



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

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against Women**

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**Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under
article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms
of Discrimination against Women**

**Replies of Belize to the list of issues and questions in relation
to its combined fifth to ninth periodic reports******

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List of acronyms

Acronym	Definition
BOOST	Building Our Opportunities for Social Transformation
BCCAT	Belize COVID-19 Cash Transfer Programme
CRESAP	Climate Resilient Sustainable Agriculture Project
COP	Conference of Parties
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
FACA	Families and Children's Act
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IDCRS	Integrated Data Collection and Reporting System
MHDFIPA	Ministry of Human Development Families Indigenous People's Affairs
MSMEs	Micro Small and Medium Enterprise
MOHW	Ministry of Health and Wellness
NGGBVAP	National Gender and Gender-Based Violence Action Plan
NGP	National Gender Policy
NHRI	National Human Rights Institute
NWC	National Women's Commission
OHCHR	Office of the Commission on Human Rights
RRB	Rural Resilient Belize
SCLAN	Spouses of CARICOM Leaders Action Network
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UPR	Universal Periodic Report
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
WPC	Women's Parliamentary Caucus

A. Introduction

1. This report responds to the CEDAW Committee’s list of issues and questions in relation to the combined fifth to ninth periodic reports of Belize (CEDAW/C/BLZ/Q/5-9). It reflects oral and written contributions made by contributing agencies and information derived from national reports, assessments and evaluations, data, and empirical evidence from various organizations.

B. Women’s rights and gender equality in relation to the coronavirus disease pandemic, recovery efforts, and global crises

2. Belize’s COVID-19 Response included a mix of responses aimed at protecting the health and well-being of the population and supporting economic recovery and empowerment. Efforts to protect the health and well-being of the population included the Belize COVID-19 Response Project, approved by the World Bank (WB) on February 23, 2022, as part of its Multi-Phase Programmatic approach to support countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of February 2024, the Project has supported the Government of Belize to (a) procure 148,800 COVID-19 vaccines and vaccinate 66.2 percent of the eligible population, (b) conduct more than 1,200 mobile clinic visits with vaccine campaigns in six districts, (c) carry out vaccination satisfaction surveys and various studies on COVID-19 vaccine acceptance and uptake to strengthen the vaccine communication strategy, and (d) increase the knowledge of frontline health workers on gender-based violence during emergencies. Implementation remains underway and the loan is scheduled to close in December 2025. As per World Bank Performance Requirements, a stakeholder engagement plan was developed and implemented with a focus on increasing engagement of key vulnerable groups including elderly men and women, women and men living in extreme poverty, men and women with disabilities, indigenous men and women, LGBTQI population, migrant men and women.

3. Additionally, faced with soaring unemployment and an unprecedented pandemic, the COVID-19 Oversight Committee established the COVID-19 Unemployment Relief Program. An online portal was designed to facilitate and process electronic applications. 44,552 male and female applicants were approved. While bank deposits were used for those who had accounts, the unbanked were offered Top-Up cards. The Social Security Board (SSB) processed payments once applicants were approved. Recently unemployed persons received \$150 every two weeks and long-term unemployed persons received \$100 every two weeks. The benefits lasted for twelve months. An evaluation of the Unemployment Relief Programme demonstrated that cash transfer programs would be plausible in the Belizean context in times of emergency.¹

4. The Belize COVID-19 Cash Transfer Program (BCCAT) was launched in February 2021. The Ministry of Human Development oversaw the implementation of the program. The BCCAT was funded by the World Bank with a total of \$12.4 million. BCCAT beneficiaries received three payments of \$300 every two months for six months. The program aimed to support 21,500 households that were ineligible for the Building Opportunities for Our Social Transformation (BOOST) or Unemployment Relief. Beneficiaries received notification of approval through SMS. Digi developed the MobilePayz platform to allow beneficiaries to cash out their funds.²

¹ See <https://www.policytracker.bz/review-of-targeted-direct-cash-transfers-2/>.

² See <https://www.policytracker.bz/review-of-targeted-direct-cash-transfers-2/>.

5. Within the Government of Belize's overall response to COVID-19, specific strategies were implemented targeting the economic empowerment of women. In 2021 the Government of Belize launched its Women's Economic Empowerment Project: 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. The goal of the project is to enhance the training capabilities of institutions that provide economic empowerment guidance, provide capacity building for women and young entrepreneurs, and build resiliency of Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

6. Between 2021 and 2023, this COVID-19 response strategy, targeting women, collaborated with 42 organizations and agencies to implement 42 initiatives reaching over 1,000 women. Interventions included "Train the Trainers" to enhance the training capabilities of vocational institutions by improving consultants' advisory skills and administration's efficiency, provision of practical courses ranging from Business Strategy, Digital Skills, and varying vocations for women and young entrepreneurs, strengthening MSME's by having business consultants identify points of improvement and assist in implementing a business recovery plan, provision of Angel Fund/Seed Capital (Funding), and assisting business with proposal writing. Phase II of the initiative is underway and scheduled for completion in 2026.

