

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND THEIR AGENCY IN  
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:

*A Case Study of Women's Human Rights on the  
Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast*

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MAESTRÍA EN DERECHOS HUMANOS Y EDUCACIÓN PARA LA PAZ

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## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to discover whether or not women are regarded as agents towards human development in under-developed regions such as the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. The study is based on academic and empirical research on international theory and strategy on development, the empowerment of women and women's agency towards human development. Furthermore, the analysis is exemplified with findings during qualitative fieldwork in the region's largest city, Bluefields, and through the analysis of UNDP's 2005 Human Development Report for Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast from a gender perspective.

The Autonomous Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua suffers from significant poverty and low human development rates in comparison to the rest of the country. Although there are great variations between rural and urban communities in the area, the majority of the Caribbean population live in marginalized conditions. Although the majority of households in urban areas is headed by women due to men's labour emigration, these women still belong to a vulnerable group in society due to gender based discrimination in various forms. Similarly, these women of diverse ethnical background live in an autonomous region ignored and discriminated by the central government in one of the western hemisphere's poorest countries. The load of responsibilities in addition to the common problems women suffer from belonging to the female gender are thus affecting the women in this region severely.

In accordance with international development theory and experience, gender equity and the empowerment of women play important parts in the increase of human development in poor countries. This paper questions the lack of policy and practice to include and empower women in order for them to become agents in the combat against poverty and the increase in human development.

## **Let's Light Another Candle**

For the fourteen women, and the fourteen x fourteen millions more

...Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle  
For old women, rejected wives, and all women  
Powerless and silenced,  
Whose children have forgotten the ones who gave them birth  
Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle,  
For the childless wives, violated women and all women scorned  
Whose brothers have forgotten the same mothers they mourned  
Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle  
For women mutilated by parents, battered by partners,  
All women killed by laws of custom,  
Whose families hold sacrosanct such "cultural practice"  
Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle  
For "comfort women", "ethnically polluted" women,  
All women brutalized by rape and the sanctions of war  
Whose states have abandoned them; displaced, seeking refuge  
Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle  
For girl children unmourned in death, oppressed in life  
All girls unborn to life,  
Whose people place no honour in girls  
Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle  
Also for warrior women working for women,  
All females, all feminists, all sisters in spirit,  
Let's light a candle

Let's light another candle.

*By Abena P. A. Busia, Accra – Ghana, 1995*

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## ACCRONYMS AND ABBRIVIATIONS

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women

CEDEHCA: Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Costa Atlántica

CEIMM: Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica

FADCANIC: Fundación para la Autonomía y el Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua

IDH: From Spanish: Informe de Desarrollo Humano 2005. Las regiones autónomas de la Costa Caribe. ¿Nicaragua asume su diversidad? (Human Development Report for the Caribbean Coast, 2005)

GDI: Gender-related development index

MDGs: Millennium Development Goals

NGO(s): Non governmental organisation(s)

RAAN: North Atlantic Autonomous Region

RAAS: South Atlantic Autonomous Region

UN: United Nations

UNDP: United Nations Development Program

UNIFEM: United Nations Development Fund for Women

URACCAN: Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense

## **EXPLANATORY NOTE ON GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS**

The Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast is currently referred to as the following:

- a) Atlantic Autonomous Region (North Atlantic Autonomous Region – RAAN and South Atlantic Autonomous Region – RAAS)
- b) Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua
- c) Nicaraguan Atlantic Coast
- d) Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua
- e) Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast

This paper will refer to the region as the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, or merely ‘the Coast’ in general, and to the North Region/RAAN and the South Region/RAAS when distinguishing between the two regions.

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been clearly defined on a global level that gender equity and the empowerment of women are implicitly connected to the increase of human development in poor countries. As a red line throughout this paper, the link between women and human development is based on the United Nations (UN) theories and strategies on human development and international human rights law with focus on, though not restricted to, the Convention on the Elimination on all forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>1</sup> (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action<sup>2</sup>.

