



*The
Bahamas*

**COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION
OF
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

Fifty- second Session

STATEMENT

by

**The Honourable Melanie Griffin, M.P.
Minister of Social Services**

20 July, 2012

New York

Please check against delivery

Madam Chair, Distinguished Members of the CEDAW Committee,

On behalf of the Government of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, I offer my gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to present to you today the tangible manifestations of The Bahamas' implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of all the members of the Committee and to congratulate those members who were re-elected last month during the 17th Meeting of States Parties to the Convention, which was chaired by Her Excellency Dr. Paulette Bethel, Permanent Representative of The Bahamas to the United Nations. My congratulations also to the Committee on its 30th anniversary celebration held recently here at the United Nations under the theme '*Focusing on Women's Political Participation and Leadership – In Pursuit of Equality*'.

I take this opportunity also to extend sincere apologies to the Committee and to the CEDAW Secretariat for the delay in our participation in this Dialogue. Please be assured that the submission by The Bahamas of its Combined Initial to Fourth Periodic Report and its Fifth Periodic Report, as well as my delegation's presence here today, reaffirm the depth of the Government's commitment to the Convention and its implementation. This commitment was also reaffirmed in February 2011 with the Government's withdrawal of its reservation to article 16 (1) (h).

In many respects, The Bahamas is an exceptional State Party to this Convention. Our geography, culture, regional and post colonial history have all shaped our conception of gender and its related issues, and the manner in which we respond. Definitions of concepts such as, "developed", "rural", "devolution", and "representation" take on special meanings in the context of The Bahamas, because the country is host to a number of extreme and specific challenges, as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) with a relatively high GNP per capita income, which has resulted in its graduated status. Yet, in spite of many socio-economic challenges stemming from the world's economic and financial crisis, as well as challenges posed by natural disasters, we are on target to meet a number of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. We have surpassed the goal in terms of universal primary education and have made considerable progress in the area of gender equality.

Notwithstanding pressing concerns such as high unemployment and an increasing crime rate, which are not exclusive to The Bahamas, my Government is committed to maintaining the momentum required for the achievement of gender equality. As the Minister of Social Services, with responsibility for the Bureau of Women's Affairs, I assure you that I am committed to the further advancement and protection of the rights of women.

The Bahamas is in a position to boast an unprecedented level of engagement relative to gender equality and the empowerment of women. We are cognizant of the fact that both the reporting and review exercises offer States Parties a unique opportunity to meaningfully engage, evaluate and address the disparities faced by women throughout the world. Further, we welcome the efforts undertaken by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights toward the enhancement of the human rights treaty body system and their reporting processes, which, hopefully, will take adequately into account the overwhelming burden of multiple and constant reporting placed on small States such as The Bahamas which lack the requisite capacity and technical resources for such reporting.

Before we continue, Madam Chair, I would like to introduce the delegation of The Bahamas: H. E. Dr. Paulette Bethel, Permanent Representative of The Bahamas to the United Nations; Mrs. Barbara Burrows, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Services; Ms. Christine Campbell, First Assistant Secretary and Officer-in-Charge of the Bureau of Women's Affairs; Ms. Jewel Major, Chief Counsel, Office of the Attorney General; Ms. Patricia Francis, First Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Health; Ms. Sharmaine Sinclair, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Ministry of Education; Ms. Allison Booker, Counsellor, and Ms. Sasha Dixon, Third Secretary, Bahamas Mission to the United Nations, as well as Dr. Ian Bethel-Bennett, a member of The Bahamas Gender Policy Team. I thank my fellow delegates for their dedication, time and resources expended in preparation for today's review.

Madam Chair,

The key to determining the overall impact of the CEDAW in The Bahamas is to explore my country's accomplishments and challenges in a realistic, honest and frank manner. Though obstacles remain in achieving total equality between the sexes, my Government is committed to action towards this end.

One of the most notable developments relates directly to The Bahamas' Bureau of Women's Affairs. It is the plan of my Government to elevate the Bureau to a Department. Once in effect, this change should have a significant impact on the scope and reach of the National Machinery in the implementation of the Convention, which will be facilitated and enhanced by the appointment of a Director, and an increase in budgetary, human and other resource. Indeed, there has been a significant increase in the Bureau's budget for the 2012/2013 fiscal year in preparation for this change.