7. As part of its long-term plan to respond to current and future crises, the Government of Belize has drafted a Social Protection Policy and Strategy, building on key lessons learned from COVID-19 and other national emergencies. The Social Protection Policy and Strategy aim to develop one comprehensive social protection system with three components: (a) Contributory social insurance through the Social Security Board, (b) Labour market policies and interventions by the Ministry of Labour and the Department of Youth Services with the private sector, and (c) Non-contributory social assistance (mainly cash transfer) programmes as well as social care programmes by the Ministries of Health, Education and Human Development.

C. Women's access to justice

8. In 2023, a Legal Aid Act was passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate to make legal aid readily available to persons of small or moderate economic means; to enable the cost of providing legal aid granted to persons of small and moderate economic means to be defrayed wholly or partly out of money provided for that purpose by the National Assembly. The Act calls for the establishment of a Commission by the Chief Justice to ensure that the provisions of the Act are carried out, including organizing the establishment and operation of offices and clinics to provide legal aid services throughout Belize. Chapter 24 (I) of the Act makes provision for the provision of legal aid as a matter of urgency in respect of proceedings for, and in relation to, an application made under the Domestic Violence Act. The Act states that the Director shall have power, without reference to the court or the Commission, to issue an Emergency Legal Aid Certificate and submit an application as set out in Schedule VII.

9. In 2018, a Gender Equality Protocol for Judicial Officers in Belize was developed under the JURIST Project. The Gender Equality Protocol is intended to promote awareness of how gender intersects with other social statuses to affect the justice system and its users and to provide tools to help judicial officers achieve gender-sensitive adjudication.

10. In 2021, the capacity of the Magistrates Court to respond to family law cases was enhanced. The Spotlight Initiative collaborated with the Magistrate and Family

Court of Belize to strengthen Court Officials' involvement in the hearing of matters dealing with children and families. Four (4) procedural training modules were developed that broadly contributed to ending violence against children and families and to the strengthening of policy and legislation that guarantee increased protection of women and girls.

11. In addition to recognizing the roles of the magistrates, the intervention considered the supporting roles that social workers, prosecutors, clerks of court, and intake officers play in the administration and facilitation of justice for children, and women and support to families. The training served to build the capacity of 42 state actors (18 males, 24 females) to respond to family violence, expanding the range of services available, and addressing social norms and behaviours that promote violence against women and girls.

12. To ensure the practical application of knowledge received during the training, 11 Magistrates (3 males, 8 females) benefited from courtroom mentorship to develop their ability to adjust behaviours and practices for more child-friendly and gender-responsive service delivery within the court system.

D. National machinery for the advancement of women

13. The National Women's Commission Bill was enacted in 2023. It provides the legal framework for the establishment of the National Women's Commission to advance Belize's commitments to gender equality and equity; promote awareness of the National Gender Policy; recommend remedial measures, and facilitate the redressal of grievances and advise the Minister on all legislative and policy matters affecting women; to advocate for the fulfilment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as well as other pertinent Conventions. As a statutory body, the Bill legally empowers the NWC to address gender issues and to coordinate all national efforts relating to gender equality, equity, and women's empowerment, inclusive of the country's reporting on global and regional treaties and commitments.

14. The Government of Belize provides human and financial resources for the effective operation of the NWC Secretariat including funding for the implementation of some components of the National Gender Policy, the National Gender-Based Violence Action Plan, and other relevant policies. Partnership funding from other entities such as UN Agencies also forms part of NWC's core funding.

15. The National Gender Policy was also endorsed by the Cabinet in 2024. The National Gender Policy (2024-2030) builds on the achievements of the 2013 National Gender Policy. It focuses on the gaps and areas for further action in each of the six areas of health, education, wealth and employment creation, gender-based violence, women in power and decision-making, and organizational systems strengthening and aims to achieve six key goals. Goal 1: Secure access to quality affordable gender-responsive healthcare services throughout the life course. Goal 2: Eliminate Gender-Based Discrimination in Education. Goal 3: Empower women through the creation of economic opportunities in urban and rural areas. Goal 4: Strengthen and expand measures to ensure the safety and security of victims/survivors of gender-based violence. Goal 5: Advance the equitable participation of women in leadership and political governance. Goal 6: Organizational systems are established and strengthened to support the coordination, advocacy, capacity building, resource mobilization, monitoring, and evaluation of gender mainstreaming and gender programming.

16. In 2023, the capacity of the national and sub-national institutions that form the National and District Gender and Gender-Based Violence Committees, under the National Women's Commission, was also strengthened to plan, fund, and deliver

evidence-based programmes that prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. The National and District Committees are technical multi-sectoral, results-oriented committees responsible for the efficient and effective implementation of the National Gender Policy (NGP) and the National Gender-Based Violence Action Plan (NGBVAP). Over 100 members of the National and District Gender and Gender Based Violence Committees benefitted from countrywide capacity-building sessions to enhance gender mainstreaming, and coordination, and to inform the drafting of a 2-year action plan aligned with the National Women's Commission's 2023–2027 Strategic Plan.

