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Women's Institute for Alternative Development

Gender Perspectives on Local Government Reform: Securing Women's Rights

Submission to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government

Local Government Reform Consultations

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Trinidad and Tobago (TT) is a representative democracy but the greater population often finds itself deeply disconnected from the decision-making process. The current hierarchical structure translates to the concentration of authority in central government, an issue that affects democracies from all corners of the globe. For numerous years support has increased for a model that is more inclusive of citizens¹

WINAD welcomes the focus on reforming local government to make Trinidad and Tobago's governance system more responsive to citizens' needs. We have taken note of Government's intention to "*remove all of the red tape and bureaucracy that prevent local government from doing their work in an effective and efficient manner*". For us, local government reform is a governance issue.

The importance of Local Government and Good Governance

Good governance is a concept which has received an enormous amount of support by the international community, because bad governance is being increasingly seen "as one of the root causes of all evil within our societies". Good governance must assure that corruption is minimized,

¹ Women's Institute for Alternative Development (2015) <http://winad.org/resources>

that participation by both men and women exists, and that such participation is informed and organized (What is Good Governance? 2006).

Several characteristics are accepted globally. These characteristics include - accountability, transparency, rule of law, responsiveness, equitability and inclusiveness, efficiency, effectiveness, and participation (Good Governance Guide, 2012).

It is in the context of delivering good governance that local government reform must be addressed to ensure properly functioning local government authorities that would advocate on behalf of burgesses, develop policy, enable law enforcement, plan and monitor the delivery of services, and provide security and protection for burgesses.

Local government design and delivery does not serve all the people in the same way. For example, it serves women and men differently and for this reason it is important for women's views, women's interests, and women's participation to be fully integrated into providing leadership at the local level, accessing goods and services from local government authorities, and restructuring local government. Attempts to reform local government must be informed by gender analysis to guarantee equal treatment of men and women in the process. Gender-sensitive governance is also a significant means to broader social transformation because of the extent to which governance institutions help to shape perceptions of the roles men and women play in society (Brody, 2009, p.4).

Why focus on gender?

The local government reforms must acknowledge, that even with certain regulations in place for citizen participation in local decision-making, decentralisation is not an automatically inclusive process (Mainstreaming Gender in Programming, 2013). Ensuring women's full and equal participation in local government decision making becomes an imperative.

Security of Funding

Addressing the concept of good governance and security of funding to ensure that more taxes and revenue collected within local boundaries are used for development in that community is vital to the practice of transparency and accountability at the local level. However, good governance does not end at the minimization of corruption, it includes equal participation between men and women

as well (UN Women). In order to bring about gender equality in the vision of security of funding, local governments must ensure that fund allocation is not only transparent for all members of the community but that women's needs and projects are funded by the local revenues just as much as those of men and all other burgesses.

Executive Authority

Although it is anticipated that all 14 municipalities are to be given a level of autonomy similar to that of the Tobago House of Assembly (THA), the goal for autonomy should far exceed that of Tobago's.

It is necessary that when these reforms are completed a community is able to decide what matters in the context of their own region, and they are then able to decide whether they are making progress on the issues they deem as important or not (Spence, 2016).

Thus gender awareness at the local level becomes critical as a basis for good governance. In that regard it is important to prepare Councillors, Aldermen, and Executive Management in local government authorities through training, with ample support from gender sensitive policy to guide their decision making and gender mainstreaming for the purposes of programming and administration.

New Responsibilities

While creating and improving new responsibilities that local government authorities will be responsible for such as local tourism, school welfare services and sporting programmes, it is critical that these responsibilities are aligned with the country's obligations to the Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals. These international agreements all hold gender equity and equality as a main priority and target for development.

Consequently, new responsibilities could include gender-sensitive training for all groups and service providers associated with local authorities, and the introduction of gender indicators in the evaluation of development plans, policies, projects and service delivery.

Local Contractors

Local Government will now be responsible for developing competencies of local suppliers of goods and services as well as create opportunities for local work. This is an excellent area where gender

equity and equality can be strengthened. Well-designed and inclusive infrastructure programmes can provide a useful entry point for rural development as they strengthen community organizations and participation, develop skills, stimulate small enterprises and empower women.

Local government reforms should continue to push for further breakthroughs by encouraging contractors to hire equal numbers of women and men with the requisite skills.

