



**Convention on the Elimination  
of All Forms of Discrimination  
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination  
against Women**

**Combined fifth to ninth periodic reports submitted by  
Belize under article 18 of the Convention, due in 2011\*\*\***

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\* The present document is being issued without formal editing.

\*\* The annexes to the present document may be accessed from the web page of the Committee.



## I. Summary of major policy and service developments

### Introduction

1. Belize is bordered in the north by Mexico, the south and west by Guatemala, and in the east by the Caribbean Sea. Geographically, Belize forms part of both the Central American and Caribbean regions. Belize consists of six districts covering an area of 8,867 square miles. According to 2021 mid-year estimates, the population was at 430,191, of which 215,092 were females and 215,099 males.

2. In May 1990 Belize signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). On December 2, 2002, Belize acceded to the CEDAW Optional Protocol for individual communication and investigation procedure CEDAW-OP and CEDAW-op Article. 8-9).

3. Belize submitted a combined third and fourth periodic report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Committee) which was published on September 26, 2005. The State received Concluding Comments on August 10, 2007 and the Committee recommended that Belize submits a combined fifth and sixth periodic report by 2011. Though a state report was submitted in 2012, this was not accepted pending revisions, updates, and resubmission as communicated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Therefore, this report serves as the fifth and sixth periodic report of Belize. It covers the period 2007 to 2021.

4. This report responds to the recommendations made by the CEDAW Committee in its report [CEDAW/C/BLZ/CO/04](#) dated 5 August 2007 having considered Belize's third and fourth periodic report. The present document details actions taken, results achieved, and challenges faced, as Belize addressed the issues raised in the concluding observations. It recaps oral and written submissions made by contributing agencies and stakeholder. It includes information derived from national reports, assessments, as well as empirical research and data gathered by these agencies.

5. In this reporting period, it is worth noting that efforts were made to align national laws, policies, and programs with the CEDAW. Institutional capacity to collect sex-disaggregated data was strengthened. Investments were made to expand services and attention to women in rural, indigenous, and underserved communities. In 2013 the government approved the Revised National Gender Policy, and the 2013 Criminal Code Amendment. However, Belize continued to face resistance primarily from some faith-based groups to advance legislation and policies recognizing gender in all its diversity, such that the 2020 Equal Opportunities Bill is still under consideration.

### Report preparation process

6. The drafting of this periodic report was guided by the September 2022 Guidelines issued by the OHCHR. It also followed GoB's process for preparing national reports regarding implementation of Conventions which requires stakeholders' input and Cabinet's approval.

7. In 2011, the Ministry of Human Development, Families & Indigenous Peoples' Affairs (formerly Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation) oversaw the drafting process of the combined report. Stakeholders from 34 governmental agencies, statutory bodies and NGOs participated in a consultative process. The National Women's Commission oversaw the drafting of the updated version. Between October 2022–February 2023, input was solicited

from 40 governmental agencies, statutory bodies, gender focal points, and NGOs via an online qualitative questionnaire, interviews and three virtual review and validation sessions.

## Summary of Laws & Policies

8. During the reporting period, Belize enacted several laws and revised or aligned domestic legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure compliance with the CEDAW and other international commitments. Provisions were made to increase support, protection, and restitution for victims of violence and discrimination.

### Laws

9. In 2007, the *Domestic Violence Act (DVA) Revised Edition 2011, CAP 178 of the Laws of Belize* replaced the 2000 version.<sup>1</sup> The Revised DVA came into effect in October 2008. Amendments were made in 2011. The Revised DVA ensures prompt and equitable legal remedies for survivors of domestic violence. It supports sanctions against physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and financial abuse. It strengthened the ability of the courts and law enforcement agents to protect persons from abuse.

10. In 2011, *The Labour Act Revised Edition 2011, CAP 297 of the Laws of Belize*<sup>2</sup> was amended to protect workers from unfair dismissal and unequal treatment in the workplace due to pregnancy, HIV status, and filing a sexual harassment case against an employer or co-worker. Prior to the revision of this law women and other workers did not have law protection to address these abuses in the workplace.

11. In 2013, amendments were made to 25 sections of the *Criminal Code*.<sup>3</sup> The amendments toughened penalties for sexual crimes committed against children who were identified as some of the main victims of sexual abuse and crimes. These amendments covered a wide range of sexual crimes and included the adoption of Gender inclusive language signifying equal protection for males and females for rape since previously this language did not recognize that males could be raped. Provisions are now under considerations for regulations that supports the operationalization of the Sexual Offenders Registry to track and monitor convicted persons.

12. In 2013, the *Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2013, CAP 108 of the Laws of Belize*.<sup>4</sup> replaced the 2003 version. The revised version put into effect the UN Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons. The new Act criminalizes sex trafficking, labour trafficking and forced marriage of both adult and child victims. This Act also addresses trafficking in children for adoption or criminal intent. It outlines procedures for the forfeiture of assets gained from trafficking activities and made provisions to improve aid and protection for victims.

13. In 2013, the *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Prohibition) Act (CSEC)* was passed. The CSEC Act gave effect to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. It defined several types of commercial sexual exploitation of children and tougher penalties for perpetrators. It made provisions for victim support and restitution.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.belizejudiciary.org/download/LAWS-of-Belize-rev2011/Laws-of-Belize-Update-2011/VOLUME%209A/Cap%20178%20Domestic%20Violence%20Act.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://www.oas.org/juridico/PDFs/mesicic5\\_blz\\_resp\\_annex38.pdf](https://www.oas.org/juridico/PDFs/mesicic5_blz_resp_annex38.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See [http://d02044893.brinkster.net/belizecan/PDF/BILL101/Criminal\\_Code\\_\(Amendment\)\\_ \(No.\\_2\)\\_Bill,\\_2013.pdf](http://d02044893.brinkster.net/belizecan/PDF/BILL101/Criminal_Code_(Amendment)_ (No._2)_Bill,_2013.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See [http://humandevlopment.gov.bz/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/TIPS\\_Law.pdf](http://humandevlopment.gov.bz/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/TIPS_Law.pdf).

14. In 2016, the Supreme Court of Belize declared *Section 53* of the Criminal Code as unconstitutional.<sup>5</sup> This section criminalized certain sexual activities between consenting adults. The Chief Justice viewed Section 53 as infringing some provisions of the Constitution protecting fundamental rights, freedoms, and human dignity such as the prohibition of discrimination based on sex, which the courts interpreted to include sexual orientation. In 2019, the Court of Appeals upheld this ruling.

15. In 2017, the *Evidence Act* was amended for consistency with the Civil Procedure Rules 2005, Section 64(1)(b)(iii) and Section 64(c).<sup>6</sup> These changes allowed for video and virtual communication to be as part of court procedures and for oral evidence to be collected electronically. This amendment provided greater protection for witnesses, such as victims of sexual crimes and children, particularly those unable or unwilling to be physically present in court to provide oral testimony during trial proceedings.

### **National Gender Policies**

16. During the reporting period, two National Gender Policies were adopted. The National Gender Policy (NGP) constitutes the most important framework through which “rights are translated into the achievement of de jure and de facto gender equality, equity, and women’s empowerment in Belize” (p. 9). The NGP is framed by the principles outlined in the Constitution of Belize as well as international conventions, agreements signed and ratified by the Government of Belize: the CEDAW, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Convention of Belem Do Para (1994), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) Conventions and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

17. In 2010 Belize revised its National Gender Policy (2010–2013). Through support from the Spotlight Initiative and an extensive participatory process, the National Women’s Commission further revised and strengthened the National Gender Policy for the period 2021–2031. This new version was developed during this reporting period to address gaps in resources and institutional mechanisms and is now accompanied by an Action Plan, an Implementation Plan, Costing, and a Monitoring and Evaluation framework.

### **Summary of Limitations to Advancing Gender Equality**

18. Poverty levels in Belize have remained consistently high. Belize’s most comprehensive poverty assessment, The National Poverty Study (2009) indicated that between 2009 and 2018, the gender inequality gap widened by 28.9 per cent. Poverty rates remained high, especially among female-headed households. The poverty study also noted high female unemployment, and the lack of women’s representation in political leadership, policy and decision making are key factors to overcoming vulnerability and deprivation especially among women.

19. The social and cultural expectations placed on women and girls continue to challenge progress toward gender equity and equality. Early marriage and union remain a concern, with as much as one-third of women aged 20–24 years reporting being married or in a union before reaching age 18. In 2019, the birth rate was at 58.2 per 1,000 for women aged 15-19 years indicating a high birth rate among adolescence.

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<sup>5</sup> Supreme Court Judgement (10/08/2016). *Caleb Orozco vs. The Attorney General of Belize*. See <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/Judgment-Orozco-v-The-Attorney-General-of-Belize.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://nationalassembly.gov.bz/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Act-No.-24-of-2017-Evidence-Amendment-Bill-2017.pdf>.

Such birth rates preclude women and girls from accessing economic opportunities and education to improve their lives and livelihoods.

20. Women's political representation at the highest level of decision making remains low. Belize has had four elections since the submission of the last CEDAW report (2007), and while women have been elected, in the four governments since then, their total number has never exceeded four (4) out of all the 31 seats in the house of representatives. There are 46 members in the national assembly, however, women parliamentarians account for just 22 per cent of the members of the National Assembly. Currently, only 12.9 per cent of elected parliamentary seats are held by women. Short of a significant increase in women elected to the House of Representatives their priorities and voices will continue to be marginalised.

21. Women continue to experience significant economic exclusion. The income inequality experienced by women in Belize has further marginalized women and girls and prevent them from their right to work and a decent standard of living. Unemployment and underemployment data for women in 2021 are at 15.58 per cent and 21.1 per cent respectively. Consistently, unemployment levels for women fall below that for women who tend to experience unemployment at levels three times higher than men.

22. Women and girls are also disproportionately affected by gender-based violence. This violence is endemic, systemic socially and culturally tolerated in the Belizean community. Between the period 2017 to 2021 a total of 69 women were murdered in Belize. During that same period 11,461 cases of Domestic Violence were reported.

23. The global Covid-19 Pandemic which emerged in 2020, reversed some of the economic and social gains made for women. At the height of pandemic, many women undertook care-giving roles and unpaid labour in their homes including substitute teachers for children since schools were closed. Women were also hardest hit economically since they predominate in the informal sector to earn a living. The tourism sector in Belize is one of the largest employers of women who work in the service industry. The closure of borders ceased the arrival of both international and domestic tourists who were key to the operations of small and micro entrepreneurs many of which were owned by women.

## **II. Progress on the committee recommendations**

### **Response to paragraph 10**

#### **Disaggregated data**

24. In relation to the institutionalisation of comprehensive data collection mechanism, since 2007, the Statistical Institute of Belize (SIB) has been established as the official, national statistical entity. This quasi-government body produces a range of national surveys and reports supported by various governmental and international agencies usually producing sex-disaggregated data. The SIB coordinates the National Statistical System (NSS) which is comprised of fifteen agencies collecting sex-disaggregated data. These agencies provide administrative data to feed into SIB's system which is then used to inform and produce national reporting. The SIB provides technical oversight for Monitoring & Evaluation of Horizon 2030 and the Medium-Term Development Plan (GSDS 2016–2020). It fulfils the reporting obligations for the SDG's. Nonetheless, disaggregated data on women and gender still remain isolated from this central system limiting more comprehensive analysis for evidence-based policy development that should advance the rights of women.

25. In 2010, the SIB conducted the Housing and Population Census and is now undertaking the 2022 Census. The 2010 Census questionnaire included a section on Women in Leadership Positions. This was requested by the National Women's Commission since no data on this topic existed at the time. This data was used to guide the NWC work on women in politics. This was reintroduced in the 2022 Census.

### **The national data machinery**

26. The National Data Machinery was strengthened. It comprises of several agencies who contribute disaggregated data for national monitoring and evaluation purposes and for policy decision-making.

- Since 2008, Ministry of Health has operated the Gender-based Violence Surveillance System through its Belize Health Information System (BHIS). The Epidemiology Unit uses this data to produce quarterly reports on gender-based violence which is disseminated to key agencies;
- Sexual and domestic violence incidences are recorded at each police station. This data is forwarded to their Joint Intelligence Unit (JICC) through the Crime Information Management System (CIMS) and the Ministry of Health's Epidemiology Unit through the BHIS;
- The Department of Human Services and Women's Department manage its cases through the FAMCare Case Management System, Family and Magistrate Courts collect data through internal data system on gender-based violence cases brought before the courts. This is submitted to Ministry of Health's surveillance system;
- In 2014, The Ministry of Education, Science & Technology launched the Belize's Education Management Information System/OpenEMIS from which an annual sex-disaggregated Abstract of Statistics is being produced;
- Since 2016, with support from UNDP's Infosegura project, the Belize Crime Observatory (BCO) have been compiling, analysing, and publishing an annual comprehensive report on violence against women and girls. It includes domestic violence, sexual violence and femicide. It maintains a data repository and the Sexual Offenders Registry.

27. Key agencies such as the Ministry of Human of Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs (MHDFIPA) has improved administrative data systems. In 2013, the Ministry adopted the Family Care (FAMCARE) system, which includes a case management module on gender-based violence, a module on Trafficking in Persons and a Gender-Based Violence Complaints System Tool. This system allows the Ministry to enhance service delivery since it gives real-time information as well as cost tracking and financial management.