E. National human rights institution

17. With support from OHCHR's Universal Periodic Review Voluntary Fund (UPR VF) and the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, following the recommendations of the third cycle UPR, undertook a study of the potential structure of a National Human Rights Institution in Belize (NHRI). This study informed the Government's endorsement of the proposal to transition the Office of the Ombudsman into a NHRI. The government is currently mobilizing support for the next steps to be taken, which include enacting a law to amend the mandate of the Office of the Ombudsman. There are ongoing discussions in this regard with UNDP, OHCHR, and the European Union to formulate a project to support the establishment of the NHRI. The support from UN Belize to the Government is in progressive fulfilment of the 2017 Tripartite Partnership in Support of National Human Rights Institutions. Current efforts include discussions on budget and operating procedures for the proposed NHRI model; sensitization of decision-makers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders on the proposed model's merits; and a roadmap for the full functioning of the NHRI including accreditation standards as guided by the Paris Principles.

F. Temporary special measures

18. Goal 5 of the Revised National Gender Policy 2024 to 2030, outlines key actions to advance the equitable participation of women in leadership and political governance. By 2030, the Gender Policy aims to establish/strengthen new and existing women's advocacy groups with support from the government, donors, the private sector, and civil society, and strengthen leadership programmes for women in the public and private sectors to address cultural attitudes that have a negative impact on the participation of women in public life.

G. Gender-based violence against women

19. In 2022, Belize appointed its first female Chief Justice. All of the leading judicial and legal offices, including those of the Attorney General and Director of Public Prosecutions, are currently filled by women. The Ministry of Home Affairs continues to maintain a policy of gender-responsive citizen security and in 2024 surpassed the UN Minimum Standards of 20 per cent on inclusion of women. In 2024, 25 per cent of officers graduating from the Belize Police Academy were women.

20. The Revised National Gender-Based Violence Action Plan (NGBVAP) was endorsed by the Cabinet in 2024 and serves as the overarching framework for the response to GBV in Belize. The National Social and Behaviour Change Communication Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls was also endorsed along with the NGBVAP.

21. As part of the national response to GBV and the implementation of the National Gender Based Violence Action Plan, national, between 2020 and 2023, Gender and Gender- Based Violence was integrated into 3 sectors (Social Services, Education, and Justice) development plans that are evidence-based and in line with globally agreed standards, and over 200 key government officials in all 3 sectors now have strengthened capacities to develop and deliver programmes that prevent and respond to VAWG including family violence, and to integrate efforts to end VAWG including family violence into the development plans of other sectors.

22. Additionally, the Essential Service Package for Women Subject to Violence was developed in 2023 under the purview of the National Women’s Commission, with technical support from the United Nations Population Fund and in collaboration with the Belize Police Department, Ministry of Human Development Families and Indigenous People’s Affairs (MHDFIPA), Ministry of Health and Wellness (MOHW), The Belize Family Life Association (BFLA), Legal Sector (Legal Aide Department, Ombudsman Office, Family Court) and the Social Sector (Haven House, Mary Open Doors, Cornerstone Foundation, House of Dorcas, Women’s Support Group, Women on the Move for Equal Needs, Productive Organization for Women in Action (POWA), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), RESTORE Belize). The Essential Service Package reflects the vital components of the coordinated multi- and inter-sectoral responses required for women and girls subject to or experiencing violence (whether gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence).

23. Over 1,800 faith-based leaders, and community leaders, including indigenous leaders and women mobilizers have been trained to implement interventions to address the root causes of family violence resulting in an expansion of support and services available to women and girls at the community level and capacity for community-led prevention interventions. The Family Violence Toolkit which aims to address the root causes of family violence has strengthened the capacities of key informal decision makers and community advocates. Faith Leaders, Teachers, Community Leaders, Village Councils, Sports Coaches, Justices of the Peace, and Community Mobilizers are now able to engage communities regularly and confidently, including migrant and rural communities, to raise awareness of family violence, including intimate partners, child abuse, and child marriage and early unions.

24. In 2023, the Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence (Prohibition) Bill was drafted to replace the Domestic Violence Act. The new Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence (Prohibition) Bill addresses gaps in access to justice and increases protection for persons experiencing domestic and intimate partner violence and survivors of violence.

25. Belize’s first Social and Behaviour Change Communication Strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls was endorsed alongside the Gender-Based Violence Action Plan in 2024. As a part of the strategy’s rollout, the National Women’s Commission supported a participatory and inclusive campaign “It Ends with Me” to challenge gender inequitable social norms, negative attitudes, and behaviours at the community and individual levels to prevent violence against women and girls. Over 200 stakeholders across key frontline sectors and community activists in rural and urban zones benefitted from capacity building and training of trainers’ sessions on employing a gender lens in addressing cases of GBV and integrating preventative strategies in the response to end VAWG. The “It Ends with Me” Social and Behaviour Change Communication Campaign contributed to gender-sensitive, culturally relevant, education and awareness of gender-based violence through the development and dissemination of high-quality social and behaviour change communication assets that challenged the intersectionality of family violence in Belize and provoked conversations on norms to stimulate behaviour change.

