



Empowerment of Women in Democracies of Developing Countries:
The Experience of the Dominican Republic

Rosa Rita Álvarez



GFDD | FUNGLODE

*Empowerment of Women in Democracies of Developing Countries:
The Experience of the Dominican Republic*

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Presentation held at the parallel event called by the GFDD on March 6, 2012, in collaboration with the United Nations, the Office of the President of the sixty-sixth session of the UN General Assembly and the Dominican Mission to the United Nations.

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FOREWORD

The Global Foundation for Democracy and Development (GFDD), in the United States of America, and Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo (FUNGLODE), headquartered in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, are dedicated to promoting research and awareness in areas crucial to the democratic, social and economic sustainable development of the Dominican Republic and the world. The two think tanks organize meetings and educational programs as well as generate studies and publications that contribute to the development of new perspectives, searching for innovative solutions and creating transformative initiatives.

GFDD and FUNGLODE are honored to present the publication series RESEARCH AND IDEAS. The series includes research papers, articles, speeches and keynote addresses that discuss critical issues of the contemporary world from national, regional and global points of view.

These selected works present scrupulous analysis, introduce innovative ideas and transmit inspiration. We hope they will contribute to a better understanding of the world, empowering us to act in a more informed, efficient and harmonious way.

Natasha Despotovic
Executive Director, GFDD

PREFACE

Gender equality is a matter of concern that affects not only women, but greater society at large. We believe that the development potential of nations, communities and families is contingent upon the ability of women to fully exercise their equal rights alongside men. As part of our commitment to promote the advancement of women, on March 6, 2012, Global Foundation for Democracy and Development (GFDD), partnered with the United Nations Office of the President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly and the Mission of the Dominican Republic to the United Nations to convene the side event “Women Empowerment in Developing Country Democracies.”

The discourse that we are presenting to you by Rosa Rita Álvarez, Executive Director of the NGO Mujeres en Desarrollo, MUDE (Women in Development) is an outcome of this discussion forum, which sought to assess gains and ongoing struggles related to the achievement of gender equality in all spheres.

GFDD, along with its sister organization in the Dominican Republic, Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo (FUNGLODE), assume as part of their mission to raise awareness and promote national and international research, as well as the improvement of debate in order to address the most pressing needs of the Dominican Republic in social and economic development.

This concise, compelling discourse provides an overview of social, economic, cultural and political inequalities facing women in the Dominican Republic. Álvarez refers to international agreements and national policy that have stimulated the integration and equal participation of women in Dominican society. She cites advances in terms of political participation, but insists that more remains to be done. Álvarez also calls attention to the need for continued progress in the areas of health and security and economic empowerment.

We hope that this publication will serve to stimulate dialogue around issues pertaining to gender equality and women's empowerment. For when women are able to realize their development potential, society as a whole benefits.

Asunción Sanz

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Margaret Hayward

Communications and Outreach Manager
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INTRODUCTION

The Dominican Republic is a Caribbean country that 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 percent are women; 68 percent live in urban areas and 32 percent 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 were strengthened after the establishment of our democratic system. Since then, several constitutions have been proclaimed that incorporated legal enhancements favoring gender equity and the advancement of women.

A very significant contribution is stated in the new constitution in which 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...” It further 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 educational equality among the sexes.

The recently enacted law regarding the 2010 – 2030 National Development Strategy of the Dominican Republic articulates the state’s commitment to building a culture of equality and equity among 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 other conventions, confirms the state's pledge to improve the lives of women.

Today there is a Ministry of Women's Affairs that serves as the governing body on gender issues, and a National Plan for Gender Equality and Equity 2007 - 2017, designed by congresswomen and women in political parties.

This discourse seeks to present the situation of women in the Dominican Republic in terms of progress, achievements, and challenges in relation to gender equity and equality, political and decision-making issues, matters of health and security, and economic integration.

PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AND DECISION MAKING

Women's participation in the political process is critical for the advancement of women's rights and struggles to consolidate democracy, justice, and peace.

The advancement of Dominican women regarding decision making and their participation in the power structures has not advanced to the same extent as has their contribution to development and democracy.

The statistics from the agency responsible for the elections in the country indicate that the percentage of registered female voters is slightly higher than that of men, 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 women's interest in political affairs and the existence of a law on quotas, which establishes a 33 percent quota for women with respect to congressional and municipal posts, these numbers have not yet been reached, notwithstanding an increase in women's representation.