### **Older women**

28. In 2010 it was estimated that older persons, 60 years and above, made up seven per cent of Belize's population. The 2021 mid-year estimates noted that older persons reduced to six per cent. Females account for 48 per cent of the elderly population. As Belize's population ages, women may be further challenged, excluded and marginalized in their senior years as they continue to spend their productive years in unpaid care work and in the informal sector. Many women will not access social protection services owing to their lack of contributions to the national social security scheme, which is made possible through employment in the formal sector.

29. The 2009 Country Poverty Study found that 34 per cent of all older persons were living in poverty. In 2010, The National Council on Ageing (NCA), an advocacy body responsible for developing and implementing plans and programmes to protect the

rights of Older Persons in Belize conducted a “Situational Analysis of Older Persons in Belize”. This was done in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Development Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation, PAHO and UNFPA. While most findings were not sex-disaggregated, it offered a better understanding of issues affecting older persons in Belize which helped to shape the direction of policies and programming for older women. Findings show:

- Older persons tend to live near kin. Older women are usually tasked with paid or unpaid caregiving for their children, grandchildren, or neighbours;
- As much as 72 per cent of elderly persons are homeowners but most homes were in poor conditions;
- Healthcare was a key concern, especially among rural older persons;
- Older persons face many ailments resulting from aging, yet only 37.3 per cent obtained their medication free of cost;
- 84 per cent of the older population had no employment income;
- Only 37 per cent received a pension of which 55.2 per cent were women.

30. The above-mentioned findings framed the “NCA’s Strategic Plan for 2015-2019: Working to place concerns of Older Persons on the National Agenda”.<sup>7</sup> The NCA continues to discuss Belize’s adoption of the Older Persons Act which has been in draft format since 2007. This is considered an important legislation since there is currently none in Belize that specifically protects older persons or addresses issues affecting older women. The NCA is pushing for Belize to sign the Inter-American Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons.

31. To alleviate hardships faced by older persons in Belize, GoB supports a Non-Contributory Pension for Older Persons including migrant women with permanent residency. This is administered through the Belize Social Security Board. The scheme was scaled down in 2008 based on actuarial advice. As such, only older persons with no source of income or family support qualified. However, the benefit increased to BZ\$100.00 (US\$50) per month plus men aged 67 and above were included. Despite efforts to support the elderly poor, many consider BZ\$100(US\$50) insufficient to meet basic needs. The NCA suggested that older persons should be enrolled in GoB’s social protection programs to include more older persons and establish a Universal Pension Scheme. In 2021, a total of 833 women were benefiting from the Non-Contributory Pension Scheme compared to 2009, when peak beneficiaries of women were 2790. Understanding the factors leading to the decline in women beneficiaries.

**Table: Women as Non-contributory pensioners, 2009-2021**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Beneficiaries</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>2009</b>	4 297	2 790	65
<b>2010</b>	3 992	2 654	66
<b>2011</b>	3 711	2 457	66
<b>2012</b>	3 396	2 236	66
<b>2013</b>	3 115	2 058	66
<b>2014</b>	2 777	1 828	66

<sup>7</sup> See [https://extranet.who.int/countryplanningcycles/sites/default/files/planning\\_cycle\\_repository/belize/national\\_council\\_on\\_ageing\\_strategic\\_plan\\_2015\\_-\\_2019.pdf](https://extranet.who.int/countryplanningcycles/sites/default/files/planning_cycle_repository/belize/national_council_on_ageing_strategic_plan_2015_-_2019.pdf).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Beneficiaries</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>2015</b>	2 513	1 646	65
<b>2016</b>	2 214	1 461	66
<b>2017</b>	2 018	1 347	67
<b>2018</b>	1 863	1 239	67
<b>2019</b>	1 575	1 055	67
<b>2020</b>	1 412	949	67
<b>2021</b>	1 228	833	68

*Source: Social Security Board, Abstract of Statistics, 2009–2021.*

32. Recognizing health challenges faced by elderly persons; the government improved the National Health Insurance (NHI) programme. In July 2020, as part of GoB's cost saving measures, the program experienced a budget cut of 15–20 per cent. By 2021, the budget increased to the pre-pandemic amount of BZ\$17(US\$8.5) million. The NHI provides free basic healthcare services to residents of areas where it operates. It is part of GoB's effort to alleviate poverty especially among vulnerable groups such as elderly women. In 2007, GoB expanded the scheme to the southern districts. In 2009, separate urban and rural service models were created. In 2013, other areas of Belize City were included. By 2021, NHI had 129784 members.

33. Despite efforts to improve healthcare services for elderly persons, various accounts point to the fact that Belize lacks medical personnel trained in geriatric care making it difficult for healthcare providers to adequately respond to the needs of older persons, even more so, the needs of elderly women. To improve this gap, NHI continue to support the Mercy Care Clinic, the only facility in the entire country focusing on the geriatric population.

### **Women with disabilities**

34. *Part II Section 16* of the *Constitution of Belize* protects individuals from discrimination on various grounds but does not explicitly mention disability. Therefore, presently, there is no officially adopted definition of disability nor explicit legal protection for people with disabilities. Nevertheless, in May 2011, Belize signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is yet to sign on to the Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities.

35. It is estimated that about 35,000 people are living with disabilities in Belize. Two Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys were conducted by the SIB with support from UNICEF. Key areas of these report did not provide sex-disaggregated data but the 2011 survey estimated that 36.4 per cent of children ages 2–9 had at least one form of impairment. The Situational Analysis of Older Persons (2010) found that a quarter of respondents had some type of disability. Their disability, however, was likely due to a health condition or accident related to the aging process. About one third of the elderly population is likely restricted to a wheelchair.

36. Considering these accounts, gender-based violence response now explicitly outlines supports for persons with disabilities. For example, Horizon 2030 recognizes the need to improve the condition of women with disabilities. The 2021 Spotlight Initiative, noted that Care for Child Development (CCD), an early childhood project in collaboration with Ministries of Health, Education and Human Development and previously funded by UNICEF will be expanded to support families of children with disabilities.



37. The Spotlight Initiative is in the process of updating the guidelines of the referral and counter referral system for violence against women which was developed under the 2014 BA1 project. The update is deemed as important since the Sexual and Reproductive Health Assessment (2018) conducted by UNFPA raised concerns that females and males with disabilities were experiencing high rates of forced sex. Therefore, the updated referral system will include vulnerable social groups such as persons with disabilities.

38. Belize brought the situation of persons living with disabilities to the forefront by assigning the Special Envoy for Women and Children and Families as the key spokesperson. Since 2008, the spouse of the Prime Minister has been assigned to the Office of the Special Envoy. The office continues to collaborate on national legislations and spearhead awareness campaigns. In 2014, the then Special Envoy established the Inspiration Centre, offering comprehensive therapy and health services to children with disabilities.

39. A Disability Desk was established in 2021, within the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs. This office has been advocating for the rights of women and girls living with disabilities to live in dignity and inclusivity in all spheres of Belizean life. It raises awareness about using inclusive language in public service messages and information. It is planning interpreters training and certification, envisioning that interpreters will be placed at police stations, courts, and hospitals. In anticipation of this, the Desk has prepared a training manual in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. It is responsible to monitor and report on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and is drafting a National Disability Legislation and Policy.

40. Cognizant that services for women and girls with disabilities must improve, GoB continues to partner with community-based organizations and NGOs. For example, the Community Agency for Rehabilitation and Education (CARE-Belize) has Rehabilitation Field Officers working with children with disabilities from birth to six years of age in Toledo, Cayo, Belize and Orange Walk districts. The agency serves about 150 children monthly. The Belize Association for Persons with Diverse Abilities have nationwide membership of 600 persons including women. Since its inception women make up half of the Executive Committee. This NGO is the most active umbrella organization advocating for the rights of all persons with diverse abilities.

## **Response to paragraph 12**

### **Comprehensive operational plan**

41. Belize developed a long-term development plan, Horizon 2010–2030, along with a medium-term strategy, the Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) to guide SDGs implementation. The 2021–2030 medium-term strategy is being drafted. The 2021–2031 National Gender Policy and projects such as the 2021 Spotlight Initiative are addressing the gaps in data collection through the provision of funding for equipment, training, and software, as well as technical support to improve the capacities of ministries and state agencies to produce data disaggregated by sex, age, geographic regions, migration, administrative regions, etc. These investments have also increased the ability of the gender machinery to monitor policies and project impacts. Challenges such as data quality, interagency collaboration, and timely data sharing continue to impede evidence-based policy decision-making.

42. Two National Gender Policies were developed during the reporting period. The 2010-2013 Revised Gender Policy established five priority areas: i. Health, ii. Education and Skills training, iii. Wealth and Employment Generation, iv. Violence

Producing Conditions and v. Power and Decision Making. Commitments were made to increase women’s political participation at all levels. It envisioned adequate human and financial resources for effective gender response as well as improved coordination and collaboration between agencies plus a supportive policy and programming environment. The 2021–2030 version looked at the gaps and challenges and outlined clearer responses including implementation, monitoring, evaluation, costs, and shared responsibilities. Gender-based violence is brought more to the forefront and Organizational System Strengthening was added as a sixth pillar.

43. Three comprehensive Gender-based violence Action Plans were developed during the reporting period to guide the national multi-sectoral response. The first was the 2010–2013 National Gender-based violence Plan of Action (NGBVAP) supported by UNIFEM/UNWOMEN. Its framework was informed by findings from two assessments conducted in 2009, the “National Assessment of Actions on Ending Violence Against Women” and “Strengthening State Accountability in Policing and Prosecuting Sexual Assaults”.

44. The second NGBVAP for the period 2017–2020, was developed with funding from the BA1 Project. This version adopted four priority areas: i. Effective Governance and Sustainability, ii. Primary Prevention of Gender-Based Violence, iii. Adequate Response to Victims and iv. Effective Monitoring and Evaluation. The third and current NGBVAP covers 2021–2026. It was developed by the National Women’s Commission with support from the Spotlight Initiative. The current plan is aligned with the National Gender Policy (2021–2030), thus, foresees well-coordinated and harmonized prevention and improved safety and recovery services. Plus, it lays out an interlinked set of actions to prevent gender-based violence and protect and support victims of all gendered groups and their children.

45. Other national plans are now interconnected either with the National Gender Policy and/or the NGBVAP:

- The 2017–2030 National Children’s Agenda was developed by the National Committee for Families and Children. This agenda advocates for the holistic development and protection of the rights of children and adolescents and recognises intersections between child protection and gender-based violence;
- The 2019 Draft Citizen Security Policy and Plan developed by RESTORE Belize, addresses different types of violence including gender-based violence;
- The 2019–2020 Police Crime Fighting Strategy includes issues such as school truancy, homicide reduction and domestic violence;
- In December 2020, the Protected Areas Conservation Trust launched a Gender Policy for the Conservation Sector;
- In 2020, the Ministry of National Security adopted the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda which promotes gender equality, women empowerment, and rights in the national security forces: Police, Defence Force, and the Coastguard;
- The 2020 Women’s Agenda of Plan Belize outlines how the government elected in 2020 will accelerate economic opportunities, gender equality, pay equity and affordable land and housing for women during its tenure;
- In 2021, the National Climate Change Office, with support from the Engender Project, drafted the National Climate Change Gender Action Plan (2022–2027).

46. While there have been significant improvements in the legal framework, such that women are aware of redress, however it is still difficult and costly for many women to access legal services and aid. Women need greater access to legal services to get legal redress.

## Public Awareness

47. Programs designed to enhance women's enjoyment of rights are presented through public launches, national talk shows and press releases. Sensitization takes place in a range of settings such as public events and health fairs. Two large commemorations take place annually to raise awareness about Women's Rights: Women's Month in March, and 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence in November. In 2009, the Women's and Family Support Department (WFSD) extended the week of activities marking International Women's Day to a month. Since then, WFSD along with government, civil society organizations and the private sector conducts activities to celebrate Women's Month. For both 16 days of Activism and Women's Month, a calendar of activities is launched to heighten public awareness about women rights, gender equity and equality, services.

48. The government partnered with a network of NGOs including Haven House, Child Development Foundation, Belize Family Life Association, Mercy Clinic, Productive Organization for Women in Action, Toledo Maya Women Council, to fill service and resource gaps. New policies and programs are being designed with implementation and Monitoring & Evaluation plans to track service gaps, identify shared-responsibility, report impacts and identify where resources need to be invested. In 2020 UNFPA through the Spotlight Initiative, the Child Development Foundation, Human Rights Commission of Belize, Belize Family Life Association, Productive Organization for Women in Action, implemented the Mobile Women Centre (MWCs) delivering lifelivesaving services through legal support, psychosocial support and counselling, sexual and reproductive health services, Gender Based Violence and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights information sharing. In 2021, the Ministry of Human Development, Families and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs began the implementation of these key services through government and civil society implementation of services to the hardest to reach women and girls.