26. Between 2020 and 2024, over 12,000 men and boys attended gender-transformative programmes addressing violent masculinities and men’s violence towards women and girls in community centres, schools, and other relevant spaces resulting in an increase in knowledge and shifts in attitudes toward men and boys. The Engaging Men and Boys Programme was implemented across the country, under the Office of the Special Envoy for Women and Children, targeting boys in and out of school settings as well as men, including men in uniformed services and boys in the youth arm of the uniformed services. The programme was also integrated into community clubs in the Toledo District, targeting Indigenous youth and communities. The Addressing Gender Equality Tool Kit was developed as a means of standardizing the programme and ensuring its sustainability.

27. There are currently no plans to expand Shelters. However, in collaboration with the National Women’s Commission, two lead government ministries, the Ministry of Human Development and the Ministry of Health developed the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the 3 safe houses in Belize: Haven House in Belize District, Mary Open Doors in San Ignacio and House of Dorcas in Corozal. The SOPs include COVID-19 protocols, given the country’s recent experiences with COVID-19 and the challenges posed by continuing service delivery for survivors of violence. The capacity of shelter staff, board members, and volunteers was further strengthened through training on the implementation of the SOP, and the SOP was adopted and implemented by all three safe houses.

28. In 2023, under the MHDFIPA, efforts were made to undertake a comprehensive review of the GBV data infrastructure. Based on the assessment, an Integrated Data Collection and Reporting System (IDCRS) for GBV in Belize has been proposed. The new system is designed to synthesize the existing systems to reduce duplication and inefficiencies in collecting and reporting on GBV data.

29. At the end of 2023, the Belize Crime Observatory reported that domestic violence reports increased by 5 per cent in comparison to the same period in 2022. Of the total number of complaints received in 2023 (2993), 42 per cent were investigated while 27 per cent of cases resulted in prosecutions. 58 per cent of cases were filed for future reference by complainants.³

H. Trafficking and exploitation of prostitution

30. Between 2019 and 2023 there have been 48 cases investigated under the 2013 Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act. Nine cases have resulted in prosecution and four have resulted in convictions. It should be noted that the arrests and convictions listed for each year occurred in the calendar year but may not be related to a case investigated in that same calendar year. Often cases take some years because an arrest occurs and similarly for a conviction due to the court process required.

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Cases Investigated</i>	<i>Prosecutions (Arrests)</i>	<i>Convictions</i>
2019	10	2	0
2020	2	1	1
2021	14	2	2
2022	8	4	0
2023	14	0	1

³ Belize Crime Observatory, Domestic Violence Report, 2023.

31. The Government of Belize expanded its training in the private and public sectors on human trafficking identification to ensure that officials and citizens were more equipped to identify cases of human trafficking. This includes a notable mention of the partnership with the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NOPCAN), a member of the ATIPS Council, UNICEF, and Pathlight Belize. Partnerships with these organizations resulted in an online platform for mandatory reporting training for teachers. Other groups of persons trained have been: utility workers, immigration officers, social workers, labour officers, police officers, tour guides, hotel employees, community health workers, transportation personnel, soldiers from the Belize Defence Force, officers of the Belize Coast Guard, Judges, Magistrates, women's groups and primary school student (age-appropriate awareness was done with upper-level primary school students).

32. In partnership with IOM Belize, the Ministry of Human Development finalized a protocol for accompanied and unaccompanied migrant children to ensure that government officials have a standardized approach when managing cases involving vulnerable migrant children.

33. In partnership with UNDP, the ATIPs Council launched a pilot project that incorporated the local government and the municipality of Belmopan. This project geo-spatially mapped the city of Belmopan to provide both police officers and social workers with evidence-based decision-making tools when assessing vulnerable areas in the city.

34. The Government consistently conducts awareness campaigns that include the production of videos, media appearances, art competitions, NGO forums, social media posts, partnerships with MUB 2022, and information booths.

35. Belize remains an active member of the Regional Coalition Against Human Trafficking and Human Smuggling (CORETT as its acronym is known in Spanish). This is a non-binding body that is made up of all Central American countries, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. Belize ensures that representatives attend conferences and meetings both in Belize and regionally that have a direct connection to human trafficking. This includes meetings of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS), the Central American Integration System (SICA), INTERPOL and others. The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Police Unit also participates in regional operations headed by Interpol, CARICOM IMPACS and SICA.

36. Belize participated in the regional Public Good Project headed by IDB. This project included countries from the Latin American and Caribbean Region. The title of the project is Regional Public Good "Regional Model to Strengthen the Capacities of Citizen Security and Justice Institutions to Respond to Trafficking in Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean with a Gender Perspective and an Approach to Digital Technologies". Belize also held a bilateral meeting with Honduras to strengthen partnerships in addressing human trafficking between both countries.

37. The ATIPs Council has been cognizant of the potential relationship between tourism and increasing incidences of exploitation. Because of this, the Council partnered with IOM to conduct training sessions with persons within the tourism industry inclusive of the tourism police officers. This was done to equip persons with knowledge of the crime and how to identify it. Alongside the training, the Council and IOM developed a training manual for tour guides that will be incorporated into the official training manual for tour guides. This will ensure sustainability with the training of tour guides.

38. The Immigration Department also follows up on alerts from the US Embassy when informed that a registered sex offender is traveling to Belize. The department

refuses leave to land to these persons further reducing the vulnerabilities of minor girls who are the primary demographic of victims in Belize.