More Effective Municipal Policing

Increasing the numbers of Municipal Police should not be viewed as a panacea for crime prevention and law enforcement in our communities. A largely undetected piece of the puzzle in the national discourse on crime and violence is how the violence committed in our homes translates into criminal violence in the public arena. Local policing can potentially bring clarity to this mystery.

We must broaden our understanding of the drivers of crime, revisiting our underlying assumptions which frame our research, establishes priority areas and public policy responses to crime and violence. Additionally, particular attention needs to be paid to how geography influences the brand of insecurity and criminality that is likely to be experienced.²

It is also important to provide the enabling environment for women as they continue to be the primary care givers in families. Planning for municipal policing must include providing accessible daycare facilities/programmes to reduce pressures on parents on duty; and operationalizing the number of days per year that women with complicated menstrual cycles can take off without losing pay or benefits. These measures acknowledge women's reproductive roles and support fathers in parenting which contribute significantly to expanding the work force.

Development Control

Access to resources means being able to use them; control over resources means deciding who may use them, and how.

These are important concepts to guide decision making around planning for development. They allow us to further understand the need for preparation to use and manage resources and opportunities equitably. These concepts also reinforce the case for gender mainstreaming in all local authorities.

² WINAD <http://winad.org/resources>

Infrastructure Works

Infrastructure should reflect the collective philosophy, and cultural norms of the community whilst also being functional.

For example, infrastructure, lighting, community spaces should all be pieces of an integrated approach to keeping burgesses safe, particularly women and girls, and promoting harmonious living.

Disaster Management

It is important when addressing disaster issues and management that the role of women be viewed as integral. In fact, women—with their extensive knowledge of communities, social roles of managing natural environmental resources, and caring responsibilities—increasingly play a critical role in disaster risk management.

Not only do women play important roles in the community that are critical to disaster recovery and prevention, women also have different risks in disasters. Due to reproductive roles, women who may be pregnant especially in the final stages and those with young kids are often less mobile in disaster situations, this can lead to increases in miscarriages and infant and maternal mortality rates (Gender and Disaster, 2016).

Failure to apply gender lens in disaster risk management and response can also expose women and girls to gender based violence, sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

Involvement of Civil Society

The manifesto of the People's National Movement declares that *civil society and its respective groups will be welcome to comment and have input on the projects and programs of Local Government bodies before they are implemented* (People's National Movement Manifesto, 2015, p.54). This approach is woefully inadequate in a climate where there is robust advocacy for greater citizen participation in decision making. It is in the visioning, planning, and implementation of mutually agreed plans that the collective genius of the people can be optimized.

In the case of women, Peterson and Hughey's³ study on social cohesion found that women were more empowered than men by participatory processes coupled with connection to community. The Government's intention to act first then consult the population will disadvantage women and should be replaced by a consultative process which privileges the voice of the people.

Regional Development Plans

Review of the current regional development plans in the fourteen municipal corporations presents an opportunity to utilise gender frameworks for development planning taking care to harmonise the needs of the different groups of burgesses with the resources available.

The following set of recommendations are intended to provide specific measures for women's full and equal participation in local government and ensure inclusiveness for all citizens.

1. Each local government authority must have 50% women on the Council;
2. Each local government authority must include in its development plan and all policies gender issues and concerns, gender sensitive training for all Councillors and Aldermen as well as all the executive management;
3. Each local government authority must include gender indicators in the evaluation of its development plan and policies, and its service delivery;
4. Development plans and policies must be developed using participatory processes to benefit from the diverse knowledge and experiences of the burgesses;
5. Local government reform must establish a clear commitment to gender mainstreaming to allow for the allocation of resources, review of internal processes to determine where gender inequality exists, develop strategies for enabling gender equality, and ensure that all data collection intended to inform public policy is informed by gender analysis;
6. Mechanisms must be introduced, in partnership with burgesses, to hold officials and institutions accountable, and this process must have 50% women's participation;
7. Community development plans should clearly define safety for the specific community, including safety for women and girls in public spaces.

2016.04.12

³ Social cohesion and intrapersonal empowerment: gender as moderator; N. Andrew Peterson and Joseph Hughey; Oxford Journal Volume 19, Issue 5 <http://her.oxfordjournals.org/content/19/5/533.full>

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