

WOMEN IN PANAMA: NAVIGATING UPSTREAM AGAINST THE CURRENT¹

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Introduction

Over the last twenty years, women have been gaining representation in many areas of Panamanian society. Women now comprise more than 50 percent of students in secondary and post-secondary schools, and women's labor force participation has been steadily increasing since the early 1990s. (Duryea et al.) However, women's leadership in Panama tends to be structured in a triangular fashion with representation of women decreasing as the hierarchical structure increases. (Htun) Despite advances in education and training, women are still struggling to increase their social and economic status in Panama and are not being utilized to their full potential. The gender inequality that exists in Panama is not only harmful to women but to the country as a whole, as it impedes greater and more rapid development. If Panama wishes to benefit from the economic boom that it is experiencing at

present, it must take more concrete measures to capitalize on the potential of women's contributions to that goal.

In this article I present several issues that either affect the welfare of women or that are affected by the activism of women in Panama. The topics I address are education and work, healthcare, domestic violence, sustainable development, ecotourism, and politics. Although the lives of women in Panama are improving over time because of the burgeoning economy and because of the leadership of women in social causes, I argue that most women are still not reaching their full potential in many facets of the workplace and in political leadership.

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Education

In 2005 the estimated primary school enrollment of both girls and boys in Panama was 99 percent. However, only 67 percent of girls and 61 percent of boys continue on to secondary education. (UIS Statistics in Brief) For those who do attain a primary or even secondary education, there is no guarantee that it will be of a high standard or that they will be able to access it easily due to transportation issues and financial barriers. (Country Strategy Paper..., p. 12)

There are serious implications for family life when girls end their education too early. It has been shown that poor or minimal education for women results in higher levels of child mortality, poorer health, and lower income. Some theorists argue that having the general population attend school exposes them to “modernity”² and hence helps speed up the process of economic growth in a society. (Benavot)

Educating women also affects fertility rates. According to Benavot, moderate population growth contributes to more sustainable economic growth when it results in a population that is able to support itself with a uniform, relatively balanced age distribution. Decreasing the fertility rate also allows more resources to be allocated to each individual child.

Finally, educating more girls through the secondary level will have a favorable effect on the health of the entire population. Schools can test routinely for malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases; and students can be taught about the symptoms of common diseases. With this knowledge, women will be better able to care for themselves and their families. In fact, UNICEF has set universal education as a goal for Panama by 2011, stating that the expected results will be not only to promote gender equality but also to combat diseases. (“Panama Country Programme...”, p. 2)

Higher Education and the Job Market

Although a relatively small number of persons of both genders go to university, of those

eligible to go on to some form of tertiary education in 2005, more women than men were enrolled (55 percent of post-secondary women versus 34 percent of post-secondary men). (UIS Statistics in Brief) Women also attend graduate programs in higher numbers than men and, on average, perform better than their male counterparts. Even in traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering, women earn over half of awarded degrees. (Díaz) With the prospect of many professional positions opening due to the real estate boom, the growth in the free zone, growth in call centers, and port and canal expansion, it would be prudent for Panama to improve the socio-economic status of its own citizens by recruiting qualified women for these positions.

If women with higher education degrees are actually encouraged to enter the skilled workforce, one does not see the evidence. During the Martindale trip to Panama in May 2006, we met three college women from Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá who were being trained as engineers and, we assumed, would soon be in the workforce. However, all three women admitted that they were unsure about going to work after graduation. Instead they planned to marry, raise a family as stay-at-home moms, and did not see themselves entering the market economy. They also expressed the desire to continue to live with their parents and care for them once they had attained their degrees until they got married.

Certainly it is unwise to extrapolate a trend from a sample of three, but it is possible that talented women are not being drawn to the workplace because of pay and advancement inequalities. The income gap in Panama between men and women is large and persistent. Between 1985 and 1995, women at each education level earned between 70 and 80 percent of the earnings of men. (“Gender Assessment for...”)