I. Participation in political and public life

39. In March 2023, the National Assembly introduced a motion to establish the Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC). In May 2023, the motion was passed, and the WPC was established as a Joint Standing Committee that allows for a formal space to address issues of gender equality, greater participation in legislative processes, and the sensitization of the National Assembly's work through a gender lens. Currently, Belize has a total of four women elected to the House of Representatives, four women appointed as Senators, and two women serving as presiding officers. The total number of parliamentarians in the National Assembly (both chambers), including the presiding officers, is 46. Collectively, women parliamentarians account for 22 per cent of the National Assembly. While this is the greatest number of women serving in parliament in the history of Belize, women are still a minority in parliament. The Women's Parliamentary Caucus is advantageously positioned to champion key legislative and policy-level actions that seek to address gaps and barriers to women's full participation, including access to key essential services, and economic empowerment.⁴

J. Education

40. Data on dropout rates among girls as a result of child marriage and early pregnancy is not routinely collected. However, the 2015 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey reported an adolescent birth rate of 74. The Ministry of Education does not have a formal policy or monitoring mechanism and sanctions in place to ensure that pregnant students can return to school after childbirth.

41. In 2023, the Government of Belize signed a 15,000,000 Loan Agreement with the IDB to implement Skills for the Future, a Program implemented by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology aimed at (a) increasing access to instruction that accelerates learning in foundational skills; (b) increasing access to instruction that promotes learning in the Fourth Industrial Revolution skills; and (c) increasing access to gender-specific education services to promote inclusive education.

42. In 2023, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology opened Belize's first Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math (STEAM) Academy, Itz'at. As part of its efforts to close the gender gap, the MOEST has introduced school-based interventions to increase female participation in high-income careers such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) including (i) projects that counter stereotypes by introducing young women to role models (e.g. female scientists); (ii) providing information on expected earnings by field of study to young women who are in the process of deciding their field of specialization; and (iii) exposing young women to experiences and activities related to the field of study where they are under-represented.

43. In 2022, the Belize Education Upliftment Programme was introduced to increase access to education for schools serving male and female students from low-income households. The Belize Education Upliftment Project is a comprehensive education initiative that eliminates tuition and fees for students at targeted schools. In addition to the provision of tuition and fees, the project provides support for daily healthy meals, uniforms, transportation, learning device needs, and improvement to school

⁴ Women's Parliamentary Caucus Strategic Plan 2024-2026.

infrastructure and resources. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology aims to reach 50 per cent of the secondary school population by 2025.

44. In October 2023, the Spouses of CARICOM Leaders Action Network (SCLAN) and the Spotlight Initiative collaborated on an initiative to identify potential gaps in the current iteration of the Health Education curriculum, previously referred to as the Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) curriculum. As a result, a Revised Health Education Curriculum was formulated, accompanied by a comprehensive report highlighting identified gaps and presenting recommendations tailored to the Belizean context. The primary goal is the full adoption of the revised curriculum, allowing educators to deliver high-quality, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programs for young individuals, including those with disabilities, both within and outside the school setting. This initiative aims to foster gender equality, challenge negative socio-cultural gender norms contributing to violence against women and girls, and empower teachers to utilize the curriculum deliberately for creating awareness about social issues and building students' competencies that contribute to their overall health and well-being.⁵

45. The overall findings suggest that teachers are predominantly utilizing the new Health Education Curriculum, but there is an urgent requirement for resources to facilitate its effective implementation. While a majority agrees that the curriculum adequately addresses cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development, there is a recognized need for enhancement, particularly in areas related to CSE. It is apparent that teachers are content with the curriculum's substance but require assistance to execute it effectively. This support encompasses various aspects, including resources, service availability, and capacity building related to content and the implementation of effective teaching approaches and strategies.⁶ At the Secondary level, comprehensive sexuality education is delivered through the National Life Skills Curriculum for Secondary Schools.

46. In 2022 Belize's literacy rate stood at 86.7 per cent (male population 86.6 per cent and female population 86.8 per cent). The literacy rate is highest in the Belize District (92.9 per cent) and lowest in the Toledo District (78.8 per cent). Among the youth population 15-24 years, the literacy rate is 94.9 per cent (male population 94.3 per cent and female population 95.5 per cent). The adult literacy rate is lowest among the Maya Kekchi population (75.3 per cent) followed by the Maya Mopan population (79.2 per cent) with higher literacy rates among males for both ethnic groups. The literacy rate among Kekchi women is 73.5 per cent when compared to men (77.2 per cent). Similarly, the literacy rate for Maya Mopan men is 80.8 per cent when compared to women at 77.8 per cent.⁷

⁵ United Nations Population Fund, *A Rapid Assessment of Comprehensive Sexuality Education*, 2024.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Statistical Institute of Belize, *2022 Census Report*.