Taking into account the progress of the mere concept of human development and the policies connected to the term during the past decades, as well as Nicaragua's own recognition of the necessity to create policies and practices to improve the human development level in the country, the present paper aims to analyse why women's agency has not been recognised as essential to combat poverty and increase the human development index.

The investigation is first and foremost an academic approach, however clearly exemplified by the findings of qualitative field research in Bluefields, which is the principal city of the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS). In a national context, the economic situation of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast is grave. Beyond doubt, the Coast has been, and continues to be, excluded and impoverished to a greater extent than the rest of Nicaragua (IDH, 2005: xxx). The region is characterized by its rich ethnic diversity with identifiable cultures and languages, accompanied by the harsh reality of discrimination based on ethnicity and gender. The underemployment leading to labour emigration, poverty and violence in addition to the severe lack of social services are factors that reflect the low level of human development. Published in 2005, the Human

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<sup>1</sup> Convention adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by the UN General Assembly resolution 34/180 of 18 December 1979. Entry into force 3 September 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Fourth World Conference on Women. Adopted in Beijing September 1995 with monitoring conferences in 2000 and 2005 (Beijing +5 and Beijing +10).



Development Report for the Caribbean Coast (IDH)<sup>3</sup> shows that the index for the entire region is alarmingly low (IDH, 2005: xxii).

Various indicators indicate that women are not considered important agents towards human development. Amongst these indicators are:

- a) the absence of a clear gender policy on Nicaraguan national and regional levels;
- b) non-existent instruments in order to disaggregate data by gender and;
- c) the IDH's weak gender perspective in general and the lack of focus on women as essential agents to improve social problems in particular.

The report on the Nicaraguan national goals,<sup>4</sup> based on the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), fails to include measurements of gender equity and tactics on how to achieve it (Fonseca, n/d: 13). Similarly, in general terms, and based upon the field investigation in Bluefields, it is apparent that women experience a wide range of gender-based discrimination and as a result, their rights as human beings are being violated, and empowerment, and thus also women's agency in human development, is hindered.

The factors mentioned above constitute the main evidence that, in a national context, there is no regional tendency on government level or within the various human rights and development organizations of the Coast, to focus on women as significant agents to improve the status of human development in the region.

The paper is divided in five parts and commences with a chapter on the relevant conceptual framework. Then follows a description of the methodology employed for the investigation and a chapter to contextualise the topic. The main part of the paper focuses on the analysis of the research results, which lead to the coherent conclusions and recommendations in chapter five.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Informe de Desarrollo Humano 2005. Las regiones autónomas de la Costa Caribe. ¿Nicaragua asume la diversidad?' UNDP, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Fonseca, R. (ed.) (n/d) 'Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio y metas nacionales de Nicaragua'. Sistema de las Naciones Unidas, Nicaragua.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Are women regarded as agents towards human development in Bluefields?

## **MAIN OBJECTIVE**

Discover if women are regarded as agents towards human development in Bluefields.

## **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- a) Establish the importance of women's agency in human development in accordance to international human development strategy.
- b) Discover whether or not local decision makers and human rights organisations on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast regard women as agents towards human development in the region.
- c) Discover to what extent women's empowerment and agency towards human development might be impeded through human rights violations.
- d) Identify, based on human rights and development strategies, how women can act as agents towards human development in the region.

# **1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

International policy and theory on human development and the ‘feminisation of poverty’, as stated by UN divisions, such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), predominate the theoretical foundation of the paper, accompanied by theories of various authors, experts and non governmental organisations (NGOs).

The global MDGs and the coherent national goals of Nicaragua are taken into account as well as relevant key aspects of the Human Development Report for the Coast. It is vital to study the agency of women in human development according to experts and global tendencies with an inclusion of a brief description of gender theory.

The CEDAW and Beijing Platform for Action represent two of the strongest international instruments available in order to protect and promote women’s human rights. Thus both instruments are coherently analysed in the context of human rights violations against women in the domestic sphere and in regards to access to sexual and reproductive health services.

