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British Virgin Islands

NATIONAL REPORTS ON PROGRESS IN THE
APPLICATION OF THE MONTEVIDEO
STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
REGIONAL GENDER AGENDA WITHIN THE
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK
BY 2030

Reporting period 2016-2019



Introduction

The Virgin Islands is among a select number of countries with a National Policy for Gender Equity and Equality. The Policy, first established in 2011, outlines the response to gender disparity in the Virgin Islands. It also outlines a framework for an effective multi-sectorial response to gender equity and equality. The cadre of implementing agencies involved in the national response includes all government ministries, the tripartite team of government, employers and workers, the business sector and non-governmental organizations including faith-based entities. All have been supported through technical and or financial inputs from the Office of Gender Affairs.

Since 2011, several other regulations, policies and plans relevant to the elimination of gender inequalities, to guarantee the human rights and autonomy of women in all diversity have been implemented. Among the main policies are the Domestic Violence Act, 2011 and the National Domestic Violence Protocol. The Ministry of Health and Social Development developed the National Domestic Violence Protocol in 2014. The National Domestic Violence Protocol provides guidelines for key stakeholders within the government, to develop and implement workplace domestic violence policies and programmes to protect individuals affected by domestic violence. Further, an Occupational Safety and Health Bill is currently before Cabinet. If passed, it will provide legal protection and sanctions against discrimination for people living with HIV.

The Virgin Islands continues to take steps towards implementing the Regional Gender Agenda within the sustainable development framework by 2030. This report covers the period 2016 to May 2019.

What three main achievements regarding women's autonomy and gender equality stands out in your country since the adoption of the Montevideo Strategy in 2016?

1. Sexual and Reproductive Health - Autonomy is considered essential for decision-making in a range of health care situations, from health care seeking and utilization to choosing among treatment options. Majority of women in the Virgin Islands have autonomy and control over their health decisions.

The Virgin Islands provides women with the capacity and freedom in law to act independently, for example, the ability to go places, such as health facilities, or to make decisions regarding contraceptive use or household purchases alone and without asking anyone's permission.

This is grounded in the VI Constitution and enforced by the National Policy for Gender Equity and Equality. The Policy enforces the concept that women with greater autonomy are more likely to seek health care for themselves and use different forms of health care services available to them.

Since autonomy is also linked to quality of health care, the country continues to provide women with a space in its premier health facility, Peebles Hospital. The hospital has well equipped Obstetrics and Gynecology Departments, which offers a full spectrum of women's health care services, including yearly checkups, prenatal care and advanced gynecologic surgeries. As a trusted leader in women's health, the team of providers is dedicated to helping patients manage their reproductive health. Women can consent to treatment over the age of 18, without the permission or presence of a caregiver or partner. The BVI provides women with full control over their reproductive choices except in the case of abortions, which is illegal.

2. Involvement and Political Participation - In 2017, women's involvement in the political space of the Virgin Islands continues to be strengthening by the number of women being encouraged and willing to participate in the political process. As a

result, nine female candidates contested for a seat in the general elections held in February 2019, resulting in three seats in the House of Assembly.

There are a substantial number of women in prominent positions in BVI. Women hold fifty-seven percent of the Permanent Secretary posts and women head fifty percent of the government department's statutory boards and other agencies.

3. Family Life and Gender-based Violence - The Office of Gender Affairs continues to organize Violence Free Awareness Campaigns, which focuses on eliminating gender-based violence. Women learn how to protect themselves and more importantly know their rights if they are attacked.

The annual training of key stakeholders for the Domestic Violence Act, 2011 and Protocol ensures that victims and perpetrators are taken care of with the utmost efficiency. The Domestic Violence Act, 2011 is presently been reviewed. The National Policy for Gender Equality and Equality is also up for review to ensure that it is more in line with the Montevideo Strategy.

How has the Montevideo Strategy been useful for designing and implementing public policies to ensure gender equality and women's autonomy and rights in your country?

