Socio-Political Situation Affecting the Development of Women
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INTRODUCTION

When we focus on women we are immediately confronted with a multiplicity of interrelated issues—gender relations, culture, family roles, food, shelter, water, health, employment, media—the whole social, economic, and political gambit in a nation. As a people, we are comfortable in discussing social and economic issues, while the political is taboo. However, the political which is part of my topic today is a very important aspect of our lives. Our political system is tied directly to the socio-economic, through the dispensing of scarce resources such as jobs, housing, and land. Politics allows us to look at government, its structures and processes. It also allows to look at governance. My observation is that there is much ignorance along all socio-economic strata particularly in the areas of governance and electioneering. Most hit by such lack of knowledge are women, whose marginalization to a large extent, results from not having access to political decision-makers; and whose political participation is limited to voting and campaigning.

SOCIO-POLITICAL CULTURE

An Overview

Cultural values shape the ways in which we interpret and respond to politics and the institution of government. For example, voting is an act of free will that allows us to select decision makers. This act is critical to our development. Yet, we tend to rally around, and vote for charismatic leaders, instead of the real issues. As a result, political leadership is often accepted as shrewd when it demonstrates a capacity to manipulate. That is our political culture.

Our political culture still allows us to enjoy peaceful and orderly elections and transition of government. Other features demonstrate: disillusionment, lack of confidence in politics and politicians, open disrespect for political leaders, a patron/client system is encouraged, men-dominated at the leadership level. The negative consequences of these features to governance and the social order are obvious. But I would like to expand on the latter that of men dominated at the leadership level.

To date (1993 general elections) out of 10 general elections and 40 years of electioneering and adult suffrage to date (1993), only 13 women representing 3.4% of all candidates have challenged elections at the national assembly level. Six of these represented PUP, 6 UDP and 1 presented Pollard's CDP (1961). 1961, over 30 years ago, saw the largest percentage (8.5%) of women ever

to contest general elections. With all its years of incumbency, the PUP has done as much as the UDP in promoting female representation in parliament.

Generally, political awareness is low and voter turnout is on the decline. However, the percentage of women voter-turnout is higher than that of men, indicating more voting franchise awareness by women. The statistics on gender and age cohort on the new electors' list for November, 1997, remains very much the same as the old list: women compromise 52% of those registered, some 20 out of 29 divisions show women as the majority registered; and out of the nine that are male dominated, only two compromise a variance over 100.

This makes women a political majority, but one which is relatively unclaimed. The decision making level of our political parties are dominated by a powerful few men, primarily resident in Belize City. When interviewed, men will laughingly respond that there is no barrier to participation of women. They should probably say "no official barrier", because women are conspicuously absent from the occupancy of top positions. Overshadowed by men, women are resigned to the fact as symptomatic of the prevailing gender ideology of male supremacy. The effect is that the already limited cadre of highly trained women are passed over and are not utilized for the common good of the party and government—a tremendous wastage in scarce human capital.

Some Concerns

I now bring information from recent field research on the situation of women. While the issues/concerns are social in nature, a comprehensive solution can only be addressed through good governance. Some of the concerns that are interrelated are:

- Abandonment of women and children by mates/fathers, who are on drugs or in prison
- Neglect of children by young mothers to age 30+ due to gambling and or drugs
- Lack of proper parenting
- Poor living conditions
- Spousal abuse and indiscretions
- Crack-heads (men and women) who terrorize communities through criminal activity, brash begging, urinating in the street
- Neglect of older women by relatives

The respondents believe that the situation of women has improved. Examples cited were:

- Education—more women in tertiary level institutions

- Leadership in the Private Sector—more women as supervisors, though not as managers

- Family Court—although the claim is that service delivery needs to be improved

The culture of violence and drugs is entrenched, and is not limited to gender or socio-economic status. However, the concern is compounded for women because they sit on both sides of the fence. As well as being victims of male violence or drug habit, the perpetrators are also our sons, lovers, husbands, and brothers. It is the woman who loses economic support for their households when their men are imprisoned. In times of scarcity, it is the woman who is left to solve not only

the economic equation, but also the moral question that comes with shortage. Referred to as the moral economy, whereby it is the woman's decision who will get gravy and who will eat meat, who can continue school and who has to enter the labour market prematurely.

As solutions, the respondents are demanding more/better housing, more jobs, relevant education, and improved healthcare. All these are expected to be delivered by the government.