## **1.1 HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

UNDP (1990: 10) defines human development as “...a process of enlarging people’s choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect.” Furthermore, the Report stresses that the measurement of development cannot be limited to income terms – rather, the focus must be the people. Chen et al. (2005: 15) reaffirm this definition and amplify it by further concentrating on “human capabilities and on the choices or freedom of people.” Along with these relatively new conceptions of development, the traditional vision of poverty has changed. Although the economic dimension of poverty continues to predominate, it is

no longer sufficient to understand this complex social problem. The broad consensus on differentiating between economic poverty and human development is predominately centred in the theories of Amartya Sen.

Sen has broadened the discussion on poverty and development with an integral vision of human development during the past decades, and has remained one of the most prominent experts on the topic. He claims that development means to eliminate the principal sources of deprivation of liberty, such as poverty and tyranny, lack of economic opportunities and the deprivation of social systems. Individuals' wellbeing should be redefined as each person's capacity to choose the kind of life that s/he values and wishes to lead (Sen, 2000: 19). His definition of development is multidimensional and includes the entire economic, social and cultural prosperity to which people aspire. Environmental policies, social justice, democracy, education and cultural interchange are factors equally connected with sustainable development (Boutros-Ghali, 2002: 12). Within this framework, the right to live in a society with decent levels of human development is a basic human right.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that emerged from the Millennium Declaration, unanimously adopted by world leaders at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, are fundamental in regards to international development strategy. The eight goals and their specific targets respond to the main development challenges and constitute the global community's approach to reducing extreme poverty in its many dimensions by 2015 (UNDP, 2006: 27).

Nicaragua has responded to the task of achieving the national goals with its own monitoring report. The report indicates Nicaragua's clear focus on achieving goal two on universal education, which implicitly means education for boys *and* girls on equal terms. However, the report fails to inform on the progress made on meeting goal number three, which is 'Promote gender equity and empower women' (Fonseca, n/d: 13).

Since 1990, UNDP has published global Human Development Reports to address the individual countries' development index in comparison with other nations. The main areas of focus are the indexes concerning health, education and economical factors, each one with several components. Throughout the years, specific regional and country reports, such as the UNDP Human Development Report for the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, are also being published.

### ***1.1.1 The UNDP Human Development Report of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast***

The IDH is the first report on human development that concentrates on the autonomous regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast. This initial publication provides a historical and demographical perspective of the north and south regions, from a multicultural point of view with focus on ethnic diversity. The report describes the situation of human development in the context of the Coast and thus enriches previous definitions on human development by considering the specific social, cultural and political context, which is distinctly different to that of the rest of the country, partially because of the autonomous regime. At the same time, it underlines the significance of recognizing individual and collective rights and duties as means to development (IDH, 2005: xviii).

In concordance with other UNDP reports on human development, the IDH focuses on the three basic dimensions of development: Health, education and economics. The report indicates that close to all indicators' values are low in all geographical areas in both regions. In a regional context, Bluefields is amongst the municipalities with an improving education index, but the values for health (0,42) and economics (0,18) are distinctively lower than most other municipalities (IDH, 2005: 275).

Although drawing a discouraging image of the Coast, the IDH offers an important aspect in regard to the progress and development of the different municipalities of the two regions. As core of the approximation is the problematic: *¿Nicaragua asume su diversidad?*<sup>5</sup>. This subsequently puts into focus the autonomous regime, the interaction

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<sup>5</sup> Does Nicaragua assume its diversity?

and unity between the various ethnical groups of the region, the history, cultural heritage, identity and the particularities of the geographical reality (IDH, 2005: xvii).