In addition, thanks to the invaluable assistance of the Regional Office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other international and regional bodies, as well as domestic public and private stakeholders, The Bahamas is currently in the final stages of consultation

and review of its draft National Gender Policy, which should be submitted to Cabinet in two to three months. This we envision will be the harmonizing element under which The Bahamas clearly states and implements its policy on gender equality.

LEGISLATION & POLICIES

Madam Chair,

The Bahamas' Constitution

In our reports we acknowledge that, while The Bahamas Constitution's definition of discrimination omits the word "sex", protection for the individual against discrimination is guaranteed under Chapter III Article 15 based on the entitlement of every person in The Bahamas to fundamental rights and freedoms.

Nonetheless, in 2002, a national consultative process was initiated to seek the removal of discriminatory provisions against women in the Constitution. A referendum was held in February 2002. However, the referendum failed with more than 60 per cent of the voters who participated in the process having rejected the proposed amendments. The failure however, was not regarded as a rejection of equal rights for women, but rather the result of a process that did not permit the citizenry sufficient time *to debate and internalize the proposed changes*. Following the failure of the referendum, efforts have been made to redress the situation through the appointment of a Constitutional Commission, which was appointed in December 2002 to carry out a comprehensive review of the Constitution of The Bahamas and to consider possible amendments.

In March 2006, a Preliminary Report and Provisional Recommendations were presented by the Constitutional Commission to enable The Bahamas to bring its policies in line with CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and other international instruments which the country has ratified. I delighted to advise, Madam Chair, that a Constitutional Review Commission has now been appointed by my government and the matter will be revisited during the term of the current administration.

Madam Chair,

The Government, in tandem with the Bureau of Women's Affairs and relevant civil society organizations, continues to promote awareness and education of The Bahamas' **Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act**, enacted in 2007 and brought into force in 2008. This Act provides individuals involved in domestic violence or disputes with effective recourse to

safety and protective mechanisms. Comparative statistics on Protection Orders should be available by 2013.

The Bahamas is committed to combating the issue of Sexual and Domestic Violence, which has resulted in changes in 2008 to its **Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act** which substantially increases punitive measures for such offences. The legislation increased the sentence for the offence of rape to life imprisonment and criminalized voyeurism, sexual harassment and pornography. Further, cognizant of the importance of the protection of the family and its ongoing development, The Bahamas enacted in 2009 a **Child Protection Act** which provides for the care and protection of the rights of children, facilities, housing and all legal proceedings involving children.

Turning to the matter of trafficking in persons, and apart from the continuous application of **The Bahamas' 2008 Trafficking in Persons (Prevention and Suppression) Act**, an Inter-Ministerial Committee and a functioning Task Force have been established to address the issue of trafficking in persons. I am pleased to inform that both a National Action Plan and Protocol are being developed to aid officials in appropriate identification and management of cases of trafficking in persons (TIP). The Bahamas, with the support of the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.GIFT), also participated, as a pilot country, in an anti-trafficking in persons public awareness campaign with a leading fast-food franchise which was launched in May of this year.

In terms of **Disability Issues**, Madam Chair, while persons with disabilities have equal access to health, educational and basic social services, I am also pleased to inform that, under the auspices of my Ministry, draft legislation on Disabilities to further improve the lives of disabled persons in The Bahamas will be submitted to Cabinet within the next six months. Similarly, The Bahamas is also in the process of national preparation for its accession to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Madam Chair,

Domestic violence is pervasive in our society and threatens women's survival, economic empowerment and social development. The Bahamas is committed to eliminating this scourge by educating its young women and girls to the fact that no form of violence perpetrated against them is acceptable. My Government has employed a multi-pronged approach to address this issue with a significant emphasis on response and education.

A National Five Year Strategic Plan on Domestic Violence has been drafted and is currently being reviewed by a team of experts. The draft plan, which resulted from a Family Violence Summit held in 2010, which was a joint effort of the Bureau of Women's Affairs and The Bahamas Crisis Centre, should greatly facilitate and coordinate efforts related to gender-based violence.

