

**"EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE DEMOCRACIES
OF THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.
THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC"**

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The Dominican Republic is a Caribbean country, which shares the island of Hispaniola with the Republic of Haiti. It occupies 48,670 square kilometers and has a population of nearly 9.9 million people, of which 51.1% are women. 68% of women live in urban areas and 32% in rural areas.

Since the last century Dominican women have struggled long and hard to overcome the factors that determine the social, economic, cultural and political inequalities that affect them.

These struggles have been strengthened after the establishment of our democratic system and since then, several constitutions have been proclaimed, which have incorporated legal enhancements that favor the development and the equality of women.

A very significant contribution is stated in the new Constitution, whose Article 39 reads: "All persons are born free and equal before the law, they receive the equal protection and treatment from institutions, authorities and others, and enjoy the same rights, freedoms and opportunities without discrimination on the grounds of gender..." Later on it also states: "Women and men are equal before the law. Any action which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of the fundamental rights of women and men under equal conditions is prohibited. The necessary measures to ensure the eradication of inequalities and gender discrimination shall be promoted."

Other advances are expressed through procedural laws and the ratification of international agreements. For example, the feminization of the agrarian law, which grants equal rights to women in relation to land ownership and access to credit; the law that penalizes domestic violence and violence against women; and the Education Act which establishes the principle of educational equality between the sexes.

The recently enacted law on the 2010 – 2030 National Development Strategy of the Dominican Republic, states the commitment of the State for building a culture of equality and equity between men and women. Likewise, the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, among others.

Today there is a Ministry for Women's affairs, as the governing body on gender issues, and a

National Plan for Gender Equality and Equity 2007 - 2017, which has been designed by that Ministry in agreement with other state institutions, entities from civil society, women movements, congresswomen and women entities within the political parties.

Below we present the situation of women in the Dominican Republic in relation to the progress, achievements and challenges on the topics of gender equity and equality, on political and decision-making issues, on matters of health and security, and their economic integration.

PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND DECISION MAKING

The political participation of women is critical for the advancement of women's rights and struggles and for the consolidation of democracy, justice and peace among the peoples.

The advancements of Dominican women, in relation to decision-making and their participation in the power structures, have not taken place to the same extent as their contributions to development and democracy.

The statistics from the agency responsible for the elections in the country indicate that the percentage of women that are registered in the voter registration list is slightly higher than the men's and that their direct participation in the polls during the last two elections has kept the same pattern. Thus, women show interest in political affairs.

Despite the above and having a law on quotas, which establishes a 33% of women for congressional and municipal posts, those numbers have not yet been reached, even though it has allowed an increase in women's representation.

Within the current legislature, in the case of the Senate of the Republic, its enrollment only includes 9.4% of women, the House of Representatives only has 20.7%, and the percentage of women from around the country representing the Dominican Republic to the Central American Parliament total 20%.

At the municipal level, 8% are mayors and 92% are deputy mayors, the latter number being a product of the parties' choice of filling the quota required by law, thereby feminizing the offices

of deputy majors. Although this seems a great advancement, it still reflects the subordination of women to men. Councilwomen represent just over one third of the Municipal Assembly, and this post is the only one that reaches the minimum quota, which is due, among other things, to the fact that the legislation requires having two women for every five candidates for aldermen.

In the case of the Executive Branch, the posts are not elected and for the 21 ministries it has, there are only 3 women Ministers.

The difficulties that women face to overcome the current imbalances in political participation and decision-making, in our country they are related to the lack of resources and support to compete in elections, to the attitudes and behaviors of politicians who dismiss the inclusion of women in these spaces, and to the lack of understanding by women of the laws that favor their political participation.

In addition, the structures of political power, conditioned by a traditional culture of inequality, do not fully adhere to the laws and mechanisms that favor the participation of women and, therefore, do not include their interests nor incorporate the gender perspective.

Women have a membership in political parties equal to men, and most of them have over 10 years of political affiliation; however, in the parties' management positions men triple the number of women.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that within the general population, there is evidence of a positive evaluation regarding the inclusion and participation of women in the positions of power, their political capacity and the contributions they make.

In an opinion poll on Women and Politics, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Women, 88% of respondents agreed that women should participate in politics at the same level as men, and places great confidence in them to hold public office. We are facing major changes in people's perceptions in relation to the capacity and performance of women in this area.

On gender equity in the justice system, there has been great progress, perhaps also due to the public recognition that women are more responsible, honest and attached to the rigor of the law. In 2010 the justice system integrated, almost on an equal basis, men and women to judicial

positions of relevance.

HEALTH AND SECURITY

Present situations, related to the health and safety of women in the Dominican Republic, have become risks that threaten the autonomy, the physical empowerment and the life of our women.