The Office of Gender Affairs is the focal point for the Government in the implementation of the National Policy for Gender Equality and Equity and is guided by the Montevideo strategy to inform policies and educate the public on gender equity and equality. The Office is responsible for public education and awareness, information/research and community outreach as well as in ensuring that public officials are trained and well informed about gender and related issues. The Office is also responsible for the review of Government policies to ensure that they are gender neutral and sensitive. This process therefore allows for the further implementation of the Montevideo Strategy in policies throughout the government.

The Strategy is also influencing policies being developed such as the Virgin Islands Human Rights Legislation. In 2017, legislation was introduced in the House of Assembly of the Virgin Islands to provide for a Commission, but the legislative process became delayed when Hurricane Irma struck the Territory and the Bill has not yet been passed into law. The Human Rights Legislation will seek to integrate all the pillars of the Virgin Islands once passed. The legislation will afford all citizens the ability to enjoy all basic human rights to include access to health care and security.

The Child Maintenance and Access Act came into effect in 2017. This legislation ensures that all parents honour their duty to maintain their children and provide for each parent and a person who has assumed responsibility for a child to be entitled to have access to that child.

What degree of progress has been achieved in the implementation of the Montevideo Strategy measures?

Since the inception of the Strategy in December of 2016, The Virgin Islands continue to make headways but still have some ways to go. The Implementation of the ten pillars of the Strategy has been achieved at different levels. The majority of its implementation and integration is done through the National Machinery for Gender Equity and Equality.

Pillars 1 and 2 continues to be integrated by the Office of Gender Affairs (OGA) is with the implementation of non-discriminatory law and policy for the advancement of women and men's equality and equity all of which speak to their full anatomy. The wheels within the OGA can be said to be positively turning with being instrumental with the successful drafting instructions for the Sexual Offences Bill, which is now ready to go before Cabinet. This was completed after the implementation of the Montevideo Strategy. The Domestic Violence Act, 2011, the National Domestic Violence Protocol, the Partnership for Peace Programme, and the National Gender Policy were mechanisms put in place by the Government to ensure full development and autonomy of women on a basis of equity and equality with men in compliance with the Gender Agenda.

Pillar 3, continues to be worked on for more women to be involved in the political arena and decision-making process. At present, there are three women in the House of Assembly and four out of six Permanent Secretaries are women. This speaks volume of the high ranks of women in decision making in the VI.

Currently in the VI, two Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) that advocates for women empowerment are the Family Support Network (FSN) and the ZONTA Club. These organizations annually host events and collaborate with the Office of Gender Affairs and the Social Development Department (government) to have women empowerment sessions across the Territory. These organizations all play a major role in poverty alleviation, which can greatly affect women autonomy.

Pillar 4, is an ongoing process in Territory as gender is mainstreamed through training and development programmes. Trainings are held on an annual basis with the all stakeholders of the Domestic Violence Protocol.

The Government provides funding for the work of the Office of Gender Affairs annually. This funding is able to cover the costs of human resources and institutional capacity building. The government has however not yet put in place a mechanism to cost policies.

The progress to implement Pillar 6 is well advanced as the Government has in place a Government Information System (GIS) that is used to highlight all government information and information for businesses that makes an impact on the government. This is done through Facebook (Government of the Virgin Islands), Twitter (@BVIGovernment), and website (www.bvi.gov.vg) which reaches general and specific audiences of all ages. These mediums are used to disseminate information such as government policies and legislations. It should be noted that the Ministry of Health and Social Development (<http://www.bvi.gov.vg/departments/ministry-health-and-social-development>) also owns its

own website, which is linked to the government website. The Office of Gender Affairs Facebook page (Gender Affairs VI) also complements this.

Pillar 7 - The Government is at the initial stage of implementing its e-government initiative. The Virgin Islands e-Government Portal Services was developed to provide a single point of entry to access government information and services online. Government's information is presented in a client-centric manner, with the needs of citizens and residents, businesses and visitors in mind.

Pillar 8 - Cooperation: towards democratic multilateral governance however does not apply to the Virgin Islands.

