Assessing the Institutional & Cultural Environments for Gender Equality Programming in the Caribbean

Regional Advisory Group on Gender & Development
December 8-9, 2011
Barbados

1. Introduction
Madam Chair, Distinguished participants: I am pleased for this opportunity for engagement with the Regional Advisory Group on Gender & Development and thank UN Women and CARICOM for inviting me to participate in this dialogue; and, to share some thoughts with you on the potential of the institutional and cultural environments for promoting gender equality programming in the Caribbean – quite a challenging topic to adequately address within the allocated timeframe but I will try to be focused and to the point.

2. The institutional environment
I start with the institutional environment and from the outset will posit that gender equality programming in Caribbean states is not only dependent on national institutional frameworks but has also been driven by agendas set by a number of international and regional organisations and associations representing various political groupings. I will make reference to three such groupings which have had significant impact on gender equality programming in CARICOM member states:

1. The United Nations and its related entities;
2. The Organisation of American States; and,

The United Nations
I think I can safely claim that the most significant impact on the women’s movement and gender equality programming in the Caribbean has been the influence of a variety of UN entities. A significant marker in this regard was the staging of the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the UN body established to ensure the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. Peggy
Antrobus (1988) notes that, the 1975 conference ‘launched a new era in global efforts to promote the advancement of women by opening a worldwide dialogue on gender equality’¹.

This first conference spawned a number of important institutions and initiatives that have significantly influenced gender equality programming in the Caribbean. A significant hallmark of the conference was the call for the development of a convention on the elimination of discrimination against women, with effective procedures for its implementation. The CSW was mandated to spearhead this initiative and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* entered into force on September 3, 1981 and in 1982 the *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women* was established as the Treaty Body to monitor implementation of the Convention.

All CARICOM member states save Montserrat have ratified the CEDAW Convention often referred to as "the bill of rights for women" because it codifies international standards for eliminating discrimination against women and for protecting their rights and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. It is therefore a powerful tool for guiding and setting gender equality programming in countries that ratify and commit to the Convention. An *Optional Protocol* to the Convention, entered into force on December 22, 2000, enables women who are victims of sex discrimination and who have exhausted all domestic remedies, to submit complaints to the CEDAW Committee for assessment and action but to date, only three CARICOM states have ratified the Optional Protocol (Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, St. Kitts & Nevis).

The Plan of Action coming out of the Mexico conference also gave birth to the *International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)* and the *United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, now UN Women)*; and, in the latter case the Caribbean Office ,has been a pivotal institution in promoting and supporting gender equality programming in the region. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has a strong record

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of supporting gender equality programmes in the Caribbean particularly in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights. More recently, the region has endorsed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) although there has been a critique of the extent to which indicators, particularly those related to MDG3, are responsive to Caribbean realities.

In terms of impacting gender equality programming in the Caribbean, two other international bodies merit consideration. The Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), a specialized entity of the Organisation of American States, which oversees the efforts of the OAS to promote gender equality in the region. Among other things, the Commission is mandated to:

- urge governments to take appropriate measures to remove barriers to full and equal participation by women in the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural spheres;
- promote the adoption or adaptation of the legal measures needed to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

Most significant in regard to the last point, is the Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) which entered into force in March 1995 and establishes that violence against women constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This Convention has been ratified by all CARICOM Member states except for Montserrat.

The Commonwealth of Nations has spearheaded significant programmes in the Caribbean through the Commonwealth secretariat. A centre piece of the work of the Gender Section of the Social Transformation Unit is guiding implementation of the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 which provides the framework within which member states are urged to advance gender equality. The Secretariat has also offered technical support to Caribbean NMs particularly in the area of gender and trade and gender budgeting.

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3. **Response to the international institutional environment**

But, what has been the regional and national response to these many international initiatives and how has gender equality programming in the Caribbean fared in relation to the influence of the international institutional environment? I will, briefly identify, what in my opinion, have been some of the ‘positives’ and ‘negatives’ as Caribbean states have sought to buy into but at the same time re-engineer the international agenda for gender equality to suit the unique needs of programming in the region.

Let me start by noting that the observance of the 1975 International Year for Women and the Mexico City Conference had a significant global impact and acted as the catalyst for governments around the world, including Caribbean governments, to establish institutions to integrate women’s roles in social and political development. Peggy Antrobus (1988)\(^4\) chronicles some significant events in this regard. She notes that the Government of Jamaica was the first to establish a Women’s Desk in 1972 which, in 1975, was upgraded to the Women’s Bureau; during 1975, Commissions on the Status of Women were established in Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana; in Grenada a Ministry of Women’s Affairs was established in 1979; and, by the end of the decade all CARICOM countries had set up Women’s Desks or Bureaux.