Víctor Herrera and Manuel Madrid-Aris (“Earning Profiles and Returns to Education in Panama”) explain that the gender differential in pay for those with no formal education is probably the result of migration from rural to urban areas where women were employed mainly as maids, pulling in lower wages than men who were hired for labor. As for women with formal secondary or technical education, most are

²In sociology, modernity is commonly defined as the social patterns resulting from industrialization. (Maconis)

employed in the service sector, with clerical, secretarial, or lower management jobs. (Herrera and Madrid-Aris)

According to 2004 World Bank statistics, women at that time made up 38 percent of the entire workforce, a steady increase from 30 percent in 1980. ("Summary Gender Profile") At the same time about 88 percent of the female workforce was employed in the service economy. ("Human Development Indicators 2003") It is estimated that women in the service economy, who comprise about 75 percent of the workforce, make only 58 percent of the earnings of their male counterparts! (Mordok) In August 2007, the front page of a national Panamanian newspaper, *Panama America*, bore the headline: "Mujeres Sufren Disparidad Salarial," which means "Women Suffer Salary Discrepancies." The article highlighted that today salary inequalities between men and women are still large and pervasive. (Mordok) Unemployment is also higher for women. In urban areas the unemployment rate for women is 23.5 percent while for urban men the rate is 16.5 percent. Additionally, urban women earn only about 76 percent of the earnings of men. ("Gender, Health and Development...")

Women are noticeably underrepresented in many business realms. The Panama Canal Authority official website lists twelve positions on the Board of Directors. (Panama Canal Authority Board of Directors) Only one of the twelve upper level administrative positions is occupied by a woman — Ms. Chiquilani, Director of the Department of Human Resources. (Panama Canal Authority Organizational Chart) All of the banks visited during the Martindale trip to Panama reflected a similar absence of women in high paying, high status positions. Many banks have at most one or two women on their boards, if they have any at all. One exception is Delia Cardenas, the Superintendent of the Superintendency of Banks in the Republic of Panama.

Another example of the underrepresentation of women is seen in the media. In 1999, of 458 personalities on the radio, only 112 were women (fewer than 25 percent). Women who study communications at the University of Panama and other universities find themselves either not working in their chosen field or else working in lower level jobs than their male

counterparts. Fewer than 15 percent of the women who do become radio personalities are given the opportunity to express their opinions on issues rather than simply reading a given script. Griselda Lopez, a professor at the University of Panama, argues that large corporations that own radio stations benefit from keeping men in more powerful positions as it reaffirms cultural norms and brings in more profit. (Lopez)

Cultural norms are reflected in another type of job discrimination in Panama. For example, some positions are closed to women because of a perceived threat to women's physical well-being, such as jobs that require night shifts. (Díaz) Such over-protection of women occurs despite the fact that women have longer life expectancies than men, and is further exemplified in the legal retirement age, which is 55 for women versus 60 for men. (Díaz) This pervasive and culturally accepted over-protection of women may create an atmosphere in favor of the more traditional life and an antipathy against ambition.

A study entitled "Perceptions of Couple Decision Making in Panama" may provide an insight into the reluctance on the part of women to pursue careers and how barriers are set up by their husbands. The study was undertaken in part to investigate whether the phenomena of "machismo" and "marianismo" affected family life and decision making. The investigators describe machismo as "exaggerated aggressiveness and uncompromising stance in male-to-male interpersonal relationships," and a "callousness and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships." Marianismo is defined as women being spiritually superior to men. According to these stereotypes, typical Latin American attitudes toward women are a paradox, for women are seen as spiritually stronger but physically weaker, and are at once both protected and governed by men. (Danes et al.)

One of the findings of this study that is relevant to the topic of women working outside the home indicated that the wife's education and employment were positively associated with the making of joint decisions about family matters among couples in Panama. Less education ensured more male dominance. Thus the norms of "machismo and marianismo," still

part of the Panamanian culture, may be superseded one day by a new modern lifestyle when everyone is educated to the fullest. (Danes et al.)