49. Various governmental agencies such as the National Women's Commission, the Women's Department, Mental Health Unit, international agencies such as UNICEF, and non-governmental agencies such as Child Development Foundation launched multi-lingual campaigns to raise awareness about gender-based violence and child abuse during the pandemic. Information such as where to get help, mental health, hotlines, and Safe Shelter systems were shared through blogs, commercial and infographics.

50. Annual activities include a Women's Summit, panels, satellite tables, exhibits and fairs to stimulate debates on issues pertinent to the theme. Between 2012–2021, approximately 2,894 individuals benefited from these sessions. Since 2009, with support from local attorneys, Legal Clinics on Family Issues and Gender-based Violence have been carried out. Since inception over 17 Attorneys have participated. Concerns raised include divorce, property rights, legal separation, child maintenance, custody, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. About 70 persons access the services annually. A forum is conducted in different parts of the country on a rotating basis. An award ceremony recognizes approximately 20 Outstanding Belizean Women and their contributions.

51. More than 60 activities are done countrywide, for example: The UNite campaign pledge to end violence in 2009. Signatures were gathered countrywide at 16 Days of Activism activities and submitted to UNDP Belize. In 2010 and 2011, the department held two sexual violence forums, created public education materials and sexual violence information session. In 2012, countrywide sessions on sexual violence focused on rural women participants.

52. Between 2007–2012, the Women’s Department developed handbooks for training purposes and to inform women, men, and service providers about their rights and responsibilities. Handbooks included information on Belize’s commitments with the CEDAW, Beijing and Belem do Para. Some were translated into Spanish:

- The Women’s Rights Handbook;<sup>8</sup>
- Women’s Handbook on Domestic Violence;
- Men’s Handbook on Domestic Violence;
- Domestic Violence and its Effects on Children;
- HIV Peer Counselling for Women and Girls Manual;
- Training Guide on Facilitating Information Sessions on the link between HIV and Violence Against Women;
- Handbook on Sexual Violence: Resource Guide for legislators, police, and service providers.

53. The National AIDS Commission, the Office of the Special Envoy and the Ministry of Human Development supported the Life and Let Live Campaign launched in 2020. This community-led campaign highlights persons with lived experiences of discrimination particularly women, people living with disability and LGBTQI+ persons. It raises awareness about rights through public service messages in English, American Sign Language, Ketchi, Mopan and Spanish on tv channels, radio, and social media. It is one of the few campaigns measuring viewing rates and impact. Thus, estimates that the campaign reached over 70 per cent of Belizeans. Surveys measure how Belizeans view these social groups, acceptance, respect, neighbourliness and how much they reject discrimination. Both 2020 and 2021 findings, show positive increases in all areas.

54. The private sector through the Belize Chamber of Commerce partners with the Women’s Department to commemorate Women’s Month. Several businesses develop television commercials marking Women’s Month and offer special discounts to women.

55. As mentioned before, faith-based, and pro-life groups challenge the adoption of gender polices in Belize. The 2010–2013 Revised NGP (2010–2013) received nationwide social protests (#killthebill) due to the policy’s definition of respect for diversity and sexual orientation. In 2020, the Ministry of Human Development, the National AIDS Commission and Office of the Special Envoy drafted The Equal Opportunities Bill (EOB) which sought to protect an individual from discrimination. The bill defined discrimination and outlined 21 characteristics that an individual could be discriminated for, including gender, sex, age, and disability. It stipulated what constitutes discriminatory actions as well as fines for violators.<sup>9</sup> Protesting factions viewed them as encouraging LBGT+ rights and that fines stipulated in the EOB were too stiff and in contravention of their right to freedom of speech. Learning from these experiences and to stem upsurge of objections, when drafting such bills, GoB meets with representatives of these bodies to consider concerns and recommendations. Both

<sup>8</sup> Includes property rights, child custody, child support, co-parenting, sexual harassment, amendments to the Labour Act as it relates to dismissal on the grounds of sexual harassment and HIV status, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Characteristics include lawful sexual activity, intersex status, gender identity, and sexual orientation age, breastfeeding, disability, HIV positive status, irrelevant criminal record, marital status, pregnancy, race, sex, status as an orphan, religious belief or activity and political opinion. Stated in the bill, “discriminate against” means to make a distinction, create an exclusion, or show a difference in treatment to a person who falls within the characteristics.

national gender policies were accompanied by a public education process to reduce resistance.

56. National projects now include communication/socialization strategies. For example, the 2014 BA1 Project included a communication plan. Knowledge products were disseminated among the target population. Information about the legal framework in relation to gender-based violence, non-violent masculinity, and legal penalties for violent behaviours are included. The 2021 Spotlight Initiative proposed the creation of customized public education and awareness campaigns to target social groups such as victims/survivors, adolescents, youth, media personnel and service providers.

57. Several trainings were conducted during the reporting period. Since 2010, the Women's Department have been training Police Prosecutors and the Magistracy on Women's Rights. In 2010, with support from the Global Fund Project, a nation-wide Sisterhood Camp was held for young women between 13 and 16 years of age. Here, 42 young women were trained as peer educators in gender-based violence, who in turn, trained 343 of their peers. In 2015, a workshop was conducted for Community and Institutional Journalists and Communicators. The training covered Integrated Prevention and Assistance to Victims of gender-based violence, Women at risk for Violence Against Women, Trafficking in Persons and Femicide. In 2021, through the Spotlight Initiative, 1183 primary and secondary school educators were trained to prevent, identify, and respond to family violence.

#### **Access to justice**

58. Both the 2013 and 2021 National Gender Policies and the 2017 and 2021 National Gender-based Violence Action Plan recognizes access to justice for victims especially the need for legal representation. The 2021 Spotlight Initiative highlights access to justice for survivors of family violence. It identifies several gaps in the support system. The need for court navigators to support victims was prominent. Currently, service providers refer victims local NGO's, the Child Development Foundation and Haven House or Legal Aid. Belize identifies that vulnerable social groups such as persons with disabilities, LGBTIQI+, migrants, and persons with language barriers need additional support to access justice and navigate the judicial system.

59. The Belize Police Department continues to operate Domestic Violence Units<sup>10</sup> in major municipalities. So far, only the Belize City Family Violence Unit works on a 24-hour shift and has an in-house Counsellor. Since 2020, the DMU operates two hotlines in Belize City with a referral system to local police stations. In the other municipalities, specialized Domestic Violence Officers work from 8 a.m.–5 p.m. Thus, on weekdays and after hours, the response rest on regular police officers. Therefore, the Women's Department consistently train the Police Department on gender-based violence protocols and procedures, the referral system, case management and handling of evidence so they can improve the quality of their response.

60. Nationwide, the unit receives an average of 100 complaints monthly with constant increases. Increases are attributed to the positive impacts of gender-based violence awareness initiatives. As such, victims are more confident reporting to the police plus, the decentralization of services, improvement in the response, referrals, and support system as well as stronger collaboration with Human Services. In 2021,

<sup>10</sup> Belize City operates the Family Violence Unit which offers more specialized range of services. In the districts, the same unit is called the Domestic Violence Unit.

there were 773 cases of domestic violence, 46 cases of unlawful sexual intercourse, 12 cases of rape, and 11 cases of femicide.

61. During the reporting period, there has been little annual increase in the number of judges due to a shortage of skilled personnel in the country. For most years, there were around 12 judges at the Magistrates Court and three at the Family Court. According to the Chief Justice Reports, female judges dominate lower courts every year. For example, in 2015 there were 12 Magistrates, 10 were females. In 2013, there were three family court judges, all women. This shortage creates nation-wide effects and gaps at the level of the Magistrate Courts where matters falling under the Domestic Violence Act are adjudicated. These include the issuance of protection orders, occupation orders, tenancy orders and counselling orders. To bridge this gap, Magistrates from Belize City act as visiting judges in the municipal courts at least once a week.

62. In terms of making the court system more gender responsive, notable advances are worth mentioning. In 2017, the Judicial Reform and Institutional Strengthening (JURIST) Project was launched. The project, supported by the Government of Canada, was established to “improve court governance and administration, ensure social inclusion and gender equity and equality in the administration of justice”. The JURIST project led to Belize adopting the 2017 “Model Guidelines for Sexual Offence Cases” developed for the Caribbean Region.

63. In 2018, a “Gender Equality Protocol for Judicial Officers” was designed and approved. The protocol outlines how members of the judiciary could apply a gender lens to adjudicate cases and manage evidence in cases related to child custody, victims of domestic violence, sexual violence, and Trafficking in Persons. The protocol includes guidelines for determining protection orders and informs about the support systems available to victims including vulnerable populations. Members of the judiciary received training on the guidelines and protocol.

64. In 2021, Spotlight Initiative in collaboration with relevant government Ministries developed a training manual for court officials and mentorship for magistrates. 25 court officials and 27 magistrates received capacity development training to prevent and respond to family violence.

65. Video and virtual conferencing and use of a protective screen became more integrated into court procedures in accordance with Evidence (Amendment 2017) Act. While this was already the law, it became more widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic under the “Practice Directions of 2020 for both the Supreme Court and the Inferior Courts” (a.k.a. The COVID-19 Directions 2020 Protocol).<sup>11</sup> The directive took into consideration that such measures protect the dignity of complainants, particularly those who experienced sexual violence, and allowed for critical information to be shared without their physical presence or having to face perpetrators.

### **Women’s legal literacy**

66. The Women’s Department as a part of its public awareness information dissemination developed a Women’s Rights handbooks to improved women’s familiarity with the laws. In addition, several public awareness campaigns were held to improve women’s legal literacy. In 2018, RET International in collaboration with the National Women’s Commission, and Department of Youth Services conducted a

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<sup>11</sup> This directive stipulated the use of video-link facilities for “applicants or vulnerable witnesses, to avoid their re-victimization by the alleged perpetrator (FCPPM section 3.2.6.1). The directive goes on to note that “if such technology is not available, the court should utilize a screen to separate the respondent from the applicant or vulnerable witness” (p. 41).

seminar with youths on domestic violence, rights, and the Domestic Violence Act (2007). It included a youth-led review of the DVA to find ways to make the information more youth-friendly.

67. The Government continues to support the Belize Legal Aid and Services Centre under the Attorney General Ministry. There are offices in two parts of the country. The centre offers legal advice at a significantly reduced cost. The NGO community, international agencies and the Bar Association have collaborated with the Legal Advice and Services Centre on issues related to gender-based violence. Between August 2017–April 2018, the Belize Bar Association, with funding from the EU, organized a nation-wide free legal clinic. Clinics included legal advice on issues such as labour, land, family, wills, domestic violence, immigration, and asylum. Between 2018–2019, another 16 clinics were held. The Mobile Women Centre held 12 clinics were completed 2020 and 2021 serving 600 women and girls with legal services.

## **Response to Paragraph 14**

### **Strengthening the national machinery:**

68. In 2008, the National Women’s Commission (NWC) installed its first Executive Director. The NWC advises the government, especially the Minister with responsibility for women and gender issues. It serves as a member on several key governmental committees. The commission is comprised of 13 persons representing governmental, non-governmental agencies, civil society, and faith-based organizations.

69. The (NWC) Secretariat monitors and reports on CEDAW as well as other agencies implementing the convention. Although it falls under the MHDFIPA, it is in the process of being converted into a Statutory Body. This move should give the office wider powers to act and persuade partner agencies to monitor and report on their progress regarding the convention. Additionally, the NWC is mandated with implementing the National Gender Policies and the National Gender-based Violence Plan of Actions. It advocates issues related to the situation of women and girls, conducts public awareness campaigns along with other agencies. It implements initiatives such as political leadership training, the promotion of public education on gender equity and equality in schools and facilitates support groups for women in all districts.

70. The Ministry of Human Development, Families & Indigenous People’s Affairs (MHDFIPA) (formerly Ministry of Human Development, Social Transformation and Poverty Alleviation) is the main entity responsible for advocates for legislation, policy, and programs for the advancement of women in Belize. It adopted the following Strategic Objectives in 2021:

- Reduce human trafficking and child labour,
- Ensure that administrative structures are relevant and efficient,
- Ensure that the target population are aware of an enjoying their rights,
- Provide for the specific needs of persons with disabilities, youth, and aging population,
- Provide for the rights and wellbeing of indigenous persons,
- Ensure, and expand the quality of social safety net schemes,
- Strengthening of the wider social protection systems.

71. This Ministry collaborates with, and receives funding from, various international agencies such as the UN agencies. It collaborates with non-governmental agencies working on gender-related issues and those working to empower women. Between 2007-2012, budget allocations for women and gender line items increased notably but remain steady thereafter (except for the pandemic year).

72. The Women and Family Support Department (referred to as Women's Department) has three sections: Family Support Services, Gender Unit, and Disabilities Desk.<sup>12</sup> The Department works closely with the Human Services and Community Rehabilitation Departments that falls under MHDFIPA. It has eight offices countrywide, one in each municipality. During the reporting period, staff participated in 18 Professional Development trainings related to their mandate as well as topics on management. Special topics included Gender, Nationally Determined Contributions & Climate Change, Special Conference on the Establishment of Specific Legislation to Protect the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities, Gender & Trade, Forensic Interviewing, Trauma Informed Care for Professionals. Migration-related topics offered by IOM such as Legal and Procedural Training on Migration, Human Rights, Gender and Sexual Orientation, Migrant Youths and a UK AID training on Inclusive Trade and Gender in a Post COVID-19 World.