I see two dilemmas arising from the solutions and issues forthcoming from this consultation. Firstly, the issues are not new, but hey keep recurring. But why! When will this be processed into information and action? Second, is the level of dependency on government and politicians---the expectation is that government is responsible and hence must do. I see this as a continuation of the nationalist movement syndrome—the all providing party. In a situation where there are no alternatives being offered or people seriously questioning what next, it feeds into the whole aura of territorialism, a factor of clientelism that is a major enigma in the Jamaican socio-political scene.

Addressing the Dilemmas

Firstly, the question of neglect and abuse of women and children and gender inequality is a reaction to something. It cannot be swept under the rubric of "poverty" or some other copied name. Hence we need to understand the political ethos and cultural nuances, to find out what "thing" precipitates such actions. The women themselves are not satisfied with their situations because they have models of better at the back of their minds.

The present solutions are not designed to answer these questions, but are services based on policies geared to "patch up" or alleviate, and not ameliorate. The past decade has seen millions of dollars from bilateral and multilateral aid agencies to government and non-government organizations. Policy makers have responded with high level commissions, laws, and priority statements. Yet, despite the debate and substantial investment, the above realities remain. The literature offers several reasons, two of which can be transferred to the Belize situation. One is that the model of sustainability is far too narrow and offers very little thought to the social, political, and institutional sustainability. The other is that assistance is invariably distorted and driven by political priorities of governments and donors, and not the needs of recipients. As a result, the models fail to incorporate citizen participation in the structuring of their development, while developers assume that they influence more than they really do. In other words, much is planned but little is achieved.

What strategies then will we need to embrace? Are there practical, affordable measures? I call for the downsizing of institutional pomposity, get on the cutting edge into areas of research and development. This can be done by utilizing the capabilities of tertiary level education institutions, and have them link with the public service e.g. Planning Unit ad a Think-tank, to think through and research these issues and come up with problem definitions. We never had to do this sort of creative thinking before, because the British did it for us, then USAID, and now the multilateral aid agencies are doing it for us.

Secondly, transferring heavy state paternalism to a new kind of self-reliance will not be easy, both on the people and the politicians. It will need greater pluralism in decision making, and an aggressive private sector to generate growth. But the question to ask though is, Is there scope for change of this magnitude within any political party hierarchy? Are our political parties

"participatory"?. Women for instance, have not been integrated at the decision making level, and invariably discouraged by the male hierarchy from participating as candidates for parliamentary elections. Inequality is not a given fact of nature or biology; it is socially constructed, and therefore can be changed or deconstructed. Male dominance oppresses woman, as well as men. Why not change the social and economic system of which it is a part.

Concentration of power has been a cry in political reform, and diffusion of this must start at the party level. Therefore, I would like to see more women within the party hierarchy, as well as a wider cross-section into the decision making process, and moving away from the present all-male power structure. I would recommend that this be put into a structure to be well rooted, and not a passing phase. This kind of pluralism within the party will carry over into the government machinery, when the party becomes government. For example, President Clinton's claim to fame, among other things, is the change in the face of the government bureaucracy – the Secretary of State and the Attorney General's offices are each manned by women; the Secretary of Commerce was black; the present ambassador to Belize and once the President's speech writer, a woman; and so on. In short, President Clinton made certain that the presence of women and other minorities at the highest level will become a part of business as usual within the Federal Government of the United States of America. If qualified women are integrated at the top level, they will want to run for political office. That is the kind of change that a government can precipitate and one whose political leaders will be exonerated in the eyes of the electorate.

CONCLUSION
Why is it that women who are a political majority still a political subordinate? The primary reason is that we don't have a coherent demonstration of the effectiveness of this political power. We must realize that democracy puts our fate squarely in our hands, and our power when harnessed in the form of the vote is virtually unstoppable. What we as women have done is employ victim feminism which portrays us as powerless and helpless, rather than as potent agents for change; as marginal to the political process rather than central. The greatest disadvantage is evident when woman is criticized by woman, not for the quality of her leadership, but for the very act of putting herself forward. In 1989 a campaign against the only female candidate resorted to the circulation of nude photographs. In 1993 a radio ad by one party alluded negatively to women.

We must abandon the traditional dramatization of women as victims and fashion a new image of femininity which will lead us to view power in our hands as sexy and appropriate. Let us identify with one another through the shared strengths of femaleness, rather than primarily through our shared weaknesses. Let us welcome men, and honour their role in our lives.

It is time for Belizean women to trade in a self-image of powerlessness for one of incontestable strength. This calls for an alliance based on enlightened self-interest. Our power as a political majority depends on our acting as a majority. Nothing more complicated than the willingness of women to come together to place women issues on the front burner. The question is are we ready to take possession of political power?