In 2005 the Declaration of Panama³ stressed the importance of education, including science, technology and innovation (STI), and STI's ability to reduce poverty, create jobs, and strengthen democracy. (Bergeron) In his follow-up on the Declaration of Panama, Michel Bergeron, President of the Interciencia Association, continues to describe the importance of the Declaration of Panama for women: "Ignoring the gender gap in scientific professions [is] blocking women's ability to participate in the knowledge society, depriving society of a significant portion of its intellectual force, a sure way to weaken the national scientific capacity." (Bergeron, p. 2) Increased knowledge is absolutely necessary for the continued development of all countries. Gale Johnson attributes the increased productivity in the world for the last two centuries to an increase in knowledge and the ability to invest in knowledge. (Johnson, p. 7)

Gender Inequalities, Gender Differences, and Social Action

In the next section I explore several facets of Panamanian life that affect women and in which women have a special role. These include healthcare, domestic violence, sustainable development, ecotourism, and political action. In all of these social or environmental arenas there is the potential for change that women can make, and I show that many women have already taken a stand by forming or joining activist movements. In this transitional time it is clear that women can and actually are making a difference.

Healthcare

Healthcare utilization and costs have glaring gender implications. Although women

³The Declaration of Panama includes a list of actions and recommendations that 11 associations have already endorsed and implemented with regards to making STI education available for women in Panama. The document was initially presented at the Council of Interciencia meeting and has been circulated to other collaborative associations for support.

have a longer life expectancy than men in Panama (78 versus 73 years), women have higher rates of chronic illness which require more long-term care. ("Mortality Country Fact Sheet 2006") When socioeconomic status is taken into account, the statistics are quite alarming. Women who are poor are about *six* times more likely to die between the ages of 15 and 59 than women who are not poor. Men who are poor are about *three* times more likely to die between the ages of 15 and 59 than men who are not poor. (Gómez)

The health of working women in every socioeconomic status is compromised by overwork. The phrase "second shift" is used to describe women's contribution to home life after coming home from a full-time job. Many women who hold jobs also manage home and family, taking care of sick children, family members, or friends. Such work is undervalued; but without the woman's input at home, men could not continue to work and earn a living to their present extent. Women's role as homemaker helps to maintain the health of those in the workforce and fuels the market economy by improving the productivity of the employees who, if healthy, are able to work with fewer interruptions.

Although women constitute about 80 percent of all healthcare staff in Latin America, there are very few women with decision-making power.⁴ (Gómez) Elsa Gómez, Panama's regional advisor to the Pan American Health Organization, writes that in order to address healthcare from a gender perspective, Panama must engage women in the reform of the healthcare system with a particular focus on women from underrepresented groups, such as women from rural areas and from indigenous communities. Gómez believes that such inclusion will create a more equal distribution of "burdens, benefits, and power" (such as the difficulty in accessing healthcare and the unequal distribution of disease) and will necessarily "influence the development of health." (Gómez) Health development goes hand in hand with economic development, and it is therefore vital

⁴Many women in the healthcare field in Panama work as nurses or in family medicine. They are not generally on the boards of directors at hospitals nor are they usually seen even in lower level supervisory positions.

for Panama to continue to advance in this respect.⁵

Because of acute and chronic illnesses that many women experience, such as diabetes, they have more frequent medical bills than do men and children; and yet women continue to earn less on average than men. Creating a healthcare system that takes into account the needs of women will allow for them to be more equal participants in the workforce and to be better able to manage the home. As Gómez says, women must be actively involved in the healthcare system. In 2000, women constituted 96 percent of nurses but only 35 percent of physicians. (“Gender, Health and Development...”) It is essential to encourage women to enter medical fields and become trained as doctors so that women’s concerns are heard and addressed.

Domestic Violence

When Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos, wife of President Torrijos, visited the UN in 2005 to attend the forty-ninth session on the Status of Women, she spoke passionately and honestly about domestic abuse in Panama.