### ***1.1.2 Human Development and Gender***

*“(...) the people’s economy in the developing countries and ways of assisting it cannot be discussed without stressing the role of women. (...) they play an especially important role in the development of the developing countries.”*

Boutros Boutros-Ghali

Feminist theory claims that the concept of gender is based upon the fact that the masculine and feminine gender are not biologically determined, but assigned roles that human beings have acquired during their upbringing appropriate to cultural norms and traditions created in societies based on patriarchal paradigms (Facio, 1999: 41). This social structure is slowly changing in parts of the world, but the socio-politic and economic processes tend to be lengthy in scarcely developed communities, and the patriarchal family remains the foundation of society. When the man persists in preserving his superiority within the family and the society, the patriarchy is nourished and the androcentricity is reaffirmed. Similarly, as the woman assumes her role according to traditional gender patterns without questioning this, she too reproduces the legitimacy of the patriarchal social structures (Facio, 1999: 27).

According to Naila Kabeer (2003: xiii),

*“(...) gender inequity intersects with economic deprivation to produce more intensified forms of poverty for women than men. Gender inequity is part and parcel of the process of causing and deepening poverty in a society and must therefore constitute part and parcel of measures to eradicate poverty.”*

During the last few decades the concept ‘feminisation of poverty’ has emerged. According to UNDP, an estimated 80 per cent of the world’s poor people are women, or as stated by the NGO CARE International: “Poverty has the face of a woman.” This grave reality is specially pronounced in African and Latin American countries. It is, then, beyond any doubt that the empowerment of women to become agents towards human

development is an indispensable process. As proclaimed by UNDP (2006: 21), gender inequity is a major obstacle to combat poverty and to fulfil the MDGs.

On the other hand, the failure to achieve gender equity has proven to have a negative impact on human development. A study realized in 99 countries, first in 1960 and then in 1990, clearly shows that countries with high gender inequity have experienced slow economic development, whilst those nations with more progressive gender policies based on equity have been able to improve their development rate (Kabeer, 2003: 40).

## **1.2 EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

*“Taking women’s empowerment seriously means putting gender equality at the centre of the human development equation.”*

UNDP

The term empowerment refers to the processes by which persons who previously have been denied the ability to make choices have acquired such abilities. For it to be a real choice, there must exist alternatives (Kabeer, 2003: 170).

As pointed out in the latest UNDP Annual Report (2006: 20):

“Empowering women is critical to advancing human development and achieving progress towards the MDGs. Gender equity is and will always remain an end in itself. (...) when women suffer abuse and discrimination, when they do not play an active role in shaping the world around them, everyone in society loses out.”

The same UNDP report claims that women’s empowerment assists in the increase of production with positive economic outcome, and that it contributes to improved health (UNDP, 2006: 20). An empowered woman will gain stronger abilities to educate and care for her children. It helps more to help women to help themselves, due to the fact that women are more likely to use their new abilities and capacities to help those around them. By ensuring women access to property, employment and equal wages, and by

granting them access to positions with political power and to education, governments can no longer ignore women and their necessities. Ending violence and discrimination against women in all its forms is an integral part in the process of empowering women in general (UNIFEM, 2003: 7).

### ***1.2.1 Women's Agency***

When women's role as agents in development is limited, it has negative effects in the lives of all people in society (Sen, 200: 235). In Sen's *Development as Freedom*, the importance of women's agency towards social change is emphasised. Instead of concentrating on the mere status of women's wellbeing, or lack of such, Sen (2000: 233) focuses on female active agency to achieve changes.

In order to consider people as agents, they must be given the chance to be heard and to participate in public life and to be involved in collective decisions (Agarwal et al., 2005: 5). Sen (1977) defines agency as the ability to achieve one's goals and interests in coherence with personal values. This ability does not only reflect individual wellbeing but also welfare on a social level (Agarwal et al., 2005: 19)<sup>6</sup>. Kabeer (2003: 171-172) states that agency compasses both observable action in the exercise of choice within decision-making, protest, bargaining and negotiation – as well as the motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their actions. That way it leads to the ability to act on individual choices.