73. A Gender Integration Action Plan (2007–2009) was developed to ensure that all government ministries are gender responsive. This is guided by a Gender Focal Point Committee chaired by the National Women's Commission. This all-female committee works closely with the Women's Department and is currently comprised of 19 persons. Each focal point is designated by their government ministry.

74. A Gender Focal Points Handbook guides the work of the committee. The committee went dormant for several years, due to staff turn-over and failure to identify persons with actual decision-making capacities in the Ministries to act as focal points. In January 2011, with support from UNFPA, the committee was reconstituted, and new focal points were identified. The terms of reference and handbook were updated as well. These focal points continue to strengthen governments response system plus oversees gender mainstreaming processes for all policies, programs and plans across all government ministries and departments.

### **Multisectoral approach**

75. In 2008, the multi-sector National Gender-Based Violence Committee (NGBVC) was formed. It is chaired by the Women's Department and includes representatives from the Magistrate Court, Family Court, Police Department, Community Rehabilitation Department, Ministry of Health, and several civil society agencies including shelters. The primary mandate of the committee is to support the National Women's Commission implement the National Gender-based Violence Action Plan (NGBVAP). The committee envisions an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to improve law enforcement, health, judicial education, and community advocacy. It supports the upgrading of protection, provision of services, justice, and prevention of gender-based violence. At the district level, committees are chaired by a representative of the Women's Department. Cognizant of challenges faced by past committees such as collaboration and lack of resources, the 2017–2020 NGBVAP outlined clear timeframes as well as resource mobilization plan.

<sup>12</sup> It mandated to conduct public education and awareness; support governmental and non-governmental agencies develop gender-sensitive policies and programs; work with women at the community level to enhance their skills so that they can achieve economic independence; and capacity building for service providers.



76. The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council (ATiP) compositing per the legislation is multi-sectoral in nature and according to section 5 (6) should include the following members:

- Chaired by Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Human Development, Families and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs;
- Representative of the Ministry responsible for foreign affairs;
- Representative of the Ministry responsible for national security;
- Representative of the Attorney General's Ministry;
- Representative of the Ministry responsible for Health;
- Representative of the Belize Tourism Board;
- Labour Commissioner;
- Commissioner of Police;
- Director of Immigration and Nationality Services;
- Director of Public Prosecutions;
- Comptroller of Customs; and
- Not more than three other persons from a non-governmental organization or any other relevant organization having appropriate experience, knowledge, and expertise in relation to the problem of and issues relating to trafficking in person including the protection and support of trafficked persons.

77. Section 5 of the *Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2013* empowered the council to formulate policies and support survivor-victims. In 2012, with IOM funding, the council developed and adopted the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Strategic Plan of Action 2013-2015. This was updated and a 2021–2023 strategic plan was developed. The plan directs the work of the council to ensure it meets Belize's international commitments, national legislation, policies and plans relevant to Trafficking in Persons and discusses the roles and responsibilities of each agency.

78. The National Commission for Families and Children (NCFC) is another multi-sectorial entity. It promotes, monitor, and evaluates Belize's implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The commission is comprised of 25 NGO's, 16 governmental agencies and eight international partners. It ensures Belize meets its commitments with the CEDAW and Convention on Persons with Disabilities as it pertains to citizens under 18 including the girl child. The NCFC adopted the National Children's Agenda 2017–2030 and an accompanying Strategic Action Plan 2017–2021 as well as a Monitoring and Evaluation system. The National Children's Agenda Dashboard allows the commission to capture data and track progress towards meeting targets and milestones. Since 2019, the NCFC has been conducting the annual National Children's Parliament where 31 young men and women table issues affecting them.

79. The National Council for the Aging (NCA) was established in 2003. Its primary function is to promote, implement, monitor, and evaluate the National Policy for Older Persons. In 2010, it spearheaded The Situational Analysis of Older Persons. (See paragraph 34). The NCA is attached to the MHDFIPA but is directed by representatives of several ministries, older persons organizations, faith-based groups, and civil society organizations. During the reporting period, the NCA played a fundamental role as an advisory and advocacy office to ensure that older women in Belize have equal access to services and improved quality of life.

80. A multi-sectorial approach is vital in Belize's implementation of the convention. Many agencies play supportive roles in the gender machinery such as the health sector, legal services, etc. These partnerships are essential to help bridge shortage of human and material resources nationwide. The health sector for example, constantly faces shortages of medical personnel to provide specialized services for older persons or people with disabilities. The Legal Aid Centre provides legal services for a range of civil and criminal cases. The Office of the Ombudsman provides for complaints and barriers experienced by the public when accessing state services. This office improves the civic space for citizen engagement with the state and the conclusion of remedial action. However, this office is in Belize City only and the services are not accessible to some of the most vulnerable population who live in other parts of the country.

## **Response to paragraph 16**

### **Gender equality and national development**

81. To promote and ensure the protection of women's human rights in all development cooperation programs, the government of Belize integrated gender equality as a cross-cutting issue in Belize's long-term development plan entitled "Horizon 2030: National Development Framework for Belize 2010-2030". In this plan, specific goals and strategies are defined to enhance the capacity of women in Belize. Horizon2030 speaks about intensifying gender awareness and gender issues through education. It addresses the expansion and strengthening of child protection programmes and women's employment. Horizon2030 discusses financing civil society organizations providing critical health services to women, children, pregnant teens, young mothers and those vulnerable to HIV and violence. It reiterates inclusion of women in development processes especially at the highest levels of political leadership and supports special temporary measures to increase the number of women vying for political office.

82. Further emphasis on the promotion and protection of women's human rights in all development cooperation programs, is established in the "Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) 2016-2020". This medium-term plan complements Horizon2030 and was implemented by the Ministry of Economic Development. It identified gender as a cross cutting issue. Both strategies frame all national gender policies, sectorial plans, and gender-related plans in the post 2015 period and underpins ongoing programming to 2030 and beyond. Therefore, gender equality, poverty alleviation and sustainable development are recurrent development themes. At the same more emphasis needs to be placed on advancing women's right to development and their economic inclusion.

83. Clear policy pathways to reach women through targeted actions for women headed households and women in the rural areas indigenous communities including for Maya women were articulated in the National Human Development Advisory Committee adopted the National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan (NPESAP) 2009–2013. The Ministry of Economic Development in collaboration with the National Human Development Advisory Committee adopted the National Poverty Elimination Strategy and Action Plan (NPESAP) 2009–2013. This plan considers Belize's obligations to the CEDAW and presents gender as a cross-cutting issue. Several activities and targets are included to outline how urban and rural poverty will be addressed, efforts to curb it high levels among vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and youth.

84. In 2014, the Government of Belize adopted a Poverty Reduction Action Plan which outlined poverty reduction measures in Belize within the Caribbean

Development Bank's Basic Needs Trust Fund. The plan was implemented by the Belize Social Investment Fund (BSIF), an implementing agency of the Government of Belize that reports directly to the Office of the Prime Minister. This action plan highlights Belize's CEDAW commitment and is aligned with national development strategies. It was shaped by national policies and strategies such as the Education Sector Strategy of the Ministry of Education and the National Gender Policy. It was designed considering the gender dimension of both urban and rural poverty. Gender issues such as power relations, decision-making, and vulnerabilities are common features in its Human Resource Development and Education components.

### **Development cooperation programmes**

85. Between 2007-2021, Belize's CEDAW commitments have been addressed by the Government of Belize with support from UN agencies, regional cooperation agencies, international development agencies and funding agencies. These cooperation agreements address systemic and socio-economic issues that lead to discrimination against women (pandemic recovery programs are covered in paragraphs 21–27).

86. The BA1 Project was implemented between October 2014–2016. Since Belize is a member of the Central American Integration System (SICA), it benefited from this project designed as a part of ICA's Regional Security Plan for Central America. The BA1 component concentrated on the prevention of violence against women, femicide and Trafficking in Persons.

87. SICA operates a Centre for the Promotion of Micro and Small Enterprises (CENPROMYPE) which supported the Belize Trade and Investment Development Service (BELTRAIDE)<sup>13</sup> develop the National Entrepreneurship Strategy for Belize. This strategy follows CENPROMYPE's 2008 Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Policy and its 2012 Regional Policy. It supports entrepreneurship in both rural and urban areas in terms of strengthening their business models and developing sustainable enterprise. In 2018, this collaboration was strengthened with funding from the US State Department which led to the Female Entrepreneurship Program.

88. In 2020, Belize had 23 nurses per 10,000 well below the 105 recommended by the WHO. As much as 95 per cent of the 600 nurses in Belize were females and 5 per cent male. Considering the shortage of medical specialists and mental health professionals in country, several countries are supporting Belize via cooperation agreements in line with Belize's Human Resources Strategic Plan for 2019-2024. Through cooperation agreements, approximately 100 Cuban health workers volunteer in Belize annually. Also, between 2017-2019, 83 Nigerian, eight Filipinos, and 24 Nicaraguans were registered with the Nurses and Midwives Council. Additionally, 205 Filipinos were granted a one-year licence. These medical professionals are deployed countrywide to both urban and rural areas and provide a range of services for women, girls, and vulnerable persons.

### **Poverty alleviation**

89. The Women's Department constantly carry out economic empowerment activities. Between 2008–2010, an Information Technology and Entrepreneurship training took place with support from the Caribbean Development Bank. The training focused on incorporating information technology to improve business management. Over 2,500 women received skills training in various areas (including) information technology, basic accounting, and business management. An Economic

<sup>13</sup> BELTRAIDE is Belize's national economic development agency which operates as a statutory body under the Ministry of Economic Development.

Empowerment program was done which produced an Entrepreneurship Manual for Women and distributed to women groups countrywide. A total of 142 urban and rural women's group members participated in entrepreneurship training which covered challenges of embarking on a small business venture and strategies to address them.

90. Belize's social protection scheme, Building Opportunities for Our Social Transformation (BOOST) started in 2010 in response to the 2009 Country Poverty Assessment which reported worsening poverty rates. Women in qualified households received a small cash transfer for each household members (up to six persons). The 2016 program evaluation noted positive impact on women's empowerment, access to formal savings, and poverty alleviation of 9,911 beneficiaries. In 2019, BOOST+ was implemented to address multidimensional poverty and family dynamics. It included a Job Readiness Component with skills training, income-generation activities, financial literacy as well as a Family Services Component. Evaluation of the 2019–2021 period program (2019–2021) indicated:

- 98.3 per cent of respondents noted positive impacts at the household level,
- 85 households graduated from the program,
- 56 households completed the Job Readiness Program,
- 31 individuals enrolled in Business Mentoring,
- 12 individuals gained direct employment,
- 15 individuals were successful in entrepreneurship venture.

91. The Women's Department and the National Women's Commission implemented a victims and family support project. Funding was provided by the ENGENDER Rapid Response Facility Resources for the COVID-19 Crisis and the Spotlight Initiative. Six alternative safe spaces were identified and equipped, and three existing safe houses received support either with salaries, supplies, operations, and/or protective equipment. Dignity kits and hygiene packages were distributed to 394 women, girls, older persons, and children. 180 food packages were disbursed to survivors and 90 students received educational assistance and supplies. 160 psychosocial sessions were conducted. Case management support was provided.

92. In the last quart of 2020, the Spotlight Initiative, in collaboration with Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, United Nation Agencies: UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP with Civil Society Organizations: Productive Organization for Women in Action, Belize Family Live Association, Human Rights Commission of Belize and Child Development Foundation conducted six mobile women's centres in southern and northern villages of Belize reaching almost 398 persons major of whom were women with sexual and reproductive health services including Family Planning and Pap Smears, Legal services ranging from addressing migrant status, divorce, domestic violence including division of property, psychosocial support, counselling, information on Gender Based Violence, HIV prevention and referral to service. Due to overwhelming demand for Sexual and Reproductive Health Service with the support of the Spotlight Initiative and its partners the Belize Family Life Association reach 300 women mostly in rural Belize. Additionally, UNICEF supported mobile health teams to provide child immunizations since it noted a dip from 95 per cent to 71 per cent in 2020.

93. At that start of the pandemic, the Government of Belize implemented an Unemployment Relief Programme to those who lost income. It initially targeted the tourism sector whose workforce is approximately 46 per cent women, as well as the transport and services sectors. A total of 44,552 applications were approved. In 2020, the Ministry of Human Development, created COVID-19 Cash Transfer Program (BCCAT) with BZ\$12.2(US\$6.4 million) funding from the World Bank. The program

targeted 10,500 households which prioritized pregnant women, children, older persons, and persons living with a disability. Eligibility was determined by a poverty assessment tool. A COVID-10 Food Assistance Programme was employed. Between June to November 2020, with a BZ\$20(\$10USD) million loan from the OPEC Fund, and with UNICEF's support, the program provided food baskets valuing over BZ\$150(\$75USD). In 2021, two more rounds were done with government funding. Over 39,000 households were assisted through a network of 200 grocery stores countrywide.