In addition, last year, the Bureau of Women's Affairs partnered with the local chapter of the Caribbean Male Action Network (CariMAN) to host a two-day workshop, the primary objective of which was the creation of a network of men to become advocates for change in their local communities in the prevention of violence against women.

Further, I am pleased to report that just last month, my Government agreed for The Bahamas, through the Bureau of Women's Affairs, to participate in a one-year UN Women Project on "Strengthening State Accountability and Community Action for Ending Gender-Based Violence in the Caribbean".

More recently, on 5 July, my Ministry launched a series of community based meetings under the theme "Domestic Violence is Everybody's Business." These meetings are designed to educate the public on the provisions of the Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act, the issue of domestic violence and available interventions. Similar sessions will be held in communities throughout The Bahamas over the next several months.

EDUCATION & AWARENESS

Madam Chair,

The Bureau of Women's Affairs, in partnerships with other Government Agencies and Ministries, as well as civil society, has conducted a wide array of campaigns in an effort to enhance education and awareness of gender issues by The Bahamian populace. The Bureau has capitalized on the symbolic importance of the year 2012, as it marks the 50th Anniversary of the enfranchisement of women in The Bahamas. The achievements of the Women's Suffrage Movement, a pivotal period in Bahamian history, as well as those of the Bureau and the progressive efforts of the many women involved in the pursuit of gender equality and the empowerment of women, are highlighted in The Bahamas' 2012 telephone directories.

Further, as part of the celebrations this month of the 39th Anniversary of the Independence of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, an exhibition on the Women's Suffrage Movement was opened two weeks ago in the main town square. The achievements of these pioneering women and warriors for the advancement of women will also be commemorated

during an expanded Annual National Women's Week in November. In October, the Government will issue a special series of stamps in commemoration of the Women's Suffrage Movement. It is our hope to also undertake some form of education awareness to students on the significance of the Suffrage Movement.

In addition, The Bahamas, in conjunction with UN Women and UNDP, held a CEDAW/HIV Workshop in April last which comprised representation from the private and public sectors and complemented the regional Caribbean HIV/AIDS Conference hosted by The Bahamas in November 2011. I extend my thanks to UN Women and UNDP, and to the Committee for their support in this endeavour. Inspired by the CEDAW/HIV Workshop, the Royal Bahamas Police Force has initiated a course on The Bahamas' Domestic Violence (Protection Orders) Act for newly promoted Sergeants. Gender sensitivity at the Police Training College has also been made a priority in the training of new law enforcement officers.

Furthermore, The National Insurance Board of The Bahamas has contributed greatly to the promotion of awareness on gender issues through Public Service Announcements. Vulnerable groups such as single mothers are targeted by such announcements, which are designed to educate about specific social benefits of relevance to them. Radio talk shows and public forums which feature hot button gender issues are well-received by the public, demonstrating that for many of the local populace, matters regarding gender equality remain salient.

Madam Chair,

It is obvious that the provision of gender-sensitive education at an early age is paramount in shaping attitudes on gender equality. The Ministry of Education has completed an update of its Health and Family Life Education Curriculum at the primary school level and is in the process of doing the same at the secondary level to address, among other things, gender stereotypes in the educational system. There is also an increased focus by the Ministry of Education on science and technology-related studies to encourage all students – female and male – to pursue opportunities in the field of science and technology.

Further, in terms of educational opportunities in The Bahamas, young women currently outnumber their male counterparts in the level of enrolment at the country's tertiary institution – the College of The Bahamas. While young women in The Bahamas still have a tendency to focus on service-oriented careers in hospitality and health-care professions, such as nursing, The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute (BTVI), in an effort to combat occupational segregation, has increased significantly its outreach programmes and has seen greater numbers of females seeking careers in non-traditional sectors such as

agriculture, construction engineering, electronics, and automotive and electrical engineering and technology.

My Government is cognizant of the fact that one way to effectively eradicate poverty is through education. By training women for non-traditional careers, we increase their marketability and prepare them to survive in today's diverse and competitive workforce.

Just this week, a four-week job skill readiness and mentoring workshop was launched by the Zonta Club of New Providence in partnership with The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute. The workshop, funded by grants from my Ministry and the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, is designed to prepare unemployed women for the labour force.