The catalytic action also permeated the regional environment and during the decade various regional technical institutions were set up to focus on gender and development issues. These included:

- The Women and Development Unit (WAND) of the Extra-Mural Department of UWI;
- The Women’s Desk at the CARICOM Secretariat;
- An Advisor on Women’s Affairs at the Caribbean Office of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). (Antrobus, 1988)\(^5\)

The conference and the international decade also impacted the academic community and of major significance was the launching of the *Women in the Caribbean Research Project* headed

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by Professor Joycelin Massiah\textsuperscript{6} who was then Director of the UWI Institute of Social and Economic Studies, Barbados. The Women and Development Studies groups established on each of the three campuses of the UWI grew out of this project and were the precursor to the Centre for Gender and Development Studies campus Units and finally the establishment of the UWI Institute of Gender & Development Studies.

The first world conference was followed by three more in 1980, 1985 and 1995 and each of the four conferences brought the international community together around common concerns and sought to produce an effective plan of action for the advancement of women in all spheres of public and private life, all of which were adopted by Caribbean governments represented at these meetings. Most, if not all persons in this audience, are familiar with these outcome documents and none would deny that they have had a profound effect on gender equality programming and continue to provide an essential blueprint for promoting women’s economic, social and political empowerment in CARICOM member states.

The 1975 Mexico conference adopted the First World Plan for Action\textsuperscript{7} which called on governments to develop strategies that would integrate women in development and peace-building. The Second World Conference, held in Copenhagen in 1980 came to a close with the adoption of a Programme of Action\textsuperscript{8}, which identified a number of factors accounting for the discrepancy between legal rights and women’s ability to exercise these rights which needed to be addressed. The Third World Conference held in Nairobi in 1985 produced the Forward-Looking Strategies to the Year 2000\textsuperscript{9} set out a series of measures for achieving equality at the national level through constitutional and legal steps as well as promoting equality in social and political participation and decision-making. At the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995 UN Member States unanimously adopted the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)\textsuperscript{10} aimed at addressing twelve critical issues, which constituted barriers for the advancement of women.

\textsuperscript{7} See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/otherconferences/Mexico/Mexico\%20section\%20I\%20II.pdf
\textsuperscript{8} See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/otherconferences/Copenhagen/Copenhagen\%20Full\%20Optimized.pdf
\textsuperscript{9} See http://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/nfls/Nairobi1985report.txt
\textsuperscript{10} See http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/pdf/BEIJIN\_E.PDF
By adopting the plans coming out of the world conferences and other global meetings which followed, governments committed to the inclusion of a gender dimension throughout all their institutions, policies, planning and decision-making. These world conferences identified issues consistent with the Caribbean situation and therefore provided a blueprint for gender equality programming.

Additionally, some definite benefits were derived from engagement with the international and regional institutional environment and this was at its best leading up to and just after the 4th World Conference. Leading up to Beijing, strong technical and financial support was offered to CARICOM member states through a well orchestrated, collaborative among a number of regional institutions and Prof. Massiah played a leading role in that process as Head of the UNIFEM Caribbean Office.

The consultative and collaborative effort continued beyond Beijing with the CARICOM Secretariat taking the lead in the development of a *Post-Beijing Regional Plan of Action to the Year 2000* which was intended to serve as a guide for Member States to prepare their own national Action Plans and in this regard several actions, including gender mainstreaming, were identified to be pursued by Government and NGOs. Specific actions to be taken at level of the Secretariat were also suggested.

At the national level, one strategy employed by some NMs to respond to the many mandates for promoting gender equality emanating from the international community, some of them legally binding, as well as national imperatives, has been the development of national gender policies which seek, through a multisectoral, integrated approach, to mainstream gender in all public sector ministries and entities responsible for addressing the wide ranging issues and actions highlighted in these instruments and documents.

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Briefly put, the international institutional environment has created driving forces which, in many ways, have created a strong impetus for gender equality programming and the development of regional and national institutions to support and manage these programmes. So generally, the institutional environment has had the potential to exert a positive impact on gender equality programming.