Table 1:
Adult and Youth Literacy Rate by District and Sex: 2022

<i>DISTRICT</i>	<i>Adult Literacy</i>		
	Population 15+ years	Completed At Least Standard five	Literacy Rate
Total Population	279 452	242 292	86.7%
Corozal	32 130	27 547	85.7%
Orange Walk	38 128	32 911	86.3%
Belize	84 131	78 167	92.9%
Cayo	69 356	58 290	84.0%
Stann Creek	31 471	26 268	83.5%
Toledo	24 236	19 109	78.8%
Male Population	135 533	117 434	86.6%
Corozal	15 614	13 331	85.4%
Orange Walk	18 676	16 138	86.4%
Belize	40 442	37 423	92.5%
Cayo	33 468	28 264	84.5%
Stann Creek	15 457	12 832	83.0%
Toledo	11 877	9 447	79.5%
Female Population	143 918	124 858	86.8%
Corozal	16 516	14 216	86.1%
Orange Walk	19 451	16 774	86.2%
Belize	43 689	40 745	93.3%
Cayo	35 888	30 026	83.7%
Stann Creek	16 014	13 436	83.9%
Toledo	12 360	9 662	78.2%

Source: Statistical Institute of Belize. 2022 Population and Housing Census.

47. To increase adult literacy, in 2020, the Ministry of Education launched the Literacy and Adult Empowerment Programme (LEAP), targeting vulnerable families on the south side of Belize City. Additionally, several secondary education institutions across the country offer adult and continuing education programmes in the evenings to facilitate adult learning. To standardize ACE, the MOEST plans to develop a National Policy for Adult Education, including standards for programs and providers; (2) establish programs across the country to teach literacy, civics, parenting education, and financial literacy to adult learners, and (3) develop online adult education programmes to increase the number of persons in the workforce with secondary level qualifications.

K. Employment

48. In 2022, in accordance with the Wages Council (Wages Regulation) (Consolidation) (Amendment) Order, 2022, Statutory Instrument No. 169 of 2022, and Wages Regulation (Manual Workers) (Amendment) Order 2022, Statutory Instrument No. 170 2022, the minimum wage for all categories of workers increased from \$3.30 to \$5.00 per hour. The last wage increase was in 2012.

49. In 2019, an Anti-Discrimination Steering Committee was formed to develop equality legislation. The Equal Opportunities Bill is aimed at protecting Belizeans

who experience discrimination, such as women or persons with disabilities, ensuring fair treatment and access to health, services, education, work, and housing. Consultations have been held country-wide; however, the Bill has not been advanced as a result of opposition from the religious community.

50. In 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration and the Embassy of the Republic of China (Taiwan) implemented a project focused on the professional development of women under the framework of the “Enhancing the Economic Empowerment of Women in Latin America and the Caribbean in the COVID-19 Post-Pandemic Era: Technical Assistance for Women Employment, Entrepreneurship, and Financial Inclusion” project co-implemented by the ministry and Taiwan International Cooperation and Development Fund.

51. The project implemented 16 cohorts of vocational and technical training targeting women and girls. The sessions focused on areas such as beauty, baking and cooking, hospitality, foreign languages, customer service, bartending, and front desk management training, to name a few, for micro and small businesses.

52. In 2024, the Government of Belize, through the Ministry of Labour launched its Decent Work Country Programme. The Decent Work Country program is aligned with the Government of Belize’s Agenda, Plan Belize, and seeks to address issues such as governance and rights of workers, inclusive labour markets, and sustainable productivity. The Decent Work Country Programme also seeks to address the low participation of women in the labour force by establishing programs and policies to ensure that women are provided with adequate training and support and that equal opportunities are provided to women.

53. In 2024, a New Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill was endorsed by Cabinet which makes new and robust provisions for the prevention and protection of persons from, sexual harassment; to provide for a right of redress for any person who has been sexually harassed; to repeal the Protection Against Sexual Harassment Act, Chapter 107 of the Substantive Laws of Belize.⁸

L. Health

54. Since 2009, no changes have been made to Belize’s abortion laws. The Government of Belize has made provisions by law regarding medical termination of pregnancy. However, measures to ensure victims of rape or incest who wish to terminate unwanted pregnancies are not criminalized are still pending. The Ministry of Health has only officially recorded 4 cases of maternal mortality from abortion complications since 2010.

55. The development and approval of a Statutory Instrument for adolescents to access sexual and reproductive healthcare services with or without parental consent is still pending.

56. The Ministry of Health and Wellness provides expansion of services through scheduled mobile clinics to rural communities. In regard to the difference between women living in rural and urban communities accessing health care services, the gap has narrowed as shown in the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2015. Additionally in 2023, the Government of Belize has approved the removal of all fees charged in public hospitals, a pivotal decision aimed at ensuring universal access to quality healthcare. This move eliminates financial barriers and enhances healthcare accessibility for all citizens, particularly low-income families.

⁸ Government of Belize, Anti Sexual Harassment Bill, 2023.

57. The Government of Belize, through the MOHW, continues to invest in making modern contraceptives available to women with fiscal funds. Currently, the investment is approximately 200,000+ USD in a given year. The modern contraceptives available at public, private, and NGO health facilities are barriers (male and female condoms, IUD), and Hormonal (one, two, and three-month injectable contraceptives, implant, progesterone only pill, combined hormonal pill). Contraceptives are treated as a public good. Contraceptives are administered at health facilities (all levels of care) and during mobile clinics.