Relating agency to empowerment thus implies actively exercising choice. Increased choices may provoke social changes, considering the increased likelihood of challenging power relations.

Closely related to agency is the capabilities approach that signifies a clear focus on persons' capabilities, a term that Ingrid Robeyns<sup>7</sup> (Agarwal et al., 2005: 65) explains as

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<sup>6</sup> Fabienne Peter in "Gender and the Foundations of Social Choice: The Role of Situated Agency".

<sup>7</sup> Ingrid Robeyns in 'Sen's Capabilities Approach and Gender Inequity: Selecting Relevant Capabilities'.



“people’s potential functionings”. In the same publication (38), Martha Nussbaum<sup>8</sup> claims that capabilities, complimented by the respect for human rights, constitute important goals to stimulate development. Amongst the central human capabilities outlined by Nussbaum are the ability to live the length of a ‘standard biological’ human life, being able to have good health – including reproductive health, and to possess physical integrity in terms of being able to be free from violence and to have a choice in matters of reproduction (Agarwal et al., 2005: 43).

Capabilities, as defined by Nussbaum, are closely linked to human rights, in the sense that by granting human beings political liberties, the chance of achieving economical well-being is substantially increased (Nussbaum, 2000: 97). On the other hand, through neglecting such basic human rights, the capability of expressing and understanding ones needs diminishes (Nussbaum, 2000: 96).

### **1.3 WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS**

The Beijing Platform for Action (Art. 1) states that “equity between women and men is a matter of human rights” and consequently that “a transformed partnership based on equity between women and men is a condition for people-centred sustainable development.”

As an underlying foundation of the universal human rights, women cannot be discriminated against on the basis of belonging to the feminine gender. In accordance with Article 1 of CEDAW,

“...discrimination against women’ shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equity of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

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<sup>8</sup> Martha C.Nussbaum in ‘Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice’.

Whilst women's basic human rights, such as the right to participate on equal terms in society, the right to be free from (domestic) violence and the right to sexual and reproductive health services are disrespected, women's empowerment is impeded and consequently they have limited possibilities to become agents towards human development.

### ***1.3.1 The Right to be Free from Violence***

*Acts or threats of violence, whether occurring within the home or in the community, or perpetrated or condoned by the State, instil fear and insecurity in women's lives and are obstacles to the achievement of equity and for development and peace.*

Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action further proclaims that women and girls in all societies, and across lines of income, class and culture, are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse. It also clarifies, and stresses, the fact that women who belong to minority groups are particularly vulnerable to violence.

International human rights instruments have been strongly criticized for their weak consideration for violations of rights that uniquely, or to a great extent, affect women, such as sexual and domestic violence. This critique is based on the affirmation that the vast majority of international law's legal base has a clear patriarchal pattern that reflects the needs and preoccupations of the creators of these; mainly white occidental middle aged men. Needless to say, the basic necessities and fears of women are not substantially taken into account.

Another aspect to this critique is centred in the traditional barrier between the public and private spheres when it comes to the interpretation of human rights law. This breach results in disregard for the kind of human rights violations that take place in the domestic sphere and thus strengthens the patriarchal system and its structural gender inequity. In the Central American context, the ideal and the State legislation has been that the State

should not interfere in private matters. The American Convention on Human Rights gives credibility to this notion in its Article 11[2]: “No one may be the object of arbitrary or abusive interference with his private life, his family, his home, or his correspondence, or of unlawful attacks on his honour or reputation.” Through a mere positive interpretation of such an article (as well as noting the usage of non gender neutral language: “his”), violations of human rights in the private sphere does not seem to be prioritised in particular human rights instruments (Kaasin, 2005: 7).

The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women<sup>9</sup> (Belém do Pará) emphasises in its preamble that the elimination of violence against women is essential for individual and social development, and women’s full and equal participation. Belém do Pará states that every woman has the right to be free from violence in both the public and private sphere, and its Article 1 defines violence against women as “any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or private sphere.”