Collecting and processing of gender information is the cornerstone of Pillar 9, which is chiefly prepared in the VI through its Central Statistics Office. Since the inception of the Montevideo Strategy, the country had experienced a series of natural disasters, which caused widespread damage to the Territory. To assess the physical and social damage the Central Statistics Office conducted a number of surveys, which included a Household Assessment Survey. All surveys conducted were gender sensitive.

The Government has entrusted the monitoring, evaluation and accountability of the implementation of the 2030 Gender Agenda to the Premier's Office. This process has started with a comprehensive training by ECLAC on its implementation for the Government of the Virgin Islands. Since gender cuts across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the Office of Gender Affairs plays a critical role in the process of finalizing the indicators that were essential to the Territory.

Which implementation pillars have been most relevant for public policies aimed at achieving women's physical autonomy in your country?

The second pillar of Institutional architecture: multidimensional and comprehensive gender equality policies - The Virgin Islands boast of a host of gender equality policies which are all based on the philosophy that gender and human rights are indivisible and have the same goal, but that human rights itself must be gendered.

The VI in 2011 implemented the National Policy for Gender Equity and Equality. This policy advocates for major change in Ministries and Agencies. The policy further advocates for additional legislative reforms to include those related to women's physical autonomy.

The National Domestic Violence Protocol was signed on 1 October 2014. The Protocol is used by key agencies (health, police and prosecution) to help ensure that incidents of domestic violence are consistently handled and appropriately addressed.

The drafting instructions for a sexual offences legislation is ready for submission to the Cabinet. The proposed legislation will make provisions for marital rape, age of consent, and infanticide and trafficking of women.

The Sexual Harassment Sensitization will be done across government Ministries, Departments and Agencies. This sensitization will target senior managers to junior staff. The Department of Human Resources, in collaboration with the Office of Gender Affairs, are fervent about educating public officers on the prevention of Workplace Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Violence and related topics, in accordance with Government's workplace policies. It is our intent for every public officer to be exposed to these fundamental policies and procedures, and especially for the management staff to be knowledgeable of the content and to be vigilant regarding compliance.

Which implementation pillars have been most relevant for public policies aimed at achieving women's economic autonomy in your country?

Pillar 5: Financing: mobilizing sufficient and sustainable resources for gender equality is the most relevant to the Virgin Islands.

Unemployed women may apply for social assistance through the Social Development Department. Social Assistance may be in the form of rent, food vouchers, medical, day-care assistance, and financial grants. Each application goes before the Public Assistance Committee who makes the decision to approve and decline. If approved the Public Assistance Clerk will notify the applicant on how much money was granted and time period to which the grant extends.

A Child Maintenance and Access Bill was passed in the House of Assembly. This Act is based on the general principle that all parents take financial responsibility for providing adequate maintenance for their children; and seeks to ensure that both parents have access to their child in order to participate in the child's upbringing. It enshrines the 'best interest of the child' principle, introduces new collection and enforcement measures including attachment of income payable to the respondent, makes special provisions for children with special needs, and reflects gender neutrality.

Cabinet approved the implementation of a Household Assistance Programme in 2017 to support the basic needs of the most vulnerable households affected by the recent hurricanes. Following Hurricane Irma, a Joint Cash Platform (JCP), financial assistance programme was established with the BVI Red Cross and Caritas Antilles (funded in large part by DFID, a global leader in using cash in emergencies and the Catholic Relief Services) and the Adventist Disaster Relief Agency (ADRA) to provide financial assistance to 1,050 vulnerable households. The Social Development Department was responsible for registration, the BVI Red Cross was responsible for delivery of cash via First Caribbean Bank and Caritas was responsible for monitoring the project. Via the Platform, three monthly payments ranging from \$800 - \$1,200 per month were made to selected households who met the eligibility criteria of being most vulnerable. The objectives of the programme were to:

- i. provide a three-month unconditional grant to vulnerable households to meet basic household monthly expenditures to allow for self-recovery and longer-term recovery planning; and
- ii. stimulate the economy, building confidence in the Territory and retaining the needed labour force.