**The Post-Beijing period**

I would however contend that, particularly in the post-Beijing period, there have been a number of militating factors operating at international, regional and national levels that have posed a significant challenge to gender equality programming and threaten to erode the gains made in the pre-Beijing period. In many instances, the euphoria of the 80s and 90s has given way to pessimism and disillusionment, conceptual confusion, a lack of clarity of mandates and a sense of a derailing of the agenda for gender equality which ultimately has at its core the social, economic and political empowerment of subordinated women and men – because some men are subordinated!

The shift, I believe, is primarily due to three intertwined and interlinked environments that have militated against Caribbean states taking optimal advantage of the impetus created by the institutional environment for gender equality programming:

1. The economic environment;
2. The political environment; and,
3. The cultural environment.

In terms of the economic environment, an important factor was the post-Beijing diversion of international funding to support what was determined to be more critical and urgent needs of women in countries engaged in internal and sometimes external armed conflicts as in Afghanistan and other Islamic states where these conflicts were underpinned by political transitions and economic dislocation. Additionally, issues such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, particularly in the African continent was seen as an imperative and the focus for funding support therefore shifted from the support of gender equality programming to these more specific and urgent issues.
This shift in funding support was soon to be followed by the accelerated pace of globalization and the institution of more neo-liberal trade and financial policies and practices which had a definite impact on national economies especially in small, developing countries. Fiscal constraints resulted in public sector reforms and reduced spending in numbers of areas such as health and education. An inevitable spinoff of this situation was reduced attention to women’s issues and, in fact, an increased burden on women as well as the exacerbation of the usual problems of locating and resourcing national machineries mandated to address the status of women. The net result was a sense of tokenism rather than any purposeful political will to give necessary and sustained attention to the situation of women whose success in the educational arena was and is often used to justify this neglect. I clearly recall Prof. Massiah’s public lecture, the title of which vividly summed up the widely held perception that there has been enough attention to women and their needs so ‘What more do women want?’ The recent global economic recession has, of course, further weakened the financial base for gender equality programming globally and particularly in developing countries such as CARICOM member states.

The state of the macroeconomic environment is very closely intertwined with the political environment for gender equality programming and the weak economic base has been used to justify the lack of political will to support the agenda as reflected in the under-resourcing of Caribbean institutions at both regional and national levels. At the national level NMs have been severely impacted and are marked by features which undermine their capacity to implement, monitor and evaluate gender equality programmes; viz.:

- Marginalised in ministries that carry multiple mandates aligned with social programmes and therefore afforded less attention and resources than other areas such as trade negotiating machineries;
- Lack of decision-making power in the governance structure;
- Constant shifts from one ministry to another;
- Change in leadership which is often aligned with change of the governing political party;
• Lack of adequate human and financial resources and therefore the technical skills to advance the GMS mandate.  

The weak positioning and resourcing of the NMs is reflected in the poor track record demonstrated by the region in terms of timely reporting under international obligations such as CEDAW, the Belem do Para Convention and the Mid-Term Review of the Commonwealth Plan of Action as well as an increasing absence from the table at critical sub-regional, regional and international meeting where decisions impacting the lives of women and gender equality programming are taken.

Similar constraints are evident at the regional level since CARICOM and implementation of its programmes depends on financial support from member states many of whom, because of their own economic situation, are delinquent in meeting this obligation. Coupled with this is the fact that the functions of coordination participation in the international arena and overall support to NMs can hardly be carried out by a solitary staff person assigned to a Gender Desk. A recent gender audit of the CARICOM Secretariat clearly revealed several critical functions related to these roles which were not carried out and pointed to the inadequacy of the current structure to achieve these ends, It was strongly recommended that there was need to upgrade the Desk to a Gender and Development Unit which would be so structured to facilitate strong linkages internally with all divisions of the Secretariat as well externally with the international gender equality institutions mentioned earlier as well as with the NMs in all member states. To the best of my knowledge, to date, there has been no action taken on these recommendations.

An even more critical constraint to gender equality programming in the region is the overarching cultural environment, marked as it is by entrenched gender norms that serve patriarchal interest and the persistence of a fairly rigid private/public-reproductive/productive work dichotomy. I would argue that although efforts of international, regional and national institutions have created driving forces that have pushed women beyond the boundary of the private domain and an

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acceptance of shifting ideologies about feminine roles and functions, on their part, a concomitant shift has not occurred in the ideologies undergirding the construction of masculinity particularly in relation to the private domain.