Thus, there are specific instruments on women’s human rights, obligatory to the signatories, that clearly define violence in the private sphere as human rights violations.

Violence against women follows the clear pattern of the historically unequal power relations between men and women. This inequality, or asymmetry, of power, has led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and is impeding women's empowerment.

### ***1.3.2 The Right to Have Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services***

Women have particular needs in regard to sexual and reproductive health services because of the physical differences between men and women and given the fact that women retain the ability to procreate the human specie. Most international human rights

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<sup>9</sup> Adopted in Belém do Pará, Brazil, June 1994.

instruments refer to the rights to family planning and access to health services, but CEDAW, on the other hand, specifically refers to the liberty to choose the size of the family and the right to access sexual and reproductive health services. The Beijing Declaration (Art. 17) recognizes that the “right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility, is basic to their empowerment.”

In its Article 94, the Beijing Platform for Action defines reproductive health as:

"a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. Implicit in this last condition are the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice, as well as other methods of their choice for regulation of fertility which are not against the law, and the right of access to appropriate health-care services that will enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best chance of having a healthy infant.”

Forced sterilization and forced abortion, as well as coercive or forced use of contraceptives, are all ways of violating women’s human rights to make their own decisions regarding sexual and reproductive health issues. This is based upon the right to be free from interference with individual sexuality and the right to be free from violence that affects sexual or reproductive health.

Similarly, throughout the Beijing Platform for Action, concerns are expressed over how inadequate or inexistent formal and informal sexual education violates girls and women’s right to acquire the necessary knowledge to make the appropriate personal decisions on how to control their fertility and take care of their sexual and reproductive health.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This section will provide a brief, but detailed description of the methodology adopted for the investigation that is the foundation for the present paper. The actual description of the investigative methods employed during field research, is complimented by an academic approach in order to explain the advantage of this particular methodology.

Furthermore, this chapter includes a definition of concepts, as they form part of the specific objects of investigation.

### **2.1 TYPE OF INVESTIGATION**

The investigation is based on qualitative research, which aims to obtain information through the analysis of relevant people according to their expressions, definitions and terminology (Hernández et al., 2003: 450). The purpose of this method is to provide a description of the situation that is widely and profoundly based on the subjects' perceptions, attitudes, experiences and beliefs (Hernández et al., 2003: 451).

Furthermore, the research is based on the analysis of secondary data and information, such as UNDP reports on human development, including the IDH for the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast. The CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and other instruments are also analysed and applied. Statistics and studies on violence against women and sexual and reproductive health from Bluefields are taken into account.

#### ***2.1.1 Field Research***

The results from the fieldwork in Bluefields derives from interviews with individuals linked to human rights organisations, members of women's associations, as well as persons with political influence. Participative observation (attended radio recordings,

attended meetings, participation in informal conversations, etc.) in different aspects of the daily life of Bluefields is also taken into account for the analysis of the research results.

The total length of the period of fieldwork includes three visits to the region. The two first stays were in May and June 2005, and lasted for a total of three weeks. During these visits, which included trips to several rural areas of the RAAS, the initial frames for the topic of this paper were developed. The next research period was effectuated during four weeks in April/May 2006. Considering the limited time lapse of the fieldwork, it is of importance to mention what is considered to be a very intensive research work, with an average of two interviews each day. Also, the high level of social involvement, such as attending cultural events, joining parades, home visits to single mothers and grandmothers as well as conversing with locals in restaurants and bars, is regarded to grant added value to understanding the social movements of Bluefields, in order to draw the adequate conclusions and recommendations.

## **2.2 RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

Although the protagonists for the topic of the paper are the multiethnic women of Bluefields, the main subjects as sources of information and for the collection of data are individuals related to human rights and women's rights organisations and development issues. Additional subjects of research are implicitly the women *and* the men of Bluefields – how they interact and their perceptions of social roles.