Madam Chair, in terms of non-traditional careers pursued by women, it would be remiss of me if I did not mention that three female pilots employed by the national airline of The Bahamas were promoted to the rank of captain, the first in the country's aviation history. Women in The Bahamas are soaring to new heights and are able to pursue career opportunities in any field.

HEALTH

Madam Chair,

Health has been identified as one of the priority concerns for The Bahamas. We are keenly aware of the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in our country, which disproportionately affects women. The Ministry of Health, through the National AIDS Programme, has implemented a series of aggressive public awareness programmes geared towards awareness, education and prevention.

In 2010, the Ministry of Health, through a Cooperative Agreement with the United States, implemented the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to improve the health of women, infants and children by bolstering national programmes which address HIV/AIDS, while improving the capacity of the national health system in its provision of quality health services. I am pleased, once again, to inform the Committee that, due to the efficacy and increased access by pregnant women infected with HIV to antiretroviral treatment, mother-to-child transmission of HIV has declined significantly and dramatically with the result that in 2010, no child was born infected with HIV leading to the citation of The Bahamas as a "best practices" model in this area.

Women are also disproportionately affected by Non-Communicable Diseases. The 2005 Bahamas Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases Prevalence Survey indicated a 9.2 per

cent prevalence rate of diabetes among the Bahamian population, with females accounting for the vast majority of those cases. The study also indicated a 25.5 per cent prevalence rate of diabetes in women in the 65 – 74 age group and an 18 per cent prevalence among the 45 – 54 age group. For a country with a population of approximately 354, 000, these statistics are staggering. The “feminization of diabetes”, as with the “feminization of HIV/AIDS” is a trend with which we must reckon, as women are breadwinners, caregivers and nurturers, and are becoming increasingly disadvantaged from an economic, cultural and social standpoint as a result of this trend. To combat this scourge, several programmes to promote healthy lifestyles have been implemented, such as the National Healthy Lifestyles Initiative, the Health Screening and Education Initiative and the National Prescription Drug Plan.

REPRESENTATION & PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE

Madam Chair,

The women of The Bahamas play an integral role in all manner of social, economic, cultural, political and public life. This was made strikingly apparent during The Bahamas’ 2012 General Elections held on 7 May, which saw an increase in the number of female candidates seeking elected office, representing 16.5% of all candidates. Further, 18,574 more women than men were registered to vote in the recent Election. Since becoming enfranchised in 1962, women in The Bahamas have enthusiastically exercised their right to vote. The Bahamas has achieved modest progress in terms of the participation of women in decision-making processes at the political level. While we have not yet achieved the target of 30% set out in the Beijing Platform for Action, we are fully aware of the fact we have much more work to do in this area.

Indicative of its commitment to enhancing the participation of women in political processes and leadership positions, The Bahamas co-sponsored in 2003 and during this current 66th session, General Assembly resolution entitled *‘Women and Political Participation’*, which was adopted by consensus in December last.

The recent General Elections saw the election of five (5) women to the House of Assembly, the elevation of four (4) women to The Bahamas Cabinet, and the appointment of five (5) women to The Bahamas Senate, one of whom is the President of the Senate.

Notably, women have served in high political offices in The Bahamas. From 2002 to 2007, women held for the **first** time the following positions: deputy leader of a political party, national chairman of a political party, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National

Security. More recently, my predecessor also a Member of Parliament, was elected the first female Deputy Leader of her Party.

Madam Chair,

In an effort to bridge the gap and to enhance dialogue between political leaders and civil society, The Bahamas Crisis Centre held a closed meeting with female Parliamentarians last month to discuss experiences and to exchange views on a number of issues of concern affecting the advancement of women in The Bahamas. Those in attendance recommended that such meetings be conducted regularly, as they offer a unique opportunity for the appropriate discussion of women's issues and for further political attention.

At the administrative and executive levels in the public service and in the judicial service, women have achieved considerable success. As of 2012, women represented almost seventy per cent of all Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Government Ministries and accounted for forty-five percent of the Justices in the judicial system. Women also hold 71.2 per cent of top administrative positions as Principals in the public educational system. Female representation at the international level is also significant with females serving as Heads and/or Interim Heads of five (5) of the 10 Bahamas Missions abroad. As a matter of fact, Ambassador Bethel serves currently as the first female Permanent Representative of The Bahamas to the United Nations, one of the few Missions, although small in staff complement, which is composed of all female diplomatic officers.