In the case of the Senate of the Republic, women represent only 9.4 percent. In the House of Representatives, women represent only 20.7 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of women from the Dominican Republic to the Central American Parliament totals 20 percent.

At the municipal level, eighth percent of women are mayors and 92 percent are deputy mayors. The latter figure is a product of the parties' decision to fill the quota required by law, thereby feminizing the offices of deputy mayors. Although this appears to be a great advancement, it still reflects the subordination of women to men. Councilwomen represent just over one third of the Municipal Assembly. This post is the only one that achieves the minimum quota, which is due—among other things—to the fact that legislation requires there be two women for every five candidates for aldermen.

In the case of the executive branch, the posts are not elected. Of the 21 ministries that comprise the branch, there are only three female ministers.

The difficulties that women face in overcoming the current imbalances in political participation and decision making in the Dominican Republic are largely related to: absence of resources and support to compete in elections; attitudes and behaviors of politicians who dismiss the inclusion of women in these spaces; and women's lack of understanding of the laws that favor their political participation.

Furthermore, the structure of political power, which is conditioned by a traditional culture of inequality, does not fully adhere to the laws and mechanisms that favor the participation of women and, therefore, does not include their interests nor incorporates a gender perspective.

Women have membership in political parties equal to men, and many possess more than ten years of political affiliation. However, with regard to management positions within the parties, the number of men triples the number of women.

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

In an opinion poll on women and politics sponsored by the Ministry of Women, 88 percent of respondents agreed that women should participate in politics at the same level as men, and placed great confidence in them to hold public office. This represents a major change in people's perceptions of women's ability and performance in the political arena.

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

HEALTH AND SECURITY

Regarding the health and security of women in the Dominican Republic, there are still risks that threaten the autonomy, physical empowerment, and lives of women.

The country has a maternal mortality rate of 159 per 100,000 live births. Although according to other statistics, it has fallen to 109.4 per 100,000 live births.

The main causes of mortality are associated with 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 treatment after delivery.

Teenage pregnancy is another cause for concern. The rate of teenage pregnancy in the Dominican Republic is among the five highest in the Americas. Ninety-two teenage girls for every 1,000 females become pregnant between the ages of 15 and 19. This situation perpetuates cycles of poverty, increases school dropout rates, and reduces employment opportunities. Pregnant teenagers are also more likely to fail in their relationships with partners.

It is of great concern that, while maternity rates for women over the age of 20 are in decline, the rate of pregnancy among teenagers continues to rise.

Other factors to consider that are also indicative of the autonomy and empowerment of women are sexual and reproductive rights. Planning the number of children they wish to have allows women to manage their lives in the manner that is most appropriate and healthy for them.

In the Dominican Republic, there has been progressive empowerment among 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 since been declining. In 2007 it was 2.4/ 2.3 in urban areas and 2.8 in rural areas.

The explanations for this decrease include the increased prevalence of contraceptive use which is now at 70 percent, and greater access to information and programs on sexual and reproductive education. Desires to study, become employed, and provide a better quality of life to children are also contributing factors.

Domestic violence and violence against women and other rights abuse issues considerably challenge women. The origins are multiple, but in the Dominican Republic patriarchal culture is the predominant cause.

The consequences of domestic abuse and violence against women include a decline in productivity, health, self-esteem, security and participation in the public arena. Violence against women is also correlated with the feminization of HIV/AIDS.

According to demographic and health surveys, 20 percent of all women over age 15 have suffered some form of gender-based violence, with the highest occurrence among young women between 20 and 39 years of age.

The Dominican Republic has one of the highest rates of femicide, the most extreme act of violence against women. Last year, 234 femicides were committed and in the last ten years the average number of femicides was 197 per year.

However, the percentage of women reporting acts of violence against them is very low, exposing them to situations of extreme stress and trauma, which in turn increases their vulnerability.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The Dominican Republic is far from reaching the goal of gender equity and equality in the labor market. In 2011, unemployment among women (21.5 percent) was twice that of men (10.1 percent). Payment for work of equal value is 30 percent less for women and female entrepreneurs tend to run smaller businesses.

Micro, small, and medium-size enterprises represent an important opportunity for women—especially for those with lower incomes—to generate additional earnings. By the year 2000, micro enterprises were principally owned by women; 51.2 percent of all micro enterprises were the exclusive property of women and 8.8 percent were jointly owned.