We are right now in the middle of a campaign against gender violence, not only against women but the whole family. It is a matter of silence. We are, therefore, trying to bring up the issue, so that everybody can talk about it and more women, men and children would be encouraged to go to the authorities and report the problem. Gender violence is in our homes and maybe next door, but we keep it a secret. (Conversation with Vivian...)

In 2006 the crime of domestic violence was named among the eight most serious human rights issues in Panama. (Country Reports on Human...) Although it is difficult to measure precisely, it is estimated that in all of Latin America between 30 and 75 percent of adult women suffer some form of domestic abuse. (Buvenic et al.) Unfortunately, accurate data on

the rates of domestic violence in Panama are unavailable.

Domestic violence is also a healthcare problem; yet victims of abuse do not always access the healthcare system when they most need it. For example, physically abusive people can prohibit their partners from receiving proper medical treatment for their injuries. Furthermore, women might experience financial abuse when an abusive partner controls a woman’s money by having a bank account she cannot access or by giving her only a set allowance each week, thus making the healthcare system unaffordable. However, victims of domestic violence often require medical treatment for inflicted trauma and for conditions such as chronic pain and fibromyalgia, and mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress, depression, and substance abuse. Some victims become permanently disabled, and it is not rare that a violent attack can turn into homicide or prompt a victim to commit suicide. (Velzeboer et al.)

Other serious health issues are products of domestic violence. A report on HIV/AIDS published by the Pan American Health Organization states that there is a strong correlation between sexually transmitted infections and domestic violence. Furthermore, men who are sexually abusive are more likely to have multiple partners and increase the chances of their partners contracting HIV. (“Gender Based Violence...,” p. 2)

Healthcare is the primary source of surveillance⁶ for domestic violence. Panama began a surveillance system in 2001 at both the national and local levels. A standardized health reporting form is used in hospitals, keeping basic descriptive data such as age, type of violence, and sex. The indicators used to monitor the level of violence are number of women, deaths, and percent of pregnant women. (“Domestic Violence Surveillance...”)

The UN has stressed that violence against women is “an obstacle to gender equity and a threat of great magnitude to the social and economic development of nations.” (“Progress in the Eradication...”) A presentation by

⁵Panama receives large numbers of “medical tourists,” people who travel to Panama from abroad looking for cheaper healthcare. These medical tourists fuel the economy. Also, more advanced healthcare will improve the health of the local Panamanian work force.

⁶Surveillance in this context denotes an observational study that monitors the prevalence of domestic violence in the country.

Claudia Piras at the Inter-American Development Bank's business seminar series in July 2006 about domestic violence in Latin America estimated that "women's wage losses from domestic violence alone represent between 1.6 and 2.0 percent of GDP." (Piras)

In the last few years, Panama has seen increased public awareness and activism against domestic violence and other health problems. Mercedes Brenes de Eleta, the current president of Fundamujer, a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) that offers legal assistance and education to women, made a presentation to the Martindale group in May 2006. Fundamujer organizes demonstrations and raises awareness about laws related to domestic violence. According to the 2005 Annual Report of Fundamujer, the organization helped to educate over 1,000 Panamanians about the problems of domestic violence in that year alone. It has also given legal and psychological assistance to help solve problems families might be having. This women's organization provides a necessary service to men, women, and children in the community and continues to decrease the impact and cost of domestic violence on the general population. ("Annual Report 2005")

Teresita Yániz de Arias, another woman whom I met during the Martindale trip to Panama, is a co-founder of Fundamujer and the director of SENAPAN (Secretaria Nacional para el Plan Alimentario Nutricional). This organization is in charge of the coordination and evaluation of nutrition programs and food safety in two districts. The program attends to some 4,000 families that receive \$35 per month to buy food on the condition that the families fulfill certain requirements. The requirements include having the children attend school and receive their necessary vaccinations, completing training on agricultural production, and women having current records on their sexual and reproductive health. (de Arias) During our meeting, Ms. Arias stressed the importance of women lobbying for change with regard to domestic violence and women's access to healthcare. She explained that a shift in cultural beliefs regarding the privacy of domestic violence is still necessary and that women are leading the movement to bring awareness of the issue.