However, there remains a notable gender gap in the private sector, particularly in the international financial and off-shore banking sector – a major economic activity in my country –, where men hold an overwhelming majority of top level positions. This is an area where we have not been able to achieve much success, to date.

RURAL & MIGRANT WOMEN

Rural Women

Madam Chair,

The connotation of "rural" as applied to and by The Bahamas is a distinctive one. As an archipelagic nation stretching over 100,000 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean, roughly thirty of our approximate seven hundred islands and cays are inhabited, with vast variations in population density on any given island and particularly high pockets of density in urban areas, such as in Nassau, the capital city and in Freeport, the second largest city, both of which account for almost ninety per cent of the country's population, there is little, if any,

positive correlation between population density and land mass. The remaining population is distributed on a much smaller scale on other “Family Islands”, which is a term used to describe the other islands in The Bahamian archipelago, many of which are remote, although not inaccessible. These Family Islands require a specialized approach in terms of devolution of governance and basic services.

With increased migration of young people to the densely populated capital, older persons, in particular women, play a significant role in rural Family Island communities throughout The Bahamas. Many of these women are farmers. Some are entrepreneurs and owners of small and medium-sized agricultural and handicraft, gifts and souvenir enterprises. The production of handicraft items has been a long tradition of Bahamian women, particularly in rural Family Island communities.

In terms of access of rural women to health, while there are approximately forty-three health centres and clinics distributed throughout the Family Islands, with an additional thirty-five satellite clinics currently operational, The Bahamas is exploring the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to facilitate improved access to medical, educational, and vocational services in the Family Islands. The Bahamas’ Telemedicine Program now extends to several of the more heavily populated Family Islands.

In terms of the promotion of gender affairs and equality in rural communities, the Bureau of Women’s Affairs, and local civil society organizations make regular visits to the Family Islands to provide rural women with better opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. I am happy to inform the Committee that the Bureau received invaluable input from women in rural communities throughout the Family Islands for The Bahamas’ draft National Gender Policy.

Migrant Women

While irregular and undocumented migration to and through The Bahamas remains a huge challenge for the Government and places an unprecedented financial burden on the country’s social services, the Constitution of The Bahamas makes no distinction in terms of the protection of basic rights and the provision of services for persons based on nationality and status. **All** persons residing in The Bahamas, regardless of their nationality and immigration status, have free access to healthcare and primary and secondary education services, as well as religious freedom.

Current practices at the College of The Bahamas permit that, if a non-Bahamian student can demonstrate his or her consistent enrolment in the national school system for at least

six years, he or she would be eligible for domestic tuition rates, which are markedly lower than international rates.

Further, The Bahamas National Insurance Board requires that *“contributions should be deducted and paid on behalf of all workers, no matter their nationality or resident/immigration status”*. This guarantees a level of social safety net protection for migrants and domestic workers.

In addition, The Bahamas' Carmichael Road Detention Centre provides adequate medical and emergency health care services for irregular and undocumented migrant detainees.

CONCLUSION: GOING FORWARD

Madam Chair,

My Government has reintroduced an innovative community-based programme termed the *'Urban Renewal Programme 2.0'* to combat crime and other social development issues that impact the quality of life of Bahamians, in particular the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including young women and men. The programme involves a cross-sector of social, health and law enforcement agencies.

Additionally, the delivery of social services will be modernized through a social safety net reform project and the introduction of a Conditional Cash Transfer Programme designed to promote human capital development and to help break the cycle of poverty.

In conclusion, Madam Chair, I have attempted to present a synopsis of the current situation on the status of women in The Bahamas and provide a supplementary overview and update to the reports already submitted to this Committee of the current situation of women in The Bahamas from the legislative, socio-economic, human rights and political perspectives, all of which are inextricably linked. While there are some notable successes, there is much more work to be done. I acknowledge that, upon further review, there are some discrepancies in the reports which we will attempt to address in our dialogue.

I thank you for the opportunity to address this Committee. My delegation and I look forward to today's open, positive interaction and dialogue.