

Translated from Spanish.

## Current situation of women in Uruguay

### Progress since Beijing

Women make up 51.6 per cent of the population; they have a life expectancy at birth of 76.15 years and the proportion of women in the elderly population is increasing, with the result that, in the 13 per cent of the population aged 65 and over, the number of women aged 85 and over is twice that of men.

The literacy rate is 96.2 per cent for women and 95.3 per cent for men, and women currently account for 68.2 per cent of university students.

Women make up 42.4 per cent of the economically active population; in other words, 45.5 per cent of Uruguayan women are on the labour market, which they enter with a high level of education (three out of four women have post-secondary education). However, only one out of four managers is a woman, and the gender wage gap and barriers to women's promotion persist, particularly in the private sector.

Politics is another area where the integration of women is proving very slow: in the 12 ministries that exist at present, only one of 12 Ministers, one under-secretary, three directors-general and five assistant directors-general are women. There are also only seven women deputies out of 99 and two women senators out of 30.

In education, there has been a major improvement since the previous Administration; women currently fill seven of the 12 Government posts in this area. There has also been a significant increase in the number of women in departmental governments, and there are 123 women town councillors or alternates in the country. It should be noted that these are honorary positions.

There has been no significant increase in the number of women in the leadership of trade unions; only one of the 15 members of the Secretariat of the largest trade union federation (Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores/ Convención Nacional de Trabajadores (PIT-CNT)) is a woman. However, the number of women delegates to trade union congresses has increased (24.66 per cent of delegates to the latest congress, held in November 1996).

A similar situation exists in the country's political parties: although women's committees have been established in all of them, women continue to be under-represented in government bodies. One woman recently took office at the highest level of the Partido Nacional.

A national women's committee has been established in the Partido Colorado (the ruling party) for the specific purpose of implementing programmes of support and training for women candidates. It should be noted that members of this committee are appointed by women themselves in the various sectors, a fact which gives these leaders legitimacy.

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Various proposals for a quota system have been rejected.

Patriarchal cultural factors continue to have a major influence in a society that is resistant to change, so that change is very slow in coming. Unfortunately, it is in education at all levels, that the mainstreaming of a gender perspective has been least successful.

In Uruguay, as in the rest of the region, both the Sixth Regional Conference, with its Regional Programme of Action for the Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Fourth World Conference on Women, with its Platform for Action, gave rise to a social movement which has spread throughout the country as a result both of women's mobilization and of Government action at the local and national levels.

Very briefly, the following positive developments took place in civil society during 1996:

1. Establishment of the Housewives and Consumer Protection League, which currently has over 500 members in the capital city, drawn from all socio-economic backgrounds and occupational groups, and is expanding through branches throughout the country. Its membership is genuinely pluralist and it works continually, through forums, discussions, courses, the media and effective interaction with other women's organizations, to train women, particularly, housewives, to defend their rights and fully to exercise their rights as citizens. Its activities even include the promotion of a housewives' retirement bill, and it has joined various international networks.

2. Establishment of the National Association of Rural Women's Groups, made up of over 700 women members from various groups which have succeeded in increasing their output and also their national visibility by, *inter alia*, participating in the country's biggest rural exposition this year and from other rural women's groups such as the Uruguayan Network of Rural Women's Groups and the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives.

3. Expansion throughout Ecuador, in 1995, of the Uruguayan Women Politicians' Network, which formerly existed only in the capital city and which is made up of women members of the political parties represented in Parliament. Pursuant to Strategic objective IV.2 of the Regional Programme of Action for the Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, 1995-2001, the Network has begun to promote positive measures to create the necessary conditions for women's equitable participation and political representation in trade unions, political parties and other formal and informal areas of civil society, holding training workshops to empower future women candidates. Beneficiaries participate actively in the design and preparation of the inputs which they receive, focusing especially on the exercise of autonomy as one element of empowerment. Particularly in the capital city, they study the bills being discussed in Parliament and have in turn submitted several bills to political parties. They also conducted an opinion poll on women's political participation.

4. Establishment in May 1996, upon completion of the activities of the Uruguay Initiative Group, of a National Committee to Follow-up the Beijing Commitments.

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This committee has coordinated its activities with various pre-existing non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including local branches of the Women Politicians' Network, and is working actively throughout Uruguay, by means of meetings, seminars and courses, to provide training with a gender perspective, promote women's rights as citizens and monitor and follow up the Government's fulfilment of the commitments made in Cairo and Beijing through, inter alia, recommendations to NGOs.

#### Government action

With respect to Government action, it is important to mention the establishment of six committees, each of which includes representatives of civil society:

1. Committee for proposals relating to, and follow-up of, the commitments made in Beijing on 12 September 1995. The Committee has a Government counterpart, which functions through the National Institute for the Family and Women and is made up of representatives of the Ministries of the Economy, Labour and Social Security, Public Health, Housing, Regional Planning and the Environment, and Education and Culture; it also has 10 working committees made up of representatives of civil society.

2. Women's Rights Committee, established on 10 November 1996, which is chaired by the Minister for Education and Culture and made up of representatives of the National Institute for the Family and Women, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the National Minors' Institute (INAMC), legislators, feminists, lawyers and sociologists. It is organizing a major national survey of Uruguayan women to ascertain their views on the situation of women's rights throughout the country. It is also developing gender perspective modules for courses taught at the school for civil servants of the National Civil Service Office (ONSC) in the Office of the President of the Republic. It plans to review legislation specifically concerning women.

