degree and quality of participation are we speaking about even when they are in the parliaments and Cabinet…and what difference does it all make to our institutions?

Challenges and Limitations

Based on the litany of challenges and obstacles cited in the various reports, the answer to the last question posed above, was clearly that women's participation, however defined and describes, was not brining any significant change to peoples lives or the process of governance or the political culture in our region.

There is little or no change in the analysis of what the main factors at work. (See Matrix) They were seen to include the following:

i.   The persistence of the culturally embedded gender biases that justify women's subordination and men's power in society.

ii.   The strengthening of the "male marginalisation thesis in explaining gender relations in the Caribbean….dialogue has shifted from women's subordination to male under-achievement".

iii.   The political culture of "dirty politics"; women politicians get trapped in partisan positions.

iv.   Acceptance of women of assigned gender roles; women not supporting women.

v.   Weaknesses in understanding of the relevance of gender; weak women's advocacy around our gender interests and weakness in women's organizing, absence of "viable organisations of women", is how the picture appears in one territory.

vi.   Insufficiency of training on gender and related issues; lack of finances;

These are the usual factors that are cited from year to year. What is missing is a ranking of the most critical factors.

What are the new factors emerging?

In this aspect emphasis is placed on the following:

- paucity of research data in the Caribbean on gender inequity in terms of development issues and related,

- absence of gender sensitive indicators to inform advocacy

- lack of understanding of gender issues at the "macro and non-social" levels of development.

Summary and Considerations Towards Recommendations

-      **search for a strategic direction: gender and sustainable development**

More and more, it is evident that we cannot isolate the matter of women in power and decision-making from the other areas of the Platform for Action which were adjudged to be critical for the Caribbean. It is clear from reading the reports that there is understanding of the inter-relationship between what is happening in the economy and society as a whole and what takes place in the politics. However this is not sufficiently examined and understood because we have tended to see the POA in the segmented 12 areas, or 5 depending on our priorities.

We have to move away from this segmented approach onto a sustainable development framework that works within the understanding that addressing economic, social, environmental and governance relationships together lay the foundations for progress.
It means further that the justification for advancing women's political power and decision-making must be positioned within this broad understanding.

 It is not possible to chart the relationships in any direct sense without further research, without designing of indicators for measuring and monitoring and looking with the gender and sustainable lens at the macro levels and issues. The new and emerging issues that are cited above speak to questions of approaches and strategies.

The approach taken in constructing the Millenium Development Goal (MDGs) **to promote gender equality and women's empowerment** provides a useful framework for analysis, further research and action to move our strategies forward in this direction. The indicators of Goal (3) for example, speak to a mix of issues as follows:

- ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education

- ratio of literate females to males of 15-24 years old

- share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector

- proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament

With all their weaknesses, including imprecision and narrowness in terms of the Caribbean experience, these indicators are a starting point to refine the tracking and measurement of achievement of the goal. However, for this to be done, the goal, target and indicators need to be review and extended; they need to be localized within communities, nation states and the region.

 Politically, this task if done in a participatory manner can serve to bring some women and men closer onto the same page and strengthen the basis for acceptance that there is a problem to be addressed! It sets the stage for a massive public education that can be linked to specific issues of poverty, gender based violence, HIV/AIDS etc.

Mainstreaming gender requires that research, gender analysis, sensitization, advocacy policy and programmatic responses permeate from the macro to the micro levels, and take advantage of the thrust from the global environment which the MDGs also represent.

Recommendations .

i.   Women's Bureaux and their partners (IGOs, CSO etc) need to begin to examine
and refine, extend and advocate around indicators for the goal of **promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.** (This is of course a reformist agenda that does not sufficiently address the question of transformation of society for the benefit of the most vulnerable), but this is where we are now).

ii.   There is need to link with the global initiatives and issues that so heavily impact women's lives and that of their families, and therefore provide justification for women to enter politics to deal with these issues. Linking with the issues, meaning understanding them from a gender perspective.   This **calls for research and advocacy.** Critical issues include:

-Our position as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the importance of the **Barbados Plan of Action (BPOA)** that seek to address our vulnerabilities. The recent Nassau inter-regional SIDS conference called for gender analysis and monitoring of the BPOA as it will emerge from the 2004 global review by the UN.

- Water and Sanitation and Gender. Water, sanitation and hygiene are axial issues in the achievement of the MDGs as well as the BPOA. Poor sanitation robs people and especially women of dignity (bottom line), but is not a sexy voting issue. What is happening with sanitation is a hidden issue but it is a key global issue, thanks to struggles at WSSD.

iii.   We need to seek/pres for the establishment of a CARICOM Women's Advisory Commission to strengthen the work of the CARICOM Desk in the context of the current restructuring period in CARICOM and onward. The Commission will help to harmonise actions across the region and bring the issues up close to the governments. I am developing proposals on this following preliminary discussions with some colleagues at the Nassau meeting.

iv.   A programme of action to support needs to be piloted in different territories; eg:
- training among parliamentarians (gender, MDGs, gender budgeting etc)
- the encouragement/development of women's caucuses within parliaments
- joint action between parliamentarians and civil society /women's organisations around specific issues

v.   There is need to isolate across the Caribbean, or further afield a few influential men who will advocate around the issues of gender and social equity and the advance of women's gender interests.

There are at this stage enough sisters at the levels of parliament in the respective territories that we can rely on to sustain there case studies. A first stage is to share the report coming out of this assessment with them and give them an opportunity to feed into the assessment themselves.

vi.   A regional public information programme based on the findings of research, dealing with issues of gender and sustainable development needs to be mounted using institutions like CARIMAC and linking with regional communications agencies.

vii.   A massive fundraising programme for regional actions needs to be mounted. We need to use the Caribbean links in the international arena (for example with the UN system) to help strategize on this issue of bringing resources for the mounting of selected regional-wide programmes through UNIFEM.