58. The MOHW continues its efforts to prevent HIV infection through education on risk factors and how to prevent the infection. HIV screening services are available in all settings at all levels of care and during outreach sessions. Treatment is available free of cost. Antiretrovirals (ARVs) are a public good and patients diagnosed in the private sector can have access to ARVs with no out-of-pocket payment.

59. As it relates to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the MOHW has one medical officer responsible for the NCD program. The HEART initiative has been integrated into the health system with updated guidelines and training of staff.

60. In regard to cervical cancer, the preferred screening test is the HPV testing, introduced in 2022. VIA and pap smear continue to be offered based on individual criteria. Chemotherapy is available in the country and surgical procedures are available (local surgeons and visiting OBGYN oncologists). There is one oncology clinic at KHHM (one local oncologist) that provides oncology care and chemotherapy. The MOHW procures chemotherapy drugs for the Oncology clinic. Radiotherapy is not available in the country. Patients have borne the cost of radiotherapy abroad.

61. In the case of breast cancer, screening is included in the national health insurance package of services for females. Surgical procedures and chemotherapy are available in the country. No radiotherapy for breast cancer is available. The Belize Cancer Society is an NGO that lobbies for preventive interventions, care, and treatment of patients diagnosed with cancer. In each district, there is a district cancer society also lobbying for preventive interventions, care, and treatment of patients diagnosed with cancer.

M. Economic empowerment of women

62. Belize has developed a Financial Inclusion Strategy. The vision of the strategy is that individuals of all means, and especially those of lower income, in Belize can manage their financial lives and invest towards a better future. This is especially true of Belizeans who have yet to be reached by the provision of traditional and most essential financial services. It is also meant to emphasize the importance of expanding access and usage of financial services amongst businesses, especially for underserved micro, small, and medium enterprises, as these are core drivers of the economic activity in the country.

63. The Government of Belize is currently negotiating a loan with the World Bank for funds to invest in women's economic empowerment programmes. This is aimed at getting more women to participate in the labour market. Additionally, the loan would support child daycare programmes as an incentive for women to access the labour market.

64. According to Belize's MSME Strategy 52 per cent of all micro-enterprise owners are women, however, male SME owners outnumber female SME owners 2 to 1. Difficulties to access credit are also accentuated for certain population groups, such as women. Women face additional financial and non-financial barriers to access credit, such as the lack of guarantees, existing social and cultural norms, and the

tendency of companies owned by women to be smaller in size. In Belize, 55 per cent of microenterprises and 32 per cent of small and medium enterprises are women-owned.

65. In 2023, the state-owned national development bank, the Development Finance Cooperation, commenced implementation of a Credit Program for Safeguarding the Productive Sectors and Women MSMEs. The Government of Belize entered into a \$ 15,000,000 loan agreement with the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) to finance the project. The project is to support the sustainability of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as employment providers in Belize amid the COVID-19 crisis and to promote the post-COVID economic recovery of MSMEs through access to production-oriented finance, with a specific focus on improving the access of women's businesses to finance. There are three components in the project: (i) to support the short-term financial sustainability of MSMEs; (ii) to promote the economic recovery of MSMEs through access to production-oriented finance; and (iii) to support the digitalization of the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to improve the efficiency of its lending operation, and enhancing the provision of financial services to MSMEs, including women's businesses.

O. Rural women

66. Rural women experience several disparities in reporting incidences of violence and accessing services. This is primarily due to geographic location and the absence of information and services in many rural communities. The Gender Advocates Programme, which falls under the purview of the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs aims to address one of the worst forms of gender inequality and equity in Belize. It seeks to contribute to an environment in which families, in particular women and children, in rural communities will enjoy their right to violent free lives. The programme is working to further the goals and objectives of several international, regional, and national commitments but most importantly the reality in which many Belizean women and children find themselves.

67. The Gender Advocates Programme, launched in 2021, aims to progressively bridge the gaps in information and services on gender and GBV for rural women. Eighteen (18) Gender Advocates, with requisite background, were appointed in 18 rural communities and their capacities strengthened to provide information and support to victims and survivors of gender-based violence. Gender Advocates are trained to create awareness about GBV, provide basic information to women about their legal rights and options, provide immediate assistance (accompaniment through the legal process) and make referrals to relevant entities, professional services, and psychosocial support, support reporting, and monitoring of "low risk" gender-based violence cases.

P. Indigenous women

68. The MOHW promotes universal health care (elimination of fees at public sector hospitals and primary care facilities, and expansion of services through mobile clinics, health caravans, and health fairs). There is no tolerance for stigma and discrimination when providing health care services, for example, the population in general can benefit from services provided at fixed health facilities and during mobile clinics.

69. In 2022, the Ministry of Rural Transformation, Community Development, Labour, and Local Government, in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, and the National

Association of Village Councils (NAVCO), launched the Rural Women Economic Empowerment Project. The project targets rural women, including indigenous women by fostering women's empowerment through the development of potential businesses to improve both the economic and social well-being of rural women.

Q. Women with disabilities

70. In 2024, the Government of Belize endorsed the Disabilities Bill to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of privileges, interests, rights, benefits, and treatment by persons with disabilities on an equal basis with persons without disabilities; to establish the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities; to establish the Disabilities and Equal Opportunities Rights Tribunal.