Two household surveys and several focus group discussions were conducted with the beneficiary households to determine whether the financial assistance programme had met its objectives. The results from the household surveys and focus group discussions confirmed that the financial assistance programme had met its intended objectives of reaching the most vulnerable households in the Territory. In addition, there was a significant impact of the assistance programme on vulnerable households where recipients were able to avoid using coping mechanisms such as incurring debt and selling of assets to make ends meet. The programme directly impacted 3,274 persons.

Which implementation pillars have been most relevant for public policies aimed at achieving women’s decision-making autonomy in your country?

Women’s participation in decision-making at the highest level was evident in the 25 February 2019 elections. Twenty four percent of the candidates were females. It should be noted that women grossed the highest number of votes with the Territory at Large votes. The Virgin Islands Election Code of Conduct protects both women and men.

The Virgin Islands has in place a Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Candidates. The purpose of this Code is to promote conditions that are conducive to free and fair elections and a climate of tolerance in which campaigning activity may take place without fear or coercion, intimidation or reprisals. It clearly states that, “No abusive attacks or innuendos may be directed to campaigners or their family members for reason of their political affiliation, race, social origins

and background, education, gender, religion, or any other reason.” Note: Section 74 of the Act outlines penalties for certain illegal practices at elections. It has been suggested that penalties be included for non-compliance to the Code.

Women have advanced to prominent positions within government. Women account for four out of seven Permanent Secretary positions within the Government.

- o Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health and Social Development
- o Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education and Culture
- o Permanent Secretary, Office of the Deputy Governor
- o Permanent Secretary, Premier’s Office

In 2016, the country’s second female Deputy Governor was appointed. Overall, women in both the public and private spheres are dominating the managerial positions and the Virgin Islands have already surpassed the 33% quota set by the BPFA regarding women in politics life.

What are the three main challenges to be overcome in order to eliminate the structural challenges of gender inequality identified in the Montevideo Strategy?

Data gaps

There is a crucial need for data to be collected by key agencies, which include information that is disaggregated by sex, ethnic/racial population, socio-economic condition and other pertinent variables based on area being addressed such as health, education, criminal offences, etc. Once this information becomes available, the Office of Gender Affairs will be able to provide systematic evidenced based reports on gender inequalities in the various areas and be able to plan the way forward to address the inequalities thereby ensuring sustainability. For example, in the area of health, using sex-disaggregated data with other relevant variables will allow health care workers

to improve generation analysis and use the data to reduce risk factors and gender-based inequities.

A well-functioning data collection system will allow the opportunity for health services and other entities to identify trends within a particular system and be able to recognize possible ways to address concerns. Before the information can be used, it must be collected from the right sources, which should include quantitative and qualitative information appropriately disaggregated. This information has to be collected in key areas and be shared across the sectors to thereby effect change. Data must be understandable and useable. The sharing of information and the correct collection of information is desperately needed for evidence-based planning to address gender inequalities and inequities. Without gender balance, the society is at risk of becoming infested with negative social characteristics, such as high crime, strained health care system, male dropouts, filled prisons etc.

Natural Disasters

In 2017 the VI was greatly impacted by a flood and two categories five (5) Hurricanes. The destructive winds and rains of Hurricane Irma and Maria caused widespread damage to the road infrastructure, housing stock, ports, telecommunications, electrical and water infrastructure and as well as critical government facilities. This resulted with several persons being displaced from their living accommodations and place of employment.

Manpower

At present, the Office of Gender Affairs is the main mechanism through which the vision and institutional capacities for gender equality in the country is being built. The actions for achieving these objectives listed above involve advancing women's issues, promoting the involvement of women, training and engaging with policy makers at all stages, and effectively coordinating activities relevant to gender equality and equity at various national levels. Therefore, the need

for additional technical/trained staff to achieve these goals is an on-going challenge. The lack of funding and other vital resources are affecting the effective performance of the Unit to the point where programmes and other activities are extremely streamlined or are non-existing.