94. In 2020, Belize's social protection program, Building Opportunities for Our Social Transformation (BOOST), received BZ\$200,000(USD\$100,000) from the Government of Canada. The funds were used to create virtual safe spaces, support networks and psycho-social support for victims of Gender-based violence. It was also used for caregiving support for elderly and disabled persons, including women.

95. In 2021, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) approved a BZ\$30(US\$15) million loan to support the sustainability of almost 200 micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) especially women-led businesses. It is estimated that women owned 40 per cent of MSME's that were affected by public health measures particularly in the creative and cultural industries, agribusiness, and fisheries. Funds will help businesses in the agriculture, fisheries, and tourism sectors overcome hardships caused by the pandemic. Funds will be used to increase the capacity of the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to be more gender responsive and for gender awareness training for loan officers.

96. In enabling the further protection of the rights of women in all development cooperation, the government of Belize led a post-pandemic economic recovery and social stability through institutional capacity strengthening, vocational skills training for women, advice and training for women entrepreneurs, and business relief counselling for MSME's. Specifically, a technical cooperation program was secured in 2021 the Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and Immigration on through the "Enhancing the Economic Empowerment of Women in Latin America and the Caribbean in the COVID-19 Post Pandemic Era: Technical Assistance for Women's Employment, Entrepreneurship and Financial Inclusion" project. The BZD\$3.7(US\$1.85) million project is part of a regional one seeking to enhance the training capabilities of institutions providing economic empowerment, guidance, and vocational training services to women and young entrepreneurs. To date, a total of 115 women have completed vocational training in varying topics. Nine women led MSME's have received seed funding. 100 professionals completed capacity building courses. Two infrastructures have been constructed including a MSME mobile incubation centre.

### **Rural and Indigenous women**

97. The government has undertaken specific programs to address the impact of poverty on rural women, including in indigenous communities. The Ministry of Finance and Economic Development executed the EU-funded Belize Rural Development Program (BRDP) from 2006–2011. The project focused on promoting economic growth and reducing the incidence of poverty in rural Belize. A major component of the EU\$8 million project was on developing rural enterprise. Using a participatory approach, women, men, and youths contributed equally to define development priorities and decision-making at the community level. They identified projects and enterprises that received funding and support. The project exceeded target beneficiaries. It required that at least 30 per cent of beneficiaries be women and youth but at conclusion, it had reached 68 per cent. It was anticipated that 1,000 - 1,500 productive rural enterprises would benefit, instead 3,290 households benefited

directly from subprojects nation-wide of which 67.9 per cent were female-headed households.

98. Furthermore, in targeting rural women as recipients of poverty alleviation programs, the BRDP provided a BZ\$900(USD\$450) thousand-dollar fund to the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). This allowed the organization to execute the Gender-based Rural Sustainable Livelihoods Program during 2006–2010 in the central zone and indigenous communities in the south. The program recruited and trained 150 rural women and youth who attended skills training offered by the YWCA in hospitality, food preparation and childcare. The project provided access to micro grants. After this successful phase, the "Expanding Economic Opportunities through Entrepreneurship and Market Development Project" began in 2012. In addition to skills training, rural women received business mentoring and technical support to create or improve their enterprise and gain market access. In 2012, the Belize City Market Outlet was upgraded and a year later, the National Enterprise Development Centre was opened in Belmopan.

99. In 2014, the Belize Social Investment Fund received funding of over BZ\$51 (US\$25.5) thousand dollars from the Caribbean Development Bank for a Garment Construction Training project. This project was implemented as part of Belize's poverty alleviation plan. Investments were made in sewing machines and fabric and practical training for 26 women from two northern rural communities.

100. In November 2018, the Government of Belize signed a BZ\$16(US\$8) million-dollar agreement with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) for the 6-year Rural Resilient Belize Program (RRB). The RRB is being implemented by the Ministry of Economic Development and Ministry of Agriculture. The program focuses on reducing the impacts of climate change and economic shocks on vulnerable rural people including women. Emphasis is on climate-resilient value chains. The project supports sustainable market access for select fruits, vegetables, and honey products. The RRB expects to impact the lives of 6,000 rural households or approximately 30,000 persons. Women are 40 per cent of targeted beneficiaries and youth 20 per cent.

101. In 2015, the Women's Department under the BA1 Project signed a memorandum of understanding with BELTRAIDE's Small Business Development Centre and its Belize Training and Employment Centre to provide skills training and micro-financing to 250 urban and rural women at risk of being victims of gender-based violence or trafficking.

102. Since 2018, BELTRAIDE has been implementing the Female Entrepreneurship Program with support from CENPROMYPE. The program focuses on social and economic empowerment and leadership development for 25 rural and urban women. Training includes knowledge transfer, skills building, mentoring and entrepreneurship to bolster market penetration and sales. In May 2019, the program hosted a SHEmentors Networking Event which led to the creation of the Belize Female Mentorship Network. This network acts as support and connection space for female entrepreneurs.

## **Response to paragraph 18**

### **Temporary Special Measures**

103. Four national elections (2008, 2012, 2015, 2020) were held during the reporting period. In all elections, women struggled to be elected to the 31-member parliament. In 2008, only three women contested the elections, none were elected. In 2012, again only three women contested, one was elected. In 2015, there were 90 candidates, ten

were women, two (2) were elected. In 2020, of the 83 candidates, 14 were women, four were elected. Although there were no changes in the law, each administration extended administrative leadership roles by appointing more women to senior leadership positions. Using executive powers, the Prime Minister appointed women to the Cabinet and Senate or as Chief Executive Officers, and Directors of statutory bodies.

104. The Women's Agenda of the People's United Party 2003-2008, advocated for at least 30 per cent of public office positions to be held by women but no official steps were taken to do so. The 2020 Plan Belize addressed women's leadership but did not set quota for political leadership. In all four elections, 'third' parties offered more women. For example, the Belize People's Front, considered a 'third' party, is female headed. In the 2020 elections, it contested thirteen seats. In 2019, the United Democratic Party had two women running for Deputy Party Leaders. Neither were successful in their bid.

105. In 2009, a National Policy on Local Government was approved. The policy emphasises gender equity at the local government level. During the reporting period, five municipal elections have been held (2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021). No political parties adopted special measures at the local government level, therefore, only 24 per cent of candidates were women in all election cycles combined. During this period, only ten per cent of those who contested were elected.

106. The 2021 election saw highest gains. Although women represented less than half of all candidates, there was visible increase in women candidates. In municipalities such as Belmopan, San Pedro and Orange Walk close to half the candidates were women. In these three municipalities and in Belize City, half of the women who contested, won. During this time span, four women have held Mayoral seats. In Belize City, the female mayor served two terms. In San Pedro, the female Mayor served three.

107. The module on women's leadership incorporated into the 2010 Census helped the National Women's Commission (NWC) comprehend cultural perceptions limiting women participation in the political sphere. Findings were used to determine what gaps needed to be addressed at a national level. Results indicated that Belizeans were largely in favour of women holding high office. Respondents from 31,875 households stated they would like to see women occupying roles as Prime Minister, 21,959 supported women taking up Ministerial positions. However, they believed that for this to materialize, women contesting elections needed training, education, family support, and political party support. The 2022 Census findings will provide an updated picture.

108. In 2012, a "Situation Analysis of Gender and Politics in Belize" was conducted by the National Women's Commission with funding from UNDP. Findings revealed that women were active in party politics but tend to do so primarily at the lower ranks of their parties. They hold leadership positions within their communities at either young ages (before having children) or in their late forties and fifties (when their children are grown). Respondents favoured special temporary measures and viewed it as a necessary step "for the good of women and the good of the country ... because men won't let women in" (Lewis, 2012, p. 80). In sum, the low levels of political participation results from both cultural and systemic barriers, thus, efforts continue to focus on changing cultural attitudes and enhancing capacities.

### **Training and Capacity Building**

109. The National Women's Commission continued to implement political training sessions for women. In 2009, with funding from UNIFEM, the NWC launched the Women in Politics (WIP) Project. It was designed as a capacity building program for

women aspiring political office. The first cohort targeted mostly young and indigenous women involved in politics at local and national levels or those aspiring to do so. Between 2009-2017, there were three cohorts, totally 100 women. Training covered international conventions and campaigns as well as challenges related to women's leadership and decision-making in Belize. It raised awareness about how gender and gender inequalities contribute to unequal political participation. Participants learned about parliamentary procedures, managing campaigns, campaign financing, media, and political messaging.

110. In 2017, the Women Issues Network-Belize (WIN-Belize) (now defunct) led the "Strengthening Women's Representation in National Leadership in Belize" program. This program was funded by the UN Democracy Fund. It trained 72 women who aspired to participate in village council and municipal elections including rural and indigenous women. Training covered areas such as gender and politics, the political system in Belize, advancing within political parties, campaigning and financing, media presence, etc. The main purpose of the program was to strengthen women's political participation and leadership capacities.

111. Non-governmental organizations like the Toledo Mayan Women Council have been building leadership capacities and increasing women's political participation in rural indigenous communities. The Toledo Mayan Women Council trained indigenous women aspiring to become village council leaders or alcaldes which are traditionally male reserved positions. Alcaldes hold an important social position in Indigenous communities of the south. They are responsible to maintain law and order. Up to 2021, only six women have held this position. In 2019, for the first time a woman was elected to an executive position at the Toledo Alcaldes Association.

112. Regional agencies have contributed to building capacity of Belizean women to take on leadership positions. In June 2010, twenty women from Belize were part of the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership "Advancing Transformational Leadership for Gender Justice in the Caribbean" training programme. This 15-day course consisted of five (5) days 'virtual' training followed by 10 days residential training. Leading lecturers, and experts from government, civil society, and the UN, facilitated the interactive and participatory training. Two of the twenty women selected had previously completed the Women in Politics Project.

## **Response to paragraph 20**

### **Enforcement and monitoring of the Domestic Violence Act**

113. In ensuring that the state places high priority on addressing all forms of violence against women, the revised Domestic Violence Act (DVA) was brought into effect in 2008 and calls for prompt and equitable legal remedies for survivors of domestic violence. It stipulates sanctions against physical, emotional, or psychological, sexual, and financial abuse. Domestic violence cases or breach of protection orders are referred to the Domestic/Family Violence Unit. This specialized unit works in partnership with the Women's Department for further support and referrals. Women Development Officers are trained to register complaints, inform clients about their rights, make referrals, and provide basic counselling since they are often a first contact. Through the DVU, Women's Department, The Ministry of Health, in partnership with specialist CSO the state has supported a system to encourage women to report cases of violence. Data on the prevalence and incidence of violence against women is collected from this system of support and most of the data is housed in the Ministry of Health. At the same time, administrative data remains in disparate administrative offices (Belize Police Department, Ministry of Human Development,



Ministry of Health and the courts). Data in the courts is still stored in a rudimentary a manner, most of which is paper based.

114. The Family Court hears family matters such as domestic violence, legal separation cases, child and spouse maintenance and juvenile offenses. In terms of sexual offences Belize recognizes sexual offenses under the Domestic Violence Act as a civil matter heard in the magistrate court (lower court). Other sexual offences of a criminal nature are heard in the Supreme Court in front of a judge. Women can be victims of both types of offenses simultaneously. The transition from the Magistrate to the Supreme Courts often result in low rate of convictions or cases being “struck out” due to issues with evidence. Thus, training on protocols is ongoing. Criminal offenses against women in the domestic space, and in spite of their severity tend to be reduced or lumped together as domestic abuse, which is dealt with only in the lower court and carries no criminal charges. Women are therefore less likely to get justice when they suffer criminal acts at the hands of an intimate partner.

115. As mentioned before, with the 2013 Criminal Code amendment, penalties for sexual crimes committed against children increased, a wider range of sexual crimes was listed.

116. Among amendments to the DVA, the court may order an abuser to return property, compensate the victim, pay child support, seek therapy or counselling, and turn in weapons to the police. Revisions to the DVA increased penalties for breach of court orders in domestic violence cases and a five-year sentence for subsequent conviction. For first-time offenders, the Act allows for a Rehabilitation Order in place of punishment. Such orders require the offender to undergo probation in a rehabilitation programme and to engage in community service work for one year.

117. Cognizant that a comprehensive approach is needed and that interventions should include the abuser, the Women’s Department established a Batterers Intervention Program. With support from UN Women through their Partners for Peace Programme, a sixteen-week violence prevention, psycho-educational programme was piloted in 2010. It continued to operate until 2012. Participation was mandated by the court as part of the judgment. Cycle 1 began in 2010 with eight persons, only seven completed the program. In 2011, the second cycle saw the participation of seven persons. In 2020, UN Women Caribbean assessed the program and currently planning to revitalize it in various jurisdictions including Belize.

118. One step taken towards a comprehensive approach is the drafting of a referral procedures for entities involved in the national response. Under the 2014 BA1 Project, the Women’s Department reviewed this system. The review led to a better referral pathway. The assessment noted that most cases were referred to the Police Department first, followed by the Women’s Department but other agencies were also points of contact for first reporting. However, many cases were not reported, especially in rural communities and among indigenous women. This is attributed to cultural attitudes and the centralization of services in urban areas; therefore, the referral system now incorporates those working at the community level such as social workers, health workers and community leaders.