R. Climate change and disaster risk reduction

71. Since 2022, the Government of Belize, through the National Climate Change Office (NCCO) has been actively implementing the National Climate Change Gender Action Plan. Gender has been mainstreamed into all core climate change strategies and policies, including the National Climate Change Policy, Strategy and Master Plan (NCCPSMP), the Nationally Determined Contributions, and the Low Emission Development Strategy. The NCCPSMP also includes an analysis of vulnerable groups, including Indigenous groups, and identifies concrete actions for climate adaptation and mitigation for women and other vulnerable groups, across all sectors.

72. In 2022, the NCCO developed a Training Manual to Support Belize's Gender and Climate Change Policies, Strategies, and Programme Development. The capacity of over 30 government and civil society organizations to mainstream gender into climate policies and projects was enhanced through training utilizing the manual.

73. In 2023, Belize appointed its United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) gender focal point and in that same year, the initial quota of 30 percent of women in Party delegations to subsidiary body meetings and at Conference of Parties (COPs) was met. In 2024, women will make up 40 per cent of negotiators to the COP. The NCCO aims to increase women's representation by at least 50 per cent by 2027.

74. Since 2002, the NCCO has been bringing together youth from diverse backgrounds for a climate change youth forum, in preparation for the COP. In 2025, representation at this forum will include students from the primary education level and the NCCO will include stakeholder consultations at the community level, including indigenous communities.

75. Since 2023, Belize has been engaged in a process to develop a Multi-sectoral National Adaptation Plan (MNAP), supported by the Green Climate Fund. The MNAP be socially inclusive and gender sensitive and will take into consideration the needs of women, youths, men, vulnerable people as well as local and indigenous communities. Through the validation, training, consultations, and workshops, the readiness process will engage 3,360 direct beneficiaries and indirectly benefit around 240,000 from the combined priority sectors.

76. Since 2018, the Government of Belize has been implementing the Resilient Rural Belize (RRB) Programme, a six-year, US 20 million Dollar programme aimed at minimizing the impacts of climatic and economic events on rural small farmers while supporting sustainable market access for their produce. RRB is operating countrywide and is targeting: (i) poor rural families; (ii) vulnerable rural families; (iii) households with less than 25 acres, engaged in part or full-time farming; and

(iv) formal and informal farmer organizations (cooperatives, associations, etc.) with the willingness and potential for improving productivity and farmer market access. The programme is expected to reach a total of 6,000 households or approximately 30,000 persons, from which 24,000 is expected to have strengthened resilience. Consistent with the importance of women in the rural economy, and in smallholder farming generally, at least 40 per cent of programme beneficiaries will be women and similarly, recognizing the importance of youth for the sustainability of the sector, youth will comprise at least 20 per cent of programme beneficiaries.

77. Additionally, in 2024, the Government of Belize launched the Climate Resilient and Sustainable Agriculture Project (CRESAP). CRESAP aims to enhance agricultural productivity and promote the adoption of climate-smart agricultural approaches among beneficiaries, while effectively responding to eligible crisis or emergency events. The project focuses on increasing the yields of key crops and livestock, encouraging the adoption of sustainable land management practices, and improving the resilience of agricultural producers through comprehensive support. CRESAP aims to benefit approximately 3,700 farmers through matching grants. The project will also ensure at least 30 per cent of beneficiaries are women, addressing gender gaps and empowering women farmers.

S. Marriage and family relations

78. Belize is in the process of drafting a Families Bill which will repeal, replace, and consolidate the Family Courts Act, Chapter 93 of the Substantive Laws of Belize, Revised Edition 2020; the Families and Children Act, Chapter 173 of the Substantive Laws of Belize, Revised Edition 2020; and the Married Persons (Protection) Act, Chapter 175 of the Substantive Laws of Belize, Revised Edition 2020; to provide for the establishment, constitution and jurisdiction of the Family Court; to provide for matters relating to families and children; to provide for matters relating to married persons; and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. Chapters 172 to 178 address the inheritance rights of men and women.

79. The Families and Children's Act, which will be replaced by the Families Bill, is the main guidance for the court. It outlines several factors the court should consider in making decisions on custody and visitation rights. One key factor is the welfare of the child, which should be the most important consideration. It also indicates that the court should for example take into consideration any harm the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering if he/she goes to live with a particular parent/guardian. The law does not make any specific reference to issues of domestic violence, however, the magistrate, as a judicial officer hearing the matter, is responsible for considering situations of domestic violence while determining the best for the child. Specifically, sections 20, and 30 of the FACA indicate that when making decisions regarding custody or access the court is to have regard to the age and the best interests of the child and taking into consideration the conduct and wishes of the parents and the child.

80. Training and awareness activities for judges, mediators, lawyers, youth welfare officers, law enforcement agencies, and local executive bodies on the rights of women and children and their role in protecting victims of domestic violence are conducted on an ongoing basis. However, there is no structured programme or curriculum developed to ensure consistency in this regard. The Judicial Education Institute of Senior Courts of Belize has identified this as an important area for incorporating into its training agenda.