Women have not yet been able to share their family responsibilities with their partners; 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 heads of households who are estimated to represent 40 percent of all households, of which 52 percent are poor. It is for these reasons that it is critical for these women to have close access to financial services.

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

The largest numbers of women-owned micro-enterprises are located outside of the capital city, particularly in rural areas. Women have contributed greatly to the diversification of household incomes and to the vitality of the micro-economies of the communities in those areas.

Dominican non-profit organizations such as the Dominican Women in Development (MUDE) have been working for decades to satisfy these needs and to promote the advancement of women. It is important that the state strengthen partnerships with these institutions to increase and broaden their impact.

Women's earnings are generally allocated towards food security, education for their children, and personal development. With this said, it is vital to invest in women and to direct them in taking greater control over their economic resources, which will lead to greater self-esteem and appreciation within family units.

CONCLUSIONS

We would like to put forth the following conclusions and suggestions:

- The democratic system of the Dominican Republic 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 advancement of these issues in the Dominican Republic.
- Political parties are key scenarios where democracy is expressed. Therefore, producing internal changes that allow for equal participation of women in positions of power and decision making will allow for their continual development.
- The state is the ideal sector to design and develop public policies with a gender perspective, and to lead processes aimed at destroying cultural patterns that sustain inequalities to the detriment of women.
- 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 education and training in order to achieve their political, social, and economic autonomy and empowerment.

We dream of a Dominican Republic in which human rights are fully implemented and there is no gender inequality. Only then shall we have a country with greater development, justice, and peace.



Rosa Rita Álvarez

Rosa Rita Álvarez has a degree in psychology, with a specialization in marital and sex therapy. She has dedicated a large portion of her professional career to working with women.

During the earlier part of her professional life she focused largely on the area of health, in particular on issues related to sexuality, reproductive health and relationships. Her involvement with Dominican society reached new heights in 1991 when she was chosen to direct the non-governmental organization *Mujeres en Desarrollo Dominicana, Inc. – MUDE* (Dominican Women in Development, Inc.), an institution dedicated to the advancement of women with limited resources.

Under the leadership of Ms. Álvarez, MUDE has, to date, impacted the lives of over 80,000 people including more than 20,000 women and members of more than 300 associations in 18 provinces spread throughout the country.

She has participated in the revision and modification of laws that benefit Dominican women, put in place quotas for elected officials and continues to push for the modification of judicial orders that impede gender equality.

Internationally, Ms. Alvarez is part of the Follow-up Council on the agreements arrived at during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and was part of the International Commission for the Strategic Development of the Dominican Republic, 2010-2020, created by executive power.

Likewise, she has had a very active volunteer career, forming part of the membership of various institutions and commissions, both national and international, including serving as President of the NGO Alliance Consortium and sitting on the Board of Directors of Administradora de Subsidios Sociales (ADDES) (Administration of Social Subsidies) (2005), in addition to having held positions and participated in over 25 other public and private organizations.

Ms. Álvarez has been recognized by numerous entities for her work and contribution to the country including having been selected to receive a Merit Award from the Presidency (March 2005) and a Medal of Outstanding Achievement from *Círculo Supremo de Plata Jaycees* (1996) among others.

GFDD

GFDD is a non-profit, non-partisan, organization dedicated to the advancement of global collaboration and exchange relevant to Dominican professionals, general audiences and institutions in the homeland and abroad by implementing projects that conduct research, enhance public understanding, design public policies, devise strategies, and offer capacity building in areas crucial to social, economic, democratic and cultural sustainable development.

GFDD promotes a better understanding and appreciation of the Dominican culture, values and heritage, as well as its richness and diversity, in the Dominican Republic, United States and worldwide.

GFDD creates, facilitates, and implements wider scope international human development projects, building on its own experience, expertise and strong national and international networks.



FUNGLODE

FUNGLODE is a private, nonprofit, pluralistic think tank dedicated to high-level research, academic excellence and creativity. The institution works to devise public policy designed to strengthen democracy, respect for human rights, sustainable development, creativity and modernization of the Dominican Republic.

FUNGLODE formulates policy and strategic plans of action aimed at presenting interdisciplinary solutions to national problems for the benefit of Dominican society. The Foundation seeks to be a critical nucleus of Dominican society via the offering of world-class academic programs and the promotion of interchange with universities and research institutions of national and international prestige. FUNGLODE is also committed to fostering artistic and cultural initiatives with national and international scopes.



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