### **Public Awareness**

119. Belize continuously conducts public awareness campaigns to send the message that violence against women is unacceptable. Various action plans and national projects outlines awareness-raising efforts. The 2017–2020 National Gender-based Violence Action Plan aims at raising awareness through intense advocacy and communication strategies at the national level. The past two NGBVAP emphasized male allyship and men as targets of prevention campaigns. The Women’s Department reports increases in community awareness of the Domestic Violence Act and available

services. However, they noted more awareness in rural communities was need. Thus, the Spotlight Initiative looks at rural and multi-lingual groups.

120. The Government of Belize commemorates several international days in collaboration with UN agencies and local organizations. Through these events, GoB reiterates its commitment to uphold the rights of women and protect them from all forms of violence. Events highlight emerging issues. For example, in June of 2021, MHDFIPA Belize commemorated for the first time, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day in collaboration with the NCA and HelpAge Belize. This became necessary as agencies realized this was a growing problem and only 1:24 incidences are likely to be reported to authorities. In 2020, during the pandemic, four per cent of domestic violence cases were committed against older persons. Media and awareness materials now emphasize that violence against older persons, in all its forms, is unacceptable.

121. In 2013 “My Body is Precious” campaign was launched by the Office of the Special Envoy. The public awareness campaign about child sexual abuse and exploitation targeted children in the 6-10 age group. In addition to awareness materials for adults, the campaign used multiple engagement formats appealing to children and adolescents. These included two books, video clips, dramatization and theme song in English, Maya, and Garifuna.

122. Annually, the Women’s Department conducts sensitization sessions in schools. Between 2012-2021, over 7,278 young people participated (an annual average of over 500). A total of 2559 young people participated in a Gender Awareness Safe School Program in 22 primary and secondary schools. The Love Shouldn’t Hurt Campaign reached 1,745 students in seven secondary schools countrywide. During the reporting period, 7,578 people attended various awareness and training sessions on different types of violence, conflict resolution, sexual and reproductive health, and women’s rights.

123. In 2021, the Ministry of Public Service partnered with the Spotlight Initiative and the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry to implement the Gender Equality and Diversity Seal program. This program seeks to work towards the achievement of the SDGs 5, 8, 10 and 17. The aim is to reduce gender gaps and promote gender equality and competitiveness, for a fair, inclusive, and sustainable growth. A total of 25 private and public sector organizations have begun to work on this initiative. It will promote gender equality and women’s empowerment by tackling issues that most contribute to gender inequalities in the workplace. As part of this program, it is anticipated that the National Women’s Commission will roll out this initiative to other areas.

### **Training and Capacity-building**

124. In 2010, the Police Department updated its Domestic Violence Protocol and Sexual Violence Protocol to align with the DVA. Since 2010, the Women’s Department has been conducting annual training sessions for recruits at the Police Training Academy and Law Enforcement Officers country-wide on the Act and related laws. In 2011, a total of 117 officers were trained on the protocol. Training with members of the judiciary and legal professionals have been discussed in various paragraphs above.

125. In terms of Social Workers, those employed by the Women's Department must undertake continuous education on gender-based violence since they are tasked as training facilitators. In 2017, the Department of Youth Services conducted training for 30 social workers on a range of topics including sexual violence trauma. In 2016, the Women’s Department supported an awareness event “Stop Gender-based Violence via Expressive Arts” organized by the Association of Social Workers in Belize.

126. The Women's Department ensures that community health workers are included in Domestic Violence training since they are front-line persons in rural areas. Between 2010–2020, the Ministry of Health Epidemiology Unit, conducted a Field Epidemiology Training Program with support from the Centre for Disease Control. Annually, ten participants receive training on a range of topics including domestic violence and teen pregnancy. At the end of 2020, 93 persons had completed the basic level of which 11 moved on to higher levels.

### **Victim Protection and Support**

127. The DVA strengthened the courts' ability to issue protection orders and provide protection for persons being abused by intimate partners, a definition which was expanded to include cohabitating and unmarried partners as well as those who have children in common or who are in a visiting relationship (de facto spouse).

128. The national gender machinery functions on a zero-tolerance approach against gender-based violence. Shelters remain an area of deficiency in the comprehensive response system. Only three shelters operate countrywide: Haven House, Mary Open Doors, and House of Dorcas. Marla's House in Belmopan is a long-term care facility that specifically houses children who have experienced violence. An average of 20 children are housed there annually. In 2021, Hope Haven Belize opened its Domestic Violence Outreach Centre in San Pedro. Also in that year, the Women's Department supported these safe houses with the development of their Policies & Procedures.

129. Between 2010–2012, a project entitled "Increasing Access to Justice, Psycho-social and Rehabilitative Services for Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Domestic Abuse" was implemented. It was a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Human Development, the Women's Department, Youth Enhancement Services (YES), Haven House and WIN-Belize with funding from the U.S. Embassy. It focused on interagency collaboration and support for victims of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic abuse. A total of 68 victims and family members received psycho-social care and legal support. Also, in addition to shelter and protection support for victims of Trafficking, the National Anti-Trafficking Action Plan (2018–2020) added psychosocial support to its mandate.

130. Mental Health services are available at hospitals and polyclinics across the country mostly staffed by Psychiatric Nurse Practitioners. The Unit supports the Domestic Violence Unit and provides training to medical staff. However, the mental health sector continuously reports lack of Counsellors, Clinical Psychologists, Mental Health Specialists, and other support personnel, therefore, referrals to NGO services are vital. Governmental agencies make referrals to agencies such as the Child Development Foundation that houses the only Counsellor specialized in trauma-informed therapy countrywide. Such collaborations alleviate shortages. To bridge these gaps, the 2021 Spotlight Initiative seeks to train first responders at the community level on basic counselling skills.

131. Considering that migrant women may have language barriers when navigating the court system, language barriers has been identified as a key concern in the administration of justice. Therefore, the court now offers translators for court proceedings if the Magistrate determines it is needed. The Chief Magistrate ensures that translators receive continuous Spanish Language training.

## Response to Paragraph 22

### Trafficking in persons and prostitution

132. The *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) Prohibition Act of 2012* and the *Trafficking in Person (Prohibition Act) 2013* both offer better protection for victims of these crimes. Both were developed to comply with international treaties. In the case of the CSEC Act, it included the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. Amendments were made to the Criminal Code to reflect these two pieces of legislation. In 2021, Belize saw its first two convictions of CESC since the adoption of the new law.

133. The Government is taking a proactive and preventative approach in conjunction with NGO partners to address child sex tourism. Since child sex-related laws do not have extraterritorial coverage; they are under reviewed. The Belize Tourism Board (BTB), a member agency of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council (ATiPs) Council, continues to adhere to the End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) Code of Conduct which covers different types of sexual exploitation of children such as prostitution, pornography, sale, and trafficking of children. The BTB recognizes its role to “provide awareness, tools and support to the tourism industry to prevent the sexual exploitation of children” since tourism facilities and tourism services are prone to this type of crime.

134. As mentioned in paragraph 60, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council (ATiP) plays a crucial role in overseeing and coordinating national efforts to combat sex and labour trafficking. The Council reports periodically to the Cabinet. In 2011, it revised the “National Strategic Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons”. In 2012, it developed its Standard Operating Procedures. These documents guide the handling of trafficking in person’s cases from operation and intelligence gathering to identification of trafficking victims. It outlines investigation and case preparation processes.

135. The Special Branch, the intelligence gathering unit of the Belize Police Department, does investigations and operations plus maintains a permanent presence at all ports of entry. However, the Department of Immigration and Nationality screens foreign nationals upon entering the country to identify potential trafficking victims. The Joint Intelligence Coordinating Centre (JICC) collects and stores TiP data. This is shared with The Anti Trafficking in Persons (ATiP) Council who compiles and produces periodic reports:

- During 2010–2013, three major operations and surveillance were carried out;
- Seven persons were arrested and charged with a total of eight counts of Trafficking in Persons, Attempted Trafficking in Persons, Rape and Aggravated Assault;
- Between 2018–2021, 61 potential victims were identified. Both immigrants and Belizean nationals are victims, most were women. Persons arrested for trafficking violations were both men and women including Belizean and foreign nationals;
- In 2021, there were three confirmed victims of forced prostitution and labour trafficking;
- The 2021 Report on the Worst Forms of Child Labour published by the ILO, indicated that girls from impoverished backgrounds, migrant children and LGBTQI+ children are most vulnerable to both CSEC and trafficking. Therefore, prevention, protection and awareness efforts target these vulnerable groups.

136. Part III of the Trafficking in Persons Law requires the Government to investigate cases: (a) take all necessary steps to identify victims of trafficking (b) provide reasonable protection to such victims to prevent their recapture, and (c) take reasonable measures to secure the victim's family against threats of intimidation by the traffickers. Victims are never arrested or detained instead they are offered protective care under the Human Services Department. These range from 24-hour security to placement. In 2021, nine victims received protection from the Government. The Government partners with foster parents, shelters or government administered care facilities to place them.

137. A Social Worker attached to the Human Services Department usually accompanies the victim from the moment of being interviewed by the ATiP Police up to case conclusion. The Government recognizes resource limitations as a challenge, especially in long-term cases where victims need assistance to transition into the workforce, school system, and housing. Nonetheless, it ensures that human resources are available for the prosecution of cases. For international victims, shelter, and basic needs are fully covered for the duration of criminal proceedings. The Immigration Department provides temporary or permanent residency status. Specialized services such as sign language interpretation, translations, etc. are provided if needed.

### **Public Awareness**

138. In 2012, with support from International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Information and Education Committee of the ATiPS Council launched an awareness and knowledge sharing campaign about Trafficking in Persons. The committee used mass media, posters, and other public education mediums. The campaign targeted potential victims by highlighting signs of Trafficking in Persons and indicating where victims can get help. It is estimated that the 2012 campaign reached about 70 per cent of the population due to its national coverage and its multilingual, (English, Spanish, Hindi, and Mandarin) and multimedia approach. Public awareness is on-going.

139. In 2010, a National Symposium on CSEC themed, "Preserving Innocence and Dignity" was held in Belize by the Office of the Special Envoy. Participants determined that actions should focus on sensitizing the Cabinet of Ministers, the media, and children about CSEC plus strengthen collaboration with tourism industry stakeholders.

140. In 2010 and 2011, the Belize Tourism Board launched its Public Campaigns. A total of 150 secondary and tertiary students learned about CSEC and child sex tourism. It partnered with the Youth Enhancement Services (YES) for a community sensitization session in San Pedro Town, one of the biggest tourism hubs in the country. Since 2011, the BTB incorporated CSEC in its National Tour Guiding Training Program.

## **Response to Paragraph 24**

### **Equal access to education**

141. In 2011, Belize revised the *Education and Training Act*. This is the main legislation governing operations of schools in Belize. The revised document reaffirms that no person shall be refused admission to any school because of religion, race, ethnicity, language or political affiliation and further states that schools should be free of gender bias (except non-coeducational schools). It reiterated that administrators must be sensitive to children with 'exceptional learning needs', such as those with special needs and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups. It restated compulsory attendance for children aged 6–14 as well as fines for parents found in

contravention of the law. Monitoring and enforcement efforts ensures that boys and girls attend school.

142. The Education Sector Strategy 2011-2016 noted unequal access to education. It stated, ‘where you live and to some extent your gender, ethnicity and, more strongly, your economic status will strongly influence those opportunities, particularly at pre-primary and post primary levels.’ (p. 7). Education is not free at higher levels. Therefore, the strategy advised measures such as free education starting with inner city schools, plus more support systems, and an attractive competency-based curriculum. Since 2015, the GoB has been providing a small subsidy of \$150USD per year to 60 per cent of students, to defray expenses such as uniforms and books. Presently, the Ministry of Education is creating a free education pilot for high schools in Belize City’s South Side.

143. In 2011, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (formerly Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) adopted the Education Sector Strategy 2013–2016 and more recently, the Belize Education Sector Plan 2021–2025. Both reflects the principles of access and equity highlighting MoECST’s commitment for universal access as stated in the constitution. The plan reiterates that the principle of equity must be upheld across the educational system, from preschool to university. Therefore, it envisions an education system free from gender disparities by 2030. This means, that vulnerable social groups such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable circumstances will have equal access to all levels of education including vocational training. Additionally, it seeks to ensure that disadvantaged groups can have a disability and gender sensitive school environment and infrastructure.

144. In 2015, the Government of Belize, through the Ministry of Education instituted the Belize Education Sector Reform Programme. With a BZ\$44(US\$22) million-dollar fund from the Caribbean Development Bank, the program sought to increase enrolment at all levels and to provide children across the country with equitable access to a quality basic education. Activities were aligned with the Education Sector Strategy (2011-2016), Horizon2030 and the GSDS. It addressed institutional issues influencing low enrolment rates such as, early stimulation and emergent learning, school feeding programs, and an Early Identification System for children at risk of failure.

145. MoECST data for academic year 2020–2021 show urban students amounting to 16,068 of enrolled students, while only 6,692 were from rural areas. Males accounted for 3,417 and females 3,275. Although there were equal number of rural and urban schools, transportation is a contributing factor. As a result, the MoECST provides free transport to most rural communities so that students can attend the nearest one.

