

WOMEN'S CHOICES: Education and Employment—Why Not the Non-traditional?

By Myrtle Palacio

**Presented: Conference sponsored by Women Issues Network (WIN)
Belize City, April 1999**

Updated: Article in the Amandala of July 1999

KOM EEN DA ME MEK AM

The information in this article was first presented at a policy conference on “Women and Employment”, organized by Women Issues Network (WIN) in April 1999. Data were collected through secondary sources such as the Abstract of Statistics, and also through primary sources one year ago. The primary data reflected the current situation on the Fourth Forms and second year Sixth Forms for some education institutions around the country.

The principal objective of the conference was to educate on concerns facing women “in our effort to achieve economic security”. One may ask, “*What is economic security?*” We know that security means a guarantee, a pledge, a feeling of safety. *But is there such a thing?* The economic deals directly with ones financial well being, and implies thrift, avoidance of waste among other things.

THE WHOS AND WHYS OF ECONOMIC SECURITY

Who is responsible for our financial well being? Government is the primary provider for economic development. Government is also the primary provider of infrastructure for social and human resource development. Indeed great attention has been given to road and port construction, telephone and electricity, as well as schools, clinics, development and protection of industries, etc. Since government is the primary provider, then there are other partners in this economic well-being package, namely, the private sector (business), and us, as individuals.

This article is about the individual, you me, the Uman. Who should guarantee me, you, financial well being? How do I achieve financial well being? Well one can marry Trump! But to be more realistic, financial well being comes from ones own sweat, our day to day earnings through some form of employment. However, access to employment is not a right, it is a privilege. While a right is an entitlement or a claim, a privilege can

only be granted. Then how does one prepare for this privilege? One way is through education and/or training of any form. However, in pursuing the education or training, we should not do so for its intrinsic worth alone, but also for its potential to boost our earnings and employment prospects. In this way education and employment go hand in hand. This paper speaks to our choices in education prepare us for the privilege of employment; prepare us for the challenge to employment.

FINDINGS

How are we preparing ourselves for the privilege of employment--three scenarios will be demonstrated. Firstly, statistics on school enrollment by education level and sex for the last five years show the following trend:

- Male dominate education at the primary school level to Std. VI (52% male to 48% female)
- Female dominate education at the secondary level or high school where there are predominantly more females than males (53% female to 47% male)
- At the tertiary level there are nearly twice as many females as males (62% to 38%)

In analyzing the above scenario, one quick conclusion would be that the females are much better off than the males, but the plot thickens.

Secondly, some observations from the Labour Force survey of 1997 are that Belize has a large dependent population. Only 35 % or barely 1/3 (81,000) of the population, age 14 years and over, make up the labour force. Most importantly for this article, some 66.8 % of those in the labour force are males and 32 % are females. In essence, this can be interpreted that there are twice as many men as women in the labour force.

Well, how does this compare to the first scenario above? Is this the reality? Let's examine the categories listed as "employment activities" which are: **worked, had a job, looked for work, home duties, attend school**. The most frequent categories are: "worked" and "home duties". Of those who "worked", 76 % are men and 24 % are women. Of those involved in "home duties", only 4.4 % are men and 94.6% are females. The logical interpretation for this is two fold:

- That men work
- That home duty is not work

If so, then the 95% of women who perform "home duties" do not "work". Confusing? No, it is gender stereotyping at the institutional level. One reason is that the population size of women in the labour force is grossly underestimated as several women are in the "cash economy", which invariably is under-reported. As a result, women's labour as vital components/contribution goes unrecognized. When these underestimations and under-valuations slide, as they often do, into the sphere of development planning, then practical policy interventions can be detrimental.

Lastly, the other demonstrations are about the current situation in some of our educational institutions. I gathered this data through telephone conversations with Fourth Forms and Second Year Sixth Forms of various institutions countrywide. Some eight institutions were polled based on location, accessibility and co-ed status, as follows:

Sixth Forms: St. Johns, Ecumenical High, Muffles,
High School: Pallotti, Wesley, Belmopan Comprehensive
Technical: Belize Technical, Center for Employment Training in Belize City (CET)

With the exception of CET and Belize Technical, all institutions were female dominated.

St. Johns Sixth Form	62 % to 38 %
Muffles Sixth Form	57 % to 43 %
Wesley	64 % to 36 %
Belmopan Comprehensive	56 % to 44 %
Ecumenical High	78 % to 22 %

However, the choices of female students in specialization can only lead to traditional employment. For example, at Belmopan Comprehensive, female students opted for Business (74 %) and Arts (88%) than Science (29 %) and Technical (31 %). At Wesley College, only 25% of those in academic science are females. Although Pallotti is not co-educational, the leaning was more towards secretarial (23%) and academic arts (36%), instead of academic science 13 %.

At the same time, the male population was the largest at the two technical schools CET (77 %) and Belize Technical (62 %). However, the trend remains whereby the female of the species are still selecting the more traditional courses. At CET 85 % of the female student population opted for hospitality and catering, while at the Belize Technical 90 % of the female body opted for Business Studies (62 %) and Education and Human Resources (28 %).

SO BE IT

And the last shall be first and the first shall be last—females are still channeled into the more traditional occupations that require more training, such as secretarial and hospitality. Men at the Primary and Vo-technical levels of education, tend to qualify for highly skilled jobs such as mechanic and plumbing. While men at the university level, qualify for managerial positions. All is fair and good. But the challenge is that one pays more than the other, and the highly skilled vocations as well as the managerial pays more than the traditional vocations.

What can women learn from this? Three major concerns scream at us. Firstly, regarding our choices in education—it is a culture trap, an ambush, and a snare. We need to acknowledge the cultural framework within which educational development occurs, including the workshops that we sponsor. We need to be alert to the interplay between the home, school, the economy, and find out where policy makers focus their attention, and seek to intervene for the better.

Secondly, unlike the situation in the region, Belize does not have gender inequality in terms of educational opportunities for the girl-child, but there is gender disparity in education due to our choices.

Lastly, there is gender stereotyping at the institutional level and one must be careful in data collection and interpretation.

What should we do? We need to develop and apply lasting sustainable measures to promote women into non-traditional vocations at all education levels and forms, including continuing education. **Cake decorating anyone? Or will it be welding this time?**

I ask the question, “Education for what!! How are we preparing ourselves for the privilege of employment?”

Myrtle Palacio
Belize, 1999