The reason for focusing on individuals related to human rights issues and social development, is due to the paper's clear focus on discovering whether or not women are being considered important agents in order to combat poverty and thus being an integral part of improving the level of human development. Although general perceptions to a great extent can determine if women are accounted for in this regard, only people with political knowledge and social influence in the local context of Bluefields can account for the inclusion, promotion and empowering of women as agents.

## **2.3 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

- a) Women's agency in human development in accordance to international human development strategy.

As discussed in the chapter on the conceptual framework, women's agency is essential to achieve social change. For women to become agents, they must obtain the necessary capabilities through empowerment. Women must be given the chance to be heard and to participate in public life and to be involved in collective decisions.

- b) Local decision makers and human rights organisations' vision on women's role as agents towards human development on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast.

It is important to discover how these State and non governmental institutions regard women in their rights and development agendas. First and foremost, this is considered important due to the fact that both urban and rural communities on the Coast are relatively small, and these institutions have great influence. Disclosing the organisations' vision on the topic, serves to indicate whether or not these organs operate with strategies and goals in concordance to the international human development plan, such as the Millennium Development Goals.

- c) Women's empowerment and agency towards human development, and how human rights violations might impede this.

The hindrance to women's empowerment through disrespect of their human rights refers to the obstacles that women on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, exemplified by the findings in Bluefields, meet to be able to act as agents to human development. The possible human rights violations include the right to be free from domestic violence, and the right to have access to sexual and reproductive health services.

- d) Ways in which women can act as agents towards human development in the region, based on human rights and development strategies.

This last objective and concept refers to the different solutions that may exist for the women of the Coast in order to increase their influence on combating poverty and fomenting development in their family and community. It stresses the importance of focusing on women as agents to improve human development, and why communities like Bluefields will benefit from a change of strategy in this field.

## **2.4 FIELD RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS AND TECHNIQUES**

The instruments used for the field research of this paper include unstructured and group interviews and participant observation. Following the brief definition of the three research methods, are explanations on how these methods were contextualised during field work in Bluefields.

### ***2.4.1 Unstructured Interviews***

As opposed to structured interviews, which normally are used in quantitative research, unstructured or focused interviews are characterised by its openness. Although based on a topic and often with prepared questions, the researcher is much more free to improvise and follow the lead of the interviewee in order to discover new aspects of the matter and develop new ideas (Grønmo, 2004: 159). The advantage of this method is that it can challenge the researcher's preconceptions and allow the interviewee to talk about issues within her or his own frame of reference, which leads to a further understanding of the subject's point of view (May, 2001: 124). Thus this method gives the research a qualitative depth.

Unstructured interviews were used as research instrument in the present paper to contextualise and further understand the topic. The subjects were selected based on their



connection to either human rights in general as well as to women's rights, development and social and issues. The purpose of interviewing people immersed with human rights was to discover the focus on women's human rights and if these organisations could account for any special programs for the inclusion and empowerment of women. Interviewing people directly working with or engaging in women's rights contributes to the understanding of what is being done and where there are flaws, thus detecting discrimination and women's human rights violations. Interviews with persons engaged in development programs and/or directly involved in the publication of the IDH, allowed for a further understanding of the role of women in human development. In connection with the specific human rights issues researched, namely the occurrence of domestic violence and access to sexual and reproductive health services, people from relevant governmental and non-governmental organisations provided both personal and statistical information on women's situation in Bluefields.

#### ***2.4.2 Focus Interviews***

Using focus interviews with a group of people as a research method is valuable in terms of exploring group norms and perceptions around a specific subject or topic (May, 2001: 125). The difference between a normal group interview (each person usually responds the researcher's questions) and a focus interview is that the latter further foments the interaction between the group participants, allowing for them to freely discuss the topic (May, 2004: 125).

This technique was used to encourage men to share their opinions regarding the women's role in society, both in the public sphere and within the family. The focus interview was considered an apt method seeing that men in company with other men tend to open up more on issues concerning women and their role.