146. In 2020, Belize received a US\$10 million loan to fund Phase II of the Education Quality Improvement Program (EQIP II) to improve quality and gender equity at primary and secondary levels across the country. Although SDG#4 data for 2020 shows a net primary enrolment of 98.95 per cent, low retention and high repetition rates among boys remain a problem. SDG#4 data for 2020, puts the secondary school completion rate at 69.47 per cent. The greatest gender disparity exists at the tertiary level, where the ratio is 62:38 female to male (MoE, 2013). Thus, among several targets, this program is addressing these disparities.

147. Children with disabilities are likely to face challenges to attend school. In 2012, the *Education Rules* were amended. Section 2<sup>14</sup> identified children with disabilities as part of the ‘Exceptional Population’. The National Resource Centre for Inclusive

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.moecst.gov.bz/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Education-Amendment-Rules-2012.pdf>.

Education under MoECST, ensures children with disabilities attend primary and secondary schools. The centre has eleven Itinerant Resource Officers countrywide. These officers are trained to identify students with Exceptional Learning Needs. Students with exceptional learning needs can be placed either in special education school, integrated into regular classrooms, or attend a mainstream school that operates a separate special education unit. The 2011 Situational Analysis of Children with Disabilities reported that only 13 per cent of schools nationwide have facilities such as toilets that can accommodate children with physical disabilities. So, new schools are now including access ramps in their designs.

### **Pregnancy & Childbirth**

148. The education system functions under a state-church system with faith-based organizations managing 62 per cent of schools according to 2020–2021 figures. This implies that churches can exercise influence in matters related to pregnancy. However, the Ministry of Education consistently advocates for students unfairly expelled or suspended from school for a variety of reasons such as hairstyles, cultural, religious, or ethnic expressions, or personal circumstances. Sessions with the Belize Council of Churches clarified that most church-state schools allow pregnant girls to return after giving birth. However, cultural views regarding pregnant girls in school create another set of problems. Parents usually remove them, or parents of other students make requests for the school to do so. There were no documented cases of schools demanding withdrawal due to pregnancy, but anecdotal evidence suggest it happens.

149. Young women who may not want to return to a mainstream school may choose to attend an evening division school or a technical/vocational (ITVET) school or skills training program such as the YWCA Helping Early Leavers Program. In addition to basic academic courses and skill training students receive life skills courses which emphasizes their social and personal development. Adult Learning Centres (known as Evening Division School) is a common option as well.

150. There is no data to confirm that teachers are being expelled from their places of employment due to becoming pregnant while unmarried. Since the 2004, case of *Maria Roches vs. Catholic Schools Management*, there has been no new documented case. The 2011 Labour Act amendment protects women from unfair dismissal for reasons such as pregnancy or a reason connected with her pregnancy or maternity leave. Furthermore, in 2010, the Belize Teaching Commission and Belize Teaching Services Appeals Tribunal were established to oversee effective governance of teaching services. Disciplinary action against teachers, is sanctioned by the Commission not school managers. Teachers can appeal to the Tribunal or Courts if they feel aggrieved by a decision.

### **Diversification of education**

151. The Technical and Vocational Education Training (ITVET) centres enrol all genders into their programs. However, the Ministry is cognizant that far more males are enrolling. The 2010 Education and Training Act outlined the establishment of the National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training to advise the sector and address gaps. Thus, the Strategic Plan 2017–2020 was developed. In 2020–2021 academic year, there were 639 males and 185 females. This is a longstanding disparity. To increase access to vocational education, partners such as the Social Security Board offers approximately 17 scholarships annually.

152. In 2020, with the new administration, the Ministry of Education expanded its name to include Science and Technology. This is to illustrate its commitment to prioritize STEM. The 2021 Education Sector Plan endorses a High Priority Education

Fund to support STEM programs. Additionally, the fund should implement a scholarship program and new trade programs.

153. Funds from the 2020 Education Quality Improvement Program (EQIP II) will be used for Science Technology Engineering Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) education. A STEAM Lab School is being established in Belize City which will recruit 300 students including girls. The school is expected to open with its first 75 students in August 2023. The curriculum and design are being done with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

## **Response to paragraph 26**

### **Entrepreneurship**

154. Women's entrepreneurship is addressed in paragraphs 69-79. In addition, during the reporting period, the Women's Department conducted skills training with 682 rural and urban women in over 30 skills and entrepreneurship programs.

### **Access to credit**

155. The Belize Rural Development Project (BRDP) in partnership with agencies such as credit unions, the Belize Enterprise for Sustained Technology, Citrus Growers Association, and the YWCA distributed several grants. Deliberate efforts were made to target disadvantaged groups such as women with disabilities, young, single, and unemployed women. By the end of 2012, a total of 681 micro grants were given to poor rural families mainly female-headed households and women groups/cooperatives. As much as 73 per cent of 2,411 direct beneficiaries of the grant component were women and youth, thus impacting the lives of 3,092 poor people.

156. The Belize Rural Financing Programme (BRFP) was implemented between 2011–2016 by the Programme Management Unit on behalf of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. The project was funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, and the GoB. Considering the gender aspects of rural life, the project promoted socio-economic empowerment of women. It partnered with lending agencies such as credit unions so that rural women, women cooperatives, and women groups could access credit at affordable rates. Borrowers received training to enhance their organizational and management capacity to oversee their productive investments. Between 2011–December 2015, of the 2,800 loans issued, 60 per cent were to women.

### **Employment**

157. In 2012, the minimum wage was raised from \$3.10 to BZ\$3.30 an hour. An increase to BZ\$5.00 an hour is to take effect on 1st January 2023. As mentioned before, Belize updated the Labour Act in 2011. This law deals with terms and conditions of employment, basic facilities for workers, wages, overtime, health and safety, holidays, retirement, termination, and dismissal. The amendment made provisions for a Labour Complaints Tribunal to hear and determine complaints from workers; to provide for greater benefits to workers, including better provisions in respect of equal pay and severance pay. The *Equal Pay Act*<sup>15</sup> CAP 303:01 of the *Laws of Belize* was revised in 2020. The act stipulates equal pay for equal work with “no

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<sup>15</sup> See [https://www.ruraltransformation.gov.bz/docs/43/Equal\\_Pay\\_Act.pdf](https://www.ruraltransformation.gov.bz/docs/43/Equal_Pay_Act.pdf).



element of differentiation among male and female employee based on the sex of the employees”.

158. In 2021, the Women’s Department supported 20 persons to be incorporated into the Labour Department’s Employment Service System (ESS), 90 of their intakes received Labour Activation/Employment services (urban, 68; rural, 22). Between 2012–2021, a total of 87 persons were assisted with direct employment/labour insertion. In partnership with the Belize Credit Union League, ten staff members of the department and four staff members of the Self-Esteem, Conflict Resolution, Anger Management, and Independent Living Skills Programme were trained as financial literacy trainers. Staff is now equipped with training techniques for financial education and incorporates this in their case management and family support services. A total of 175 beneficiaries completed the Learning, Earning and Parenting program implemented by the Love Foundation, a local NGO, as a part of its Job Readiness program. The program highlighted professional development sessions aimed at building integral job readiness skills to increase functionality in the workplace.

159. In 2020, the Labour Department collaborated with the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI). The BCCI is the official employers’ representatives with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO). The Labour Department coordinated with the BCCI on the Tripartite Body and Labour Advisory Board two key bodies that make decisions related to employees and contributed to the review of key laws, polices, conventions and proposals related to women. The BCCI submitted a position paper to the Ministry of Labour on “Child Labour, Labour Administration and Women and Labour”. These efforts have strengthened relationship with the private sector and raised employers’ awareness on these issues.

### **Maternity benefits**

160. The 2011 Revised Labour Act maintained the maternity leave entitlement of a female worker at fourteen weeks on full pay. It coincides with the Social Security Act which stipulates that 80 per cent maternity benefits are paid from Social Security while the employer pays the difference. The Act reiterates that women who do not qualify for maternity benefits from Social Security are to be paid by the employer. Women who experience complications from delivery, can claim sickness benefits if unable to return to work once maternity leave expires.

### **Sexual harassment**

161. Between 2008-2009, the Women’s Department deemed the Protection Against Sexual Harassment Act (1996) as underused and outdated thus undertook a review. Reviewers included governmental agencies, Police, Judges, Magistrates, the University of Belize, and women’s organizations. A legal expert and the Labour Commissioner reviewed the findings which highlighted ineffective aspects of the Act that could account for why no legal cases have been lodged. Reasons cited for non-reporting of sexual harassment included fear of dismissal without compensation. The review suggested requiring employers to take practical actions such as displaying a prescribed poster prominently in the workplace and issuing copies of an adopted policy to employees. It suggested consequences for victimization and increased penalties to a maximum of BZ\$50 (\$US25) thousand dollars. The Minister of Human Development recently mentioned plans to review and update this Act as part of an upcoming CARICOM initiative.

162. The Public Service Regulations of 2014 outlines the sexual harassment policy and procedures governing public servants. Statutory bodies such as the University of Belize, The Development Finance Corporation, the Belize Telemedia Limited have their own sexual harassment policy. These are aligned with section 7 and 8 of the

Protection Against Sexual Harassment Act (1996). At the University of Belize, the student handbook contains the sexual harassment policy and complaints procedures of the institution. In 2020, the Belize Defence Force adopted a Sexual Harassment Policy.

### **Public awareness**

163. No entity currently monitors sexual harassment in Belize. Sexual harassment is one of concern raised at the legal clinics. Since cultural norms normalize sexual harassment in many domains it surely impacts women and girls in Belize. Although national sexual harassment campaigns have not been done by any entity, it is usually integrated into training programs and addressed during 16 days of activism campaigns.

## **Response to Paragraph 28**

### **Sexual and reproductive health**

164. The Ministry of Health and partners continued to be guided by the Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan of Action 2006–2010. This plan was designed to implement the National Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy (2002) and aligned with the Belize Health Agenda (2006–2011). The Health Agenda set out several objectives including providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services. Although the Plan of Action has not been updated, an Adolescent Health National Strategic Plan (2019–2030) was adopted focusing on the 10-19 years age group. It seeks to improve information on sexual and reproductive rights and health. The strategic plan indicates that a Statutory instrument on adolescent sexual and reproductive health will be done through its institutional strengthening and legal framework.

165. In 2014, the Health Sector Strategic Plan (2014–2024) came into effect. This plan reiterated the provision of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services but considered key challenges faced by the health sector. This strategic plan considers gender as an important social determinant of health and envisions a health care system based on principles of equity and accessibility. Thus, it anticipated improvements in several areas including evidence-based decision making, collaboration, human resource gaps, infrastructure, and the effective use of resources.

### **Maternal mortality reduction**

166. Maternal Mortality decreased during the reporting period. In 2009, a Quality Improvement of Maternal and Neonatal Policy was adopted. This included a “Companion at birth” policy to address the mental health/psychological health of the expectant mother and allow family involvement during labour, delivery, and post-partum periods. The 2013 MDG Scorecard reported that much of the decline in maternal mortality can be attributed to a 20 per cent increase in the number of births attended by skilled medical personnel. In 2011, there was no maternal death. In 2017, the mortality rate was at 36. That year, 94 per cent of women had given birth by a skilled birth attendant. Pre-natal care coverage was at 85 per cent, even though only 14 per cent of women accessed these services in the first trimester. SDG monitoring data indicates that Belize continues to progress notably in terms of reducing maternal mortality. Hypertensive disorders in pregnancy are currently the main cause of maternal death.

167. Access to services is facilitated through the ongoing Maternal and Child Health program of the Ministry of Health. This program ensures access, coverage, and quality of basic care for mothers and children. Pre and postnatal integrated health care

is tailored to specific reproductive health needs of individuals. It includes monitoring and management of normal pregnancy, gynaecological and obstetric pathologies, and sexual and reproductive health services. These are delivered through a network of eight urban and 37 rural health centres. The success of this program led the Ministry of Health to receive the Americas Award 2010 Laureate in the category of Improvement of Maternal Health. In 2018, the Technical Advisor of the Maternal and Child Health Unit was awarded the PAHO/WHO Award for Health Services Management and Leadership in recognition for establishing this model.

168. Two other programs helped strengthen Belize's critical maternal and neonatal services. The Salud Mesoamerica Health Initiative (2012-2017) accelerated work towards improving quality maternal and child health care. This initiative operated with a BZ\$1.2(US\$600K) million dollars budget financed by the GoB and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The program served over 30,000 women of reproductive age and children under the age five. In 2015, 105 healthcare workers were trained on maternal and child health. Twenty health teams were established nationwide to improve access to family planning and supplies for neonatal services and obstetric care at the level of their health facility. By 2017, it recorded an increase in the number of women using family planning methods after childbirth to 90.3 per cent.

169. Another project funded by PAHO, and the EU commenced in 2014. The 30-month PAHO/WHO-EU/MOH project focused on healthcare for mothers and children under five. A feature of this project was the strengthening of the health services delivery network. This improved access and maintained quality health care throughout the continuum of maternal, perinatal, and neonatal health processes.

