



Poverty and Gender in the Caribbean

“Mother The Great Stone Got To Move”

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ABOUT US

The Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) is a regional network of feminist, individual researchers, activists and women's organizations, which define feminist politics as a matter of both consciousness and action.

CAFRA is committed to understanding the relationship between the oppression of women and other forms of oppression in the society, and to working actively for change.

Women in Development Europe (WIDE) is a trans-national network of gender specialist, women active in non-governmental organization and human rights activists. WIDE aims to articulate the relevance of the principles of gender equality and justice to the development process through research, documentation, information dissemination, capacity building, advocacy and networking.

The Caribbean Gender and Trade Network (CGTN) was set up to strengthen the capacity of Caribbean Women's Organizations for understanding the impact of Trade Liberalization on women's economic and social advancement.

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FEMINISATION OF POVERTY

There is no lack of desire, nor is there a lack of will or commitment of our governments, NGOs, Religious Groups, The Private Sector, Civil Society Organisations and Individuals to achieve the eradication of poverty.

Poverty eradication in the region, however is still a utopian dream, despite the apparent efforts over the years of all governments in formulating policies, establishing agencies and the implementation of programmes. There has not, to date, (save for a few countries) been any appreciable alleviation in the numbers and/or the situation of many within the poverty bracket. In fact some would say that in some countries poverty has increased or that the situation of the poor has worsened.

The face of poverty is still largely that of women, though in recent years, the number of men falling within the category of the poor has increased in some countries.

Female poverty has more far-reaching effects, in that they have primary responsibility for children and the elderly. Male poverty, however, may be linked to high levels of crime, violence in society and violence to women.

THE PRESENT BURDEN OF POVERTY

Some factors contributing to the persistence of poverty in the region are:

- Low economic growth (though some countries have had positive growth, e.g. The Bahamas, Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda and St. Kitts/Nevis) (per LC/CAR/G.772/Corr.1-11 May 2004); though it cannot now be said definitively that poverty levels have decreased significantly;
- Macro-Economic shocks, and inappropriate policy responses;
- Deficiencies in the labour market;
- Adverse effects of globalisation e.g. decrease in exports, decrease in manufacturing industries, loss of jobs and for farmers substantial decrease or loss of revenue as a result of lost foreign markets;
- Deterioration in the delivery of social services;
- Monetary devaluation and the attendant erosion of capital and savings;
- Higher cost for the provision of and to the consumer for essential services such as water and power (electricity, petrol/gas and cooking gas), contributions for higher education costs and for the provision of health services;
- Higher cost of food and other necessities of life
- Slow increase of wages and freezes on such increases;
- Most important, natural disasters – hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, prolonged periods of drought and of excessive rain resulting in loss of lives and limbs, homes and personal properties, businesses and crops, which call for unplanned expenditure by governments and complete/partial loss of capital by individuals, who most often, do not have insurance coverage (the premiums being too costly for the majority);
- Persistent high incidence of teenage pregnancies, which in many countries, still result in truncating their education and training, condemning them to low wage jobs, unemployment or unskilled informal commercial ventures;
- Existing gender-based discrimination in the higher bracket labour market, despite the fact that young women have and are outstripping young men in high school and tertiary level qualifications in many disciplines;
- Higher levels of unemployment of young persons but particularly, of young women;

- Continuing violence against women (sexual physical and mental), sexual harassment in the workplace, resulting in the need for medical treatment with its attendant costs, and time lost at work, causing loss of income and/or loss of employment, the consequent loss of self-esteem, which adversely affects their future prospects;
- Large number of female headed households;
- Slow growth of women's participation in decision-making at all levels
- High incidence of HIV/AIDS and other STIs, especially in young women, but also young men, through loss of work or opportunities for employment, because of the absence of protective legislation for job security in many countries in the region.

We should note that consequent on all or some of the above, the increasing involvement of women in the sex trade and sex tourism, as couriers in drug trafficking, their susceptibility to being trafficked for sexual exploitation and the business and domestic slave trade, and also external migration for better job opportunities, which created the phenomenon of "barrel children", became realities in the region, with all their negative impacts on our societies.

No one can question the commitment of governments to deal effectively with the factors, which adversely affect the living conditions of a good percentage of their citizens and to eradicate poverty within their borders. Taking into account their notable efforts over the years, it is clear that new measures should be taken. What measures/steps can be taken?

WHEN WOMEN BENEFIT THE WHOLE SOCIETY BENEFITS

The Kingstown Way Forward – recommendations and conclusions of the 4th Caribbean Ministerial Conference on Women (12-13 February 2004, Kingstown, St. Vincent and the Grenadines), identified a number of measures:

1. To accelerate action in promoting an active and visible policy to address the gender dimensions of poverty reduction and women's place in the economy within the context of the impact of globalisation on Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS)
2. To ensure that measures are put in place to increase competitiveness and productivity, include job creation for women, safeguard women in the flexibilisation of labour, facilitate their sustainable livelihoods, protection for those in the informal sector, especially with the provision of care services for children and the elderly, the sexual harassment of women and the roles and responsibilities of men and women in reproductive work
3. To review and examine policies and laws to enhance provisions for child support and maintenance to alleviate women's disproportionate responsibility for child care in all its dimensions
4. To strengthen the gender framework (including time use surveys) within the methodology for poverty assessment in order to accurately capture the different impacts of poverty on women and men
5. Discrimination in all its forms must be addressed including that of race and class;
6. Policies should be strengthened to take into account the rapid pace of globalisation and the resultant displacement of women forced to seek better working conditions outside their home environment
7. Continue to collect and examine data on women's and men's unwaged work as part of the domestic economy
8. Research the possible correlation between women who experienced motherhood in their teenage years and those classified among the poor and the inter-generational transmission of poverty
9. Particular attention must be given to disabled women and the elderly;
10. Countries without legal provisions and mechanisms for protection and for compensation for sexual harassment, sexual and physical violence injuries to the person, ought to take steps to so provide

11. Governments, NGOs, private sectors, religious groups, civil society organisations and individuals engaged in programmes for the poor should have closer collaboration of resources and actions to ensure a more cohesive result in all the programmes for the eradication of poverty and social protection

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The supply of information and public education strategies, on sexual reproductive health and rights and services, must be delivered in a language and in a manner, which is more acceptable to young persons and which must therefore be sought from them, to encourage greater numbers to become well informed, and thereby make responsible choices about their sexual conduct. Services must, of course, be provided to them and all others with the utmost sensitivity.

We cannot achieve sustainable development with equality, equity and the enjoyment of all human rights and freedoms, without a strict adherence to the ICPD principles.

AND, finally, the poor must be given the space for their voices to be heard, on their own behalf, and as part of the comity of human beings.