Our country has a maternal mortality rate of 159 per 100,000 live births, although, according to another method of calculation, it has fallen to 109.4 per 100,000 live births.

The main causes of mortality are associated to pregnancy toxemia and post-partum complications, factors that remain of high concern for women, especially because it is understood that they are preventable or that they can be resolved with higher quality of care and monitoring to ensure medical treatments after the delivery.

Dominican teenage girls' pregnancy is another cause for concern. It is among the five highest rates in the Americas. 92 teenage girls for every thousand females become pregnant between the ages of 15 and 19 years of age. This situation reproduces the cycle of poverty, increases the dropout rate, reduces employment opportunities and these teenagers are more likely to fail in their relationship with their partner.

It is of great concern that, while in the other age groups over the 20 year mark the maternity rates decrease, in the teenage groups the rates continue to rise.

Another indicator to consider, which also conveys the autonomy and empowerment of women, is related to their sexual and reproductive rights. Planning the number of children they wish to have, allows them to manage their lives in the most appropriate and healthy manner.

In the Dominican Republic there has been a progressive empowerment of women regarding the number of children they wish to have and their ability to make decisions on this issue. The overall fertility rate in 1991 was 3.3. This rate has been declining and in 2007 it was 2.4, 2.3 in urban areas and 2.8 in rural areas.

The elements that explain this decrease, is the prevalence of contraceptives, which is 70%, and the information and sexual and reproductive education programs. In addition, other factors are the desire to study, to get employed and to provide a better quality of life to their children.

Domestic violence and violence against women are other issues related to human rights, which considerably challenge women. Their causes are multiple, but in our country the main one remains our patriarchal culture.

The consequences include a decline in their productivity, their health, a decrease in their self-esteem and security, and a lag in their participation in the public arena. This is a factor in the feminization of the HIV / AIDS issue.

According to the demographic and health survey, 20% of all women from age 15 have suffered some form of gender-based violence and the highest occurrence is among young women (between 20 and 39 years of age).

Femicides (murder of women), the most extreme expression of violence against women, places our country as one of those with the highest occurrence rate. Last year 234 femicides were committed, and in the last ten years the average number of murders was 197 per year.

However, the percentage of women reporting acts of violence against them is very low, which exposes them to situations of extreme stress and to traumatic experiences, which in turn increase their vulnerability.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The Dominican Republic is far from reaching its goal in terms of gender equity and equality in the economic field. Unemployment among women (21.5%) is twice that of men (10.1%) for 2011; payment for work of equal value is 30% less than that for men; and the size of a business tends to be smaller than any property owned by a man.

The Micro, Small and Medium size enterprises (MIPYMEs for their acronym in Spanish)

represent important allies for women and especially for those with lower income, as another way to generate income. By the year 2000, ownership of micro-enterprises fell mostly on women: 51.2% were the exclusive property of women and 8.8% were jointly owned.

Women have not yet been able to share their family responsibilities with their partners and, therefore, many of them keep their businesses around or inside their homes to help reconcile their work life with their family life. These responsibilities increase for single women who are heads of households, who are estimated to be 40% of all households, of which 52% are poor. It is for these reasons, that it is vital for them to have close access to financial services.

Nowadays, 36% of the total population of the Dominican Republic has access to formal financial services, while in the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), this rate rises to 96%.

The largest numbers of women-owned micro-enterprises are located inside the country, particularly in the rural areas, and they have contributed to the diversification of household incomes and to the vitality of the micro-economies of the communities in those areas.

Dominican non-profit associations such as the Dominican Women in Development (MUDE), have been working for decades to satisfy these needs and to promote their development. However, the State should strengthen the partnerships with these institutions to try to increase and broaden their impact on these populations.

The women's earnings translate into a contribution to food security and education for their children and for their personal development, making it vital to invest in women and to direct them to take greater control over their economic resources, and, therefore, to gain more auto-esteem and appreciation within the family units.

CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing we can point out some conclusions and suggestions:

The democratic system of our country has been a facilitator of progress in terms of gender equality and the advancement of women.

The Summits and international conferences, as well as the agreements that have been reached, have contributed to the advances on these issues in our country.

Political parties are key scenarios where democracy is expressed; therefore, producing internal changes that allow the equal participation of women in positions of power and decision-making allows them to further develop.

The State is the ideal sector to lead processes oriented to deconstruct cultural patterns that maintain inequalities to the detriment of women, and to design and develop public policies with a gender perspective.

Civil society and women's movements should continue with their positioning, visibility, inputs and monitoring in relation to gender inequities and inequalities.

Women should continue their awareness and training processes with a view to achieving their political, social and economic autonomy and empowerment.

We dream of a Dominican Republic where human rights are fully implemented and where there is no gender inequality. Then, we shall have a country with more development, justice and peace.