#### **Abortion laws**

170. Although no changes were made to the Criminal Code regarding abortion. Legal termination of pregnancy continues to be available under limited circumstances. First, termination must be done by a registered medical practitioner. Two registered medical practitioners must corroborate that continuing the pregnancy poses a greater risk to the life of the pregnant woman, injury to her physical or mental health or that of any existing children than if the pregnancy were terminated. The second circumstance is that substantial risk that the child is born, it would suffer from physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped. In 1999 Belize received funding for the Safe Abortion Action Fund through the Belize Family Life Association that administrated the funds. Productive Organization for Women in Action supported the implementation of the project that emphasised public awareness on the laws that does allow abortion, the creation of billboards, social media outreach training of doctors and medication professional, and the referral process, over 1000 youth ages 16 to 20 were reached.

171. In 2009, a proposal was submitted by Catholic Bishops, the Evangelical Association, Jubilee Ministries and Voices for Life, a Belizean pro-life organization, requesting the removal of all exceptions to the criminalization of abortion. The proposal further recommended reinstating the Offences Against Person Act instituted by the colonial government in 1861. Consequently, in 2009, a National Working Group was established as part of WIN-Belize's advocacy program to present a position paper. The group counteracted the position, stating that the 1861 Act should not be reinstated as it would constitute serious and deleterious effects on women's rights, human rights, women's morbidity and mortality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in Belize. Thus, no changes were made to the existing Criminal Code.

### **Youth & Adolescent Sex Education**

172. Sex education is addressed in schools in Belize through the Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) Curriculum. Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) is a comprehensive, life skills-based programme, which focuses on the development of the whole person. It looks at areas such as personal and social well-being and making healthy choices in different domains. HFLE is integrated into other subjects or taught as a separate subject. However, not all schools offer it, particularly faith-based ones. In terms of sex education, the unit seeks to improve the capacity of students to practice responsible social and sexual behaviour and decision-making. To ensure sexual and reproductive health information reaches all schools, the 2021 Spotlight Initiative plans to scale up programs with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and NGO's working on these topics. The program will utilize a comprehensive sexuality education approach which uses a Health and Family Life Education Curriculum, Positive Youth Development Curriculum, and It's All One Curriculum. The initiative will include out-of-school girls as well as those with disabilities.

173. Resources for lower, middle, and upper divisions accompany the curriculum. Information is regularly updated and written in an age-appropriate manner. Training teachers to implement HFLE is ongoing. Over a four-year period, 52 Master Teachers completed HFLE training. In 2015, UN Trust Fund supported the training of another set of Master Teachers. Master Teachers are to train their peers during their annual Continuous Professional Development organized by the Ministry of Education and held nationwide in August for over 5000 teachers. Since 2011, GoBelize, a local NGO, has been implementing programs and services as well as influencing policy on sexual and reproductive health. GoBelize uses a comprehensive sexuality education approach. Diverse educational methods and mediums are used to educate about issues such as HIV infection, unintended pregnancy, gender identity and sexual orientation. GoBelize trained 19 primary school teachers and 10 service providers on integrating their resources and toolkits into HFLE curriculum/programming.

174. Teen pregnancies remain a challenge in Belize. However, SDG data show improvements. In 2010, 1392 cases were reported, and the adolescent fertility rate was at 64. The latter rose to 74 in 2014 but by 2019 it had declined to 58.2. In terms of access to contraceptives, the 2009 Sexual Behaviour Survey found only 47 per cent of young people correctly identified ways of preventing the sexual transmission of HIV. However, as much as 71.7 per cent of young people aged 15-24 reported using a condom during their last sexual encounter with a non-regular partner. The 2014, Knowledge, Practices, and Attitudes (KAP) in Sexual Behaviour and HIV in Belize Survey conducted by the Statistical Institute of Belize and National AIDS Commission show this had declined to 61.4 per cent (25,995). Urban youth were more likely to use a condom at first sex (70.2 per cent) than rural youth (52.9 per cent). Recommendations emanating from these findings reiterate the need for a comprehensive educational and awareness component in the HFLE curriculum.

### **HIV/AIDS**

175. In 2010, PAHO/WHO published a report on "HIV and Violence against Women in Belize". Findings helped agencies determine areas of intervention. The report revealed a strong connection between HIV and violence against women. It showed that the experience of violence creates barriers for accessing services:

- 5.7 in every 10 women living with HIV reported physical violence by an intimate partner;
- 3 in every 10 women living with HIV reported having experienced sexual violence;

- 3.5 out of 10 women living with HIV had experienced injuries resulting from physical and/or sexual abuse;
- 2.2 out of 10 HIV positive women reported that they must ask their partner's permission before seeking health services.

176. During the reporting period, Belize improved its HIV/AIDS health management and information systems and M&E efforts through the Belize Health Information System. The Epidemiology Unit collects data as part of the National Program on the Prevention and Control of Tuberculosis, Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and other Sexually Transmitted Infections. This allows agencies to make better programmatic decisions. The M&E component was further supported through the Build Resilience Through Innovation and National Accountability for the HIV and TB Response in Belize program which commenced in 2019, with support from Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. In 2021, the National AIDS Commission (NAC) hired an M&E Officer.

177. The NAC responds directly to the Office of the Prime Minister. It is the primary entity coordinating projects, policy, legislation, and advocacy regarding HIV/AIDS. It receives annual financial support from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It is made up of 18 agencies and has committees in each district. The Belize National Strategic Plan on HIV/STIs, Viral Hepatitis and TB 2021–2025, strategy outlines the Commission's responsibilities regarding gender-based violence and sexual violence. The commission notes the importance of education and awareness regarding HIV/AIDS especially among vulnerable groups of women such as Les/bi women, transwomen, female sex workers and commercial sex workers. The latter two along with men who have sex with men account to over 85 per cent of new HIV infections annually. The 2021–2025 plan continues to recognize community awareness, training of health care workers to provide culturally sensitive services to victims of violence and the referral system. It explains that victims of sexual violence will begin to receive post exposure prophylaxis for HIV and STIs if eligible according to recognized guidelines.

178. Belize continues to offer free voluntary counselling and testing at 14 testing sites countrywide. Annually the NAC, through its district committees, conducts testing day. In 2012, eight were operated by the Ministry of Health and six by the Belize Family Life Association. This led Belize to see less than 250 new infections for a single year, something that hadn't been documented since the year 2000. The 20–49 age groups remain most affected, with highest numbers among those in the 25–29 range.

### **Gender-responsive policies and programs**

179. Belize continued with its prevention of Mother-to-child transmission of HIV programme. Free HIV test are offered to all pregnant women. In 2010, out of the 6,631 registered pregnant women, there was 93.2 per cent coverage with HIV testing. 53 women were detected as HIV positive. The number of women who are HIV+ and pregnant decreased by around 10 per cent when compared to previous years but almost 50 per cent were repeat and unplanned pregnancies. All pregnant women detected as HIV positive receive treatment at the Maternal Child Health clinics. They receive anti-retroviral prophylaxis and anti-retroviral at the time of delivery. Babies born to HIV positive mothers receive prophylaxis at the time of delivery if the status of the parent is known by the health care attendants. Follow-up care is provided after delivery, including family planning services to avoid subsequent unwanted pregnancies.

180. In 2007, the Ministry of Labour in collaboration with the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry, National AIDS Commission (NAC) and National Trade Union Congress of Belize developed an HIV/AIDS Workplace Policy. This was done

to signal Belize's commitment to the UNGASS Declaration to control and reverse the HIV epidemic by 2015. This policy is still in place.

181. Acknowledging the importance of addressing gender issues when tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Ministry of Health commissioned a Gender Analysis of the National HIV Strategic Plan (2006–2011). The analysis identified gaps in the plan. The report noted the need to incorporate the gender dimension as well as gender-sensitive training in programming. Consequently, the MoH addressed gender-based violence in its operational plans and policies. It highlighted the need to mainstream gender into its key national HIV programs. Both the National HIV Strategic Plan (2012–2016) and the 2016–2020 National HIV and TB Strategic Plan and its 2021–2025 version took into consideration these suggestions and placed gender issues at the forefront.

182. In 2012, the Ministry of Education and the National AIDS Commission with technical support from UN Women implemented a gender mainstreaming exercise. This was done to determine the policy and programme areas to be addressed in terms of gender, rights, and HIV awareness in the education sector. Existing program and policy documents such as the National Strategic Plan, the HFLE curriculum, operational plan, and curriculum were reviewed and mainstreamed.

183. A five-year Global Fund Project entitled “Strengthening of Belize’s Multi-sectoral Response to HIV/AIDS” concluded in October 2009. The Women’s Department was one of seven sub-recipients of the project. The project focused on reducing the vulnerability to HIV/AIDS for Women and Youth. As part of the project, the Department developed knowledge products to empower women of reproductive age regarding the link between domestic violence/gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS.

184. During the reporting period, partnerships between the Ministry of Health, National AIDS Commission, the National Committee for Families and Children (NCFC), governmental agencies and NGOs working on sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. As mentioned in various paragraphs above, collaborations led to policy development, especially draft anti-discrimination legislation, and improved services for key populations. Up until 2013, the NAC worked with the Belize Red Cross on the “Together We Can” HIV/AIDS peer education program including young women. This program, funded by UNDP, intended to get young people to break HIV/AIDS stigma and reduce the number of infections among the young population. In August 2013, the Belize Red Cross partnered with the Ministry of Education on a workshop to train 26 life skills teachers and school counsellors on HIV/AIDS.

## **Response to paragraph 30**

### **Rural Women Equality**

185. Following the Committee concerns regarding rural women, the Women’s Department assigned a Rural Women’s Development Officer in 2010. The office supports rural women’s groups in their networking efforts and capacity building. Since then, several partnerships have been established. For example, BELTRAIDE’s Small Business Development Centre, rural groups were trained on topics such as marketing, production, and quality control. Beneficiaries have included rural groups such as the Northern Upholstery Women’s Group of San Narciso, Corozal and the Xucaneb Women’s Group of San Pedro Columbia, a 12-member indigenous women’s group. During the pandemic, The San Victor Rising Stars Women’s Group of Corozal, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, produced 250 full body PPE’s which were used by front line workers in the various polyclinics during the pandemic.

186. In 2021, with support from UNICEF, the Gender Advocates Program was launched by the National Women’s Commission and the Women & Family Support Department. Considering low reporting rates of gender-based violence in rural areas, advocates will assist with strengthening services to rural areas, strengthen reporting and data collect, and improve support systems for rural victims and survivors. A total of seventeen (17) advocates have been recruited and trained and will be supporting 18 rural communities countrywide.

187. In 2011, the Women’s Department began to observe the International Day for Rural Women. In commemoration, it conducted activities in rural areas of Toledo, Stann Creek and Corozal. Activities included leadership and economic development as well as capacity building in terms of costing and proposal writing. Several Rural Women’s Health Forums were held throughout the country sessions which includes topics on Gender-based Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health.

188. In 2017, the Ministry of Agriculture collaborated with FAO-Belize on a Learning Route initiative. Funding was provided by IFAD and PROCASUR Corporation. This initiative was part of FAO’s “Strengthening Decent Employment Opportunities for Young Women and Men in the Caribbean”. The project included 16 youth from rural communities (8 females). It offered young people insight into the investment and employment opportunities available in food and agriculture in rural Belize and how it can help alleviate poverty, food security and youth unemployment.

## **Response to paragraph 32**

### **Minimum age of marriage**

189. No changes have been made to the Marriage Act since it was amended in August 2005. At the time, the age of marriage was adjusted from 14 to 16 years to match age of consent in Belize.

## **Response to paragraph 34**

### **Identity**

190. Between January 2011 to 2013, the “Make your Child Count” Birth Registration Campaign was implemented. With support from the Equity Fund, UNICEF partnered with the Ministry of Health, Vital Statistics Unit, OAS, Office of the Special Envoy, and the Belize Social Security Board to close the gap on birth registration and issuance of birth certificates. The project reviewed and strengthened the birth registration governance structure and policy framework. Using radio, video, and print materials the campaign urged parents to register their children. It cited the child’s right to an identity, and the importance of registration. The campaign implemented mobile registration in 28 urban and rural communities across the country with the view of getting 100 per cent birth registration. However, in 2018 Vital Statistics reported that an estimated 4 per cent of the population was still unregistered essentially leaving them stateless.

191. In November 2015, the Vital Statistics Unit partnered with UNHCR and UNICEF, to address the remaining four per cent unregistered persons, since Belize signed the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness in 2014. A National Birth Registration Steering Committee was established. Steps were taken to identify gaps from previous efforts. In the southernmost district of Toledo, it was estimated that over half of live births in that district have not been registered due to distance and logistical issues. About 14 per cent of registered persons had not been issued with a birth certificate. Children of undocumented migrant parents who may be fearful of

going to a registration centre or may lack required documentation to do so (passport, social security, ID card) may likely not have been registered. Therefore, in 2020 another round of mobile registration clinics was held in various parts of Belize. So far, 30 communities have been reached and 201 children registered. Efforts continue to focus on rural communities in the Toledo District to reach the 100 per cent mark.

### **Response to Paragraph 38**

192. Ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Since submission of the last State report to CEDAW, Belize ratified the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on 09 March 2015. While the state has ratified this treaty, it is yet to submit its first report.

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