The resilience of this entrenched gender system is largely premised on the male breadwinner ideology which seems so pivotal to the construction of a hegemonic masculinity and to male heterosexual identity. I would suggest, however, that the traditional male bread-winner paradigm is now under threat. Data show that the incidence of female-headed households is increasing around the world so that the male breadwinner ideology is slowly being disrupted. It is obvious, however, that the impetus for change is mainly on the part of women, with men lagging behind and holding on to this seemingly fragile dimension of male identity.¹⁴

The fact of the matter is that gender systems are extremely dynamic and fluid and even as driving forces are exerted to improve the rights and self-esteem of women, opposing restraining forces operate to maintain the status quo and ensure that the project of patriarchy is not significantly disrupted. This is evidenced by a number of factors operating in Caribbean gender systems. The high levels of violence against women identified as the most critical issue facing Caribbean women since 1995 and, particularly sexual violence, is a strong expression of hegemonic masculinity and the power imbalance in gender relations.

Women’s positioning in Caribbean labour markets and their involvement in representational politics are two additional signifiers of continued male hegemony and female subordination. In spite of the fact that women represent the better source of human capital based on their higher levels of qualification compared with that of men in Caribbean labour markets, they experience lower levels of employment, higher levels of unemployment, are clustered in feminised occupations and therefore in the lower paying sectors and, on average, earn less than men.

In terms of opportunity for participation in political decision making, in all Caribbean States female representation in parliaments is well below the minimum 30% proposed as the goal for countries in the British Commonwealth. This under-representation of women in decision-making points to a lack of parity between men and women in socio-political matters and limited opportunity for women to exercise economic, political and administrative authority in national affairs at the macro level.

These indicators point to the fact that in spite of the significant gains women have made in education and in spite of the challenges to entrenched gender ideologies, male control of social, economic and political institutions in Caribbean societies continues.\textsuperscript{15}

The role of patriarchal gatekeepers in maintaining the status quo, particularly in the context of scarce financial resources, has to be juxtaposed against the shift of focus, in many Caribbean countries, to issues of men and their masculinities, which is a real concern, but is also a backlash to a perceived threat of loss of power. This shift, I believe, is also perceived to be a more politically correct stance given the not very well understood conceptual shift in the discourse from ‘women’ and ‘women’s equality’ to ‘gender’ and ‘gender equality’. A further dimension of the conceptual difficulty that arises from the conceptual shift, is the less than adequate frameworks that are used to guide gender analyses to inform programming initiatives with an almost unwavering focus on between sex comparisons which mask several vulnerabilities that both men and women face due to the intersection of their multiple identities – sex, social class, disability, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc. If gender equality programming is to be effective these intersections have to be critically analysed and understood.

\textbf{Summary}

So having made these observations how can I sum up in terms of assessing the potential of institutional and cultural environments for gender equality programming in the Caribbean. I would proffer that, over the years, there has been a strong international institutional environment that could benefit gender equality programming in the Caribbean. However, regional and

national institutions have been somewhat weak so that the approach to programming has not been sustained and this has been further undermined by weak political will and inadequate financial support as well as the absence of clearly defined monitoring and evaluation strategies linked to clear targets and indicators.

The situation has been further exacerbated by a cultural environment marked by a resilient patriarchal system which continues to serve traditional interest and motive which combine to maintain the status quo mainly through male control of social, economic and political institutions in Caribbean societies which ensure that the more things change the more they seem to remain the same.\footnote{See Bailey, Barbara. Petticoats and Coat-tails: The Dialectic of Educational Attainment and Socio-economic, Political Autonomy and Control in the Caribbean. In: IDEAZ. Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2. 2005.}

**Recommendations**

To move the gender equality agenda forward in the Caribbean urgent action is required. I offer suggestion of three areas:

1. Attention must be given to transforming the ideological environment which underpins gender inequality and fosters discrimination against women and some men;
2. Governments have to be held accountable for commitments made through their endorsement of various international and regional instruments. A case in point is the poor record of timely reporting to the CEDAW Committee which needs to be urgently addressed.
3. A gender audit was carried out of the CARICOM Secretariat and the recommendations made to upgrade the Women’s Desk to a Women and Development Unit which would have the capacity to relate to the internal environment – the NMs – and give them the support required to function in a more coordinated manner; as well as to external environment which has proved, over the years, to be indispensable to gender equality programming in the region. I urge the CARICOM to take these recommendations seriously so that together we can ensure renewed energy and commitment to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in the region.