Sustainable Development and Ecotourism

The use of natural resources by local residents takes a toll on the land, and development is often bad for the environment. The UN defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The UN has also taken many steps to promote sustainable development in Panama and other countries around the world. (United Nations Division...)

The relationship of people to natural resources is sometimes "gendered." Especially in rural areas, there are different social roles for men and women with regard to home and work; as a result their use of resources varies. According to Justine Sass of the Population Reference Bureau, men tend to have a more exploitive relationship with natural resources, using them for economic gain. Women tend to use natural resources more in the home to sustain a family (such as using water to clean clothes or gas to cook a meal). Women can therefore play a huge role in sustainable development. (Sass)

Slash-and-burn forestry⁷ has created a crisis in Panama, resulting in a new effort to set aside forests as protected land. (Fischer and Vasseur) The more knowledge women gain about the degradation of land, the better they will be able to stop it. (Fortmann and Rocheleau) Women are situated in pivotal positions, as will be discussed in the next section, to lead Panama into a more environmentally friendly future. It is vital that women be educated about the effects of deforestation and that they be involved in the development of plans to protect their communities. Wangari Maathai provides an inspirational example from Africa. Maathai's movement in Kenya has enabled women to plant more than 20 million trees in order to combat the effects of deforestation. In the same way, women in Panama can play a key role in helping to stop Panama's environmental crisis. (Maathai)

An example of the efforts and results of women's work in sustainable development is Mujeres Carrizaleñas Unidas. This is a

⁷Slash-and-burn forestry refers to the practice of clearing an entire forest and then burning the remaining brush.

Panamanian organization founded by women to guarantee the sustainability of food sources for their community through available natural resources and, in the long term, to obtain economic resources through the selling of their products. In just over 40 years, by cultivating their land these women have transformed their community from extreme poverty to one where food is abundant and can even be sold for economic gain. (Dubois and Castillo)

Panama and Central America have always benefited from tourists who want to experience the breathtaking wildlife and rainforests. However, the same tourism that benefits the economy does damage to the environment. As shown above, women are in a position to preserve natural resources and may be able to suggest the less environmentally harmful solution for ecotourism. An example is given by Regina Scheyvens, a senior lecturer at Massey University in New Zealand:

Land beside a forest that is not suited to livestock grazing or commercial agriculture might be identified by men as ideal land to lease for a tourist lodge development even though it is highly valued by women who collect broom grass and pottery clay at the site. They may make a reasonable income from the sale of products manufactured from these resources, and this needs to be weighed up against the likely revenue from a tourist lodge.... (p. 236)

Beatriz Schmitt, the Executive Director of Fundacion Avifauna Roberto Eisenmann, an NGO that she helped found, provides an inspiring example of how to provide sustainable solutions for the generating of income. This new foundation, based in Gamboa, has been impressively successful in raising funds to preserve a world-renowned birding destination called "Pipeline Road." Beatriz's role includes directly involving the indigenous Embara tribe near Gamboa in the project by incorporating their expertise with the flora and fauna.

The Kuna present a compelling case study of women in micro-enterprise, for they have built a thriving trade in Panama for their traditional folk art products. Tourism allows Kuna women to support themselves and their families finan-

cially and to provide opportunities that might not have been there otherwise, particularly for their children's education in Panama City. Without the recognized craftsmanship and demand for the fabric piece called the "mola," the Kuna Indians would not have been able to continue to develop and thrive as an indigenous population in Panama. With the money generated from mola sales, Kuna have been able to preserve their culture by selling their own traditional arts to tourists from around the globe. Their folk art has appeared in various museums worldwide and provides an excellent example of both an innovative and eco-friendly way to sustain family units.

In a meeting I had with several Kuna women in May 2006, they described the opportunities they made for themselves by selling the mola, which included financing their children's education both on the islands and in the city. (I bought several beautiful mola purses before I left!)