3. Honorary Committee on Rural Women, established on 11 December 1996 under the Ministry of Livestock, Agriculture and Fisheries and made up of representatives of two Government Ministries, the National Institute for the Family and Women and four women's NGOs.

4. Honorary Advisory Committee on Sexual and Reproductive Health, made up of professors, representatives of the Ministry of Public Health (Sexual and Reproductive Health Programme) and the National Institute for the Family and Women.

5. Tripartite Committee for Equality of Treatment and Opportunity, established on 7 March 1997 and made up of representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the National Institute for the Family and Women, two business associations and representatives of working women (PIT-CNT). It is organizing training courses with a gender perspective for Ministry of Labour and Social Security inspectors, focusing particularly on the implementation of Act No. 16,045 (Equality of Opportunity and Treatment Act).

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6. Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, established on 3 March 1998 and made up of the Minister of the Interior, who chairs it, the Minister for Education and Culture, the Minister for Public Health, the National Institute for the Family and Women, the National Crime Prevention Office, the (female) Chief of the Specialized Police Station for the Protection of Women, the women's health and domestic violence sections of the Ministry of Public Health and three NGOs. It is responsible for drafting the national plan for the prevention, detection and handling of domestic violence and for the coordination of activities between the Government and civil society. In 1998, it concentrated almost exclusively on the drafting of a comprehensive bill for the prevention and punishment of domestic violence, which is already before Parliament and which, if adopted without major amendments, will be the most up-to-date and comprehensive legislation of its kind in the region.

In addition, a National Crime Prevention Office was established within the Ministry of the Interior. It is headed by a woman and has a special section dealing with domestic violence, permitting coordinated action between the National Institute for the Family and Women and the national police. In addition, seven specialized police stations for the protection of women and two offices of women's affairs have been established in the country's interior and there are programmes for the prevention of domestic violence and for assisting victims of such violence.

In the legislative area, there have been three notable developments:

1. Domestic violence was criminalized in 1995;
2. The Convention of Belém do Pará was ratified and incorporated into domestic law on 5 January 1996;
3. Regulations for the enforcement of Act No. 16,045 (Equality of Treatment and Opportunity Act) were adopted on 5 February 1997. The Act had been in force since 2 June 1989 but was not being applied. It includes the offence of sexual harassment, a fact which gave rise to extensive national debate and media coverage of the provisions of the Act.

In early 1997, a women's health section was established in the planning department of the Ministry of Public Health, in order to provide special assistance to women more efficiently and to reaffirm women's full right to health and to comprehensive health care.

In 1996, in cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), a sexual and reproductive health programme with a subprogramme on elective motherhood and fatherhood was implemented, based on research carried out by the Honorary Advisory Committee on Sexual and Reproductive Health and on community action by outreach workers who go from house to house in the poorest areas, providing information and basic advice to women living there. A domestic violence programme has been in operation since 1996 and, lastly, in 1998, a Committee on Women and the Family was established pursuant to directives issued by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

Educational reforms are under way, including:

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(a) Full-time operation of schools in the poorest areas of the capital city (12 in all);

(b) Lowering the age of admission to (compulsory) preschool to 4 years. This will be further lowered to 3 years in 1999.

Both of these measures will result in children spending more time in a protected school environment (the school day will be extended to eight hours) and will considerably improve their level of education. This will also benefit mothers, particularly those working outside the home, since their household responsibilities will be lightened, and they will have the comfort of being able to leave their children in a safe place with all services.

Despite its limited resources, the National Institute for the Family and Women has introduced a policy of direct relations with NGOs; it tries to support and publicize their activities and has signed agreements with some of them, including one to keep open the only shelter for women victims of domestic violence.

Meetings, workshops and seminars on equality of treatment and opportunity, self-esteem, gender, family and domestic violence have been held with rural women's groups and with women's groups in the country's interior and in the capital city.

However, it is the information centres project that does the most to help and train women, by providing them with accurate, selected information, to assert themselves and to take decisions within the family on the basis of that information.

Through agreements with municipal governments and, shortly, with the Ministry of Public Health, information centres for women and the family have been established in most departmental capitals. These centres distribute leaflets, take calls, disseminate information and provide referrals, depending on the problems raised. They act as a clearinghouse, particularly for information on community resources, governmental and otherwise, and provide information on the rights of women and their families in order to help women take decisions, become empowered and improve their family's quality of life by taking advantage of all the resources available to them.

The centres also coordinate many group activities, such as meetings and workshops.

At the departmental level, the Women's Committee of the Montevideo municipal government was established in 1991 and has continued and expanded its activities in the following areas:

(a) Comprehensive health care for women through municipal polyclinics;

(b) Comprehensive health care for adolescents;

(c) A women's centre, which offers specialized legal services for women at four offices and provides a forum for women's meetings and discussions;

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- (d) A telephone hotline for women victims of domestic violence;
- (e) Training in citizenship.

The Committee has 18 local branches, in which political organizations, local committees and neighbourhood councils have been established. Members of the neighbourhood councils are elected by residents. Women make up 38 per cent of the membership of neighbourhood councils and 35 per cent of that of local committees.

This process has facilitated women's participation in discussions and decision-making at the neighbourhood level, but only on finding solutions to everyday social problems. However, it can be a very good first opportunity for gaining practical experience which should not be underestimated.

In September 1996, INAME launched a teenage pregnancy care project which, by coordinating activities with governmental and non-governmental organizations, established an entire network of polyclinics, daytime adolescent care centres, crisis care services and shelters providing social services and health care with special emphasis on teenage pregnancy.

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