Political Action

Representation of women in politics has been steadily increasing in Panama. The first female president, Mireya Moscoso, was elected in 1999 and helped guide the country through the time of the Panama Canal's reversion from the United States to Panama. However, women are still underrepresented, occupying only 20 percent of ministerial level positions and 9.9 percent in lower or single houses. ("Human Development Indicators 2003") When women are not represented in politics, real democratic and representative government cannot be achieved.

In 1997 a law was passed requiring that women comprise at least 30 percent of election candidates. (Díaz) The percentages of women in the unicameral legislature of Panama before and after the passing of the law were 8 and 17, respectively. Interestingly, in a 2004 survey of 18 Latin American countries concerning political attitudes toward women leaders, Panama ranked 13th, revealing that thirty-six percent of Panamanian respondents agreed with the statement "men are better leaders than women." (Htun) The researchers, however, could find no clear correlation between sexist attitudes and the

number of women leaders elected into office within the 18 Latin American countries involved in the study. The success of women in politics seems to depend more on their gaining leadership within political parties where they can be nurtured and groomed for success, or in a proportional representation electoral system where there is an incentive for parties to allocate seats to candidates representing a variety of social groups.

Despite their lack of representation, women have made many important inroads in humanitarian efforts and policy changes which are economically, socially, and politically critical. As a direct result of the women's movement in the 1970s, the government approved the creation of Day Nursery Centers to provide women with more support to enter the labor force. (Díaz) Women have also created NGOs that address issues from domestic violence to child malnutrition and have organized to protest murder rates, political campaigns (particularly in the case of Noriega), and discrimination.⁸ For example, in 1988, Alma Montenegro founded the first NGO to exclusively study the status of Panamanian women, the Center for the Development of Women. (Díaz) Women's work through these NGOs and also through demonstrations is vital. Poverty, discrimination, and violence must be dealt with. Every year, millions of dollars are spent through loans from the Inter-American Development Bank alone in order to combat poverty, discrimination, and violence.

One notable political demonstration achieved its goal. In 2006 *La Prensa*, a Panamanian newspaper, reported how a network of women organized a petition to the government ostracizing Liborio Garcia, seeking to remove him from his government position as national Ombudsman. (Pinilla) Garcia had allegedly participated in electoral events thought to have biased the votes. In addition, when information surfaced about an alleged domestic violence incident, Garcia said that it was "a private matter between my wife and myself, and we've resolved

it." ("2004 Domestic Violence...") Women instantly took to the streets in protest and formulated the aforementioned petition. (Abad and Sánchez) After the subsequent pressure, Rogelio Paredes, a deputy of the Partido Revolucionario Democrático political party, said that Garcia should step aside. Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos, the first lady, also made a statement in support of the women's petition, demonstrations, and efforts. ("2004 Domestic Violence...")

Conclusion

Panama ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981. This enactment increased awareness of discrimination against women at the national level and led to many policies that provided for more equal representation of women in political life. It also worked to combat violence and discrimination. Law No. 27 dealing with domestic violence and child abuse crimes was passed in 1995, and many attribute this directly to the influence of CEDAW. (Díaz) A number of other important laws were passed during the 1990s that, at least on paper, promote policy change with a gender equality resolve between men and women and, in schools, between boys and girls. Many of these policies, however, still have not been enforced and fully supported institutionally in the new millennium. (Díaz)

Women's substantial activist contributions are an undeniable part of the backbone of Panamanian society; so are the women who take on political responsibilities and who enter the workforce with college degrees behind them. But real equality is a long way from being achieved. Many ideas have to change first: that women should have equal pay, that women can be leaders in the business world, that women can embark on political careers, that women can enter the scientific realm, and that women can teach young children that violence and abuse of others are forbidden. Above all, Panama must continue to invest in women's education and support women in attaining careers comparable to their educational attainment. It is essential to provide women with the support and tools to continue to work for the betterment of Panama.

⁸Some of the more important NGOs founded by women include: Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas de Panama, Association for the Promotion of New Alternatives for Development, the Panamanian Red Cross, Fundamujer, and SENAPAN.

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