#### ***2.4.3 Participant Observation***

Participant observation is characterised by directly and personally experiencing a certain social scene, with the aim to understand it and explain it (May, 2001: 173). The correct

way to go about this method is to avoid preliminary assumptions. If successful, participant observation is a method claimed to be genuine and sincere, due to the fact that the researcher have less chance of acting biased as to what s/he expects to unravel. This method implies involvement in the daily life activities of the subjects relevant to the research topic (May, 2001: 146). In contrast to the deductive method of testing ideas, participant observation is inductive; it allows ideas to develop from observation. This method is in accordance with the idea of ‘naturalism’, whose purpose is to study the social world in its ‘natural’ state (May, 2001: 150).

For the purpose of the research paper at hand, this method was utilized in the daily life within the urban sector of Bluefields through observation of women’s role in society. Observations were made through informal conversation and interaction with men and women in everyday situations, as referred to above, in order to understand gender relations, men’s perceptions on women’s role and status in society, and women’s awareness, or lack of such, on gender inequity, empowerment and agency.

## **2.5 ANALYSIS METHODS**

Most importantly when analysing research data, is to explain the results of the interviews and the observed situations within the context of the conceptual framework (May, 2001: 164). The interpretations made during interviews and during participant observation, have thus been linked to international concepts, policies and strategies on gender equity, women’s empowerment and agency, human rights and human development.

The paper’s intention is to discover whether or not gender equity and the agency of women are regarded as essential and fruitful to improve the general living conditions and to increase the human development index of the region. In order to make the appropriate conclusions, the data collected from Bluefields are analysed in a general and holistic way to include the likely realities of other communities in the autonomous region.

### 3. CONTEXT

The Atlantic regions of Nicaragua make up nearly 50 per cent of Nicaragua's territory. In 1987, the Caribbean Coast obtained its regional autonomy, but the anticipated improvements in development have not transpired. The autonomous regime was initiated as a response to the specific needs of the region according to socio-economical, historical, ethnical and cultural particularities (Acosta, 1996: 24). As a judicial, political, economical and social autonomy, the North and South regions have their own government and counsel, but they still depend on economic and political support from the State of Nicaragua. However, the central government maintains a discriminative attitude towards the Caribbean Coast in terms of the national economical distribution and the aid to social development, at the same time as the multi-national companies continue to extract natural resources whilst contributing very little to the development of the area (IDH, 2005: xxx).

Bluefields is known as the “capital of multiculturalism of Nicaragua” (Bent, Fredersdorff, 2005: 8). Determining the population of Bluefields has proved difficult, but the latest statistics indicate a number of around 47.000<sup>10</sup> inhabitants living throughout 19 suburbs. Estimating the exact ethnic distribution in the city has also proved problematic, however, the assumption is that all six ethnic groups of the Coast are represented. According to Robb (2005: 3), the two main ethnical groups are the Mestizos (57 per cent) and Creole (36 per cent), whilst the Miskitos, the Rama, the Mayangnas and the Garifunas make up the remaining seven per cent.

For the purpose of this paper, when distinguishing between ethnic groups, only the Mestizo and the Creole are included in the analysis. The term ‘Mestizo/a’ means people of Spanish or European descent mixed with other ethnic groups during history. Some of the Mestizos/as came to the Caribbean Coast during the British colonisation, a number moved from the Pacific with the incorporation of the Coast to Nicaragua in 1894, but the

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<sup>10</sup> INEC, October 2004: 48.017 / Investigators of URACCAN: 47.849 / *Actualización cartográfica 2004*: 46.724. Source IDH 2005.

vast majority moved to the region as immigrant labourers during the 1960's and 1970's. According to Woods (2005: 43), being Creole merely means being of African descent: The ethnic heritage can in some cases be traced back to the slaves brought over by the British during the seventeenth century, while the majority usually trace their roots to emancipated slaves that migrated from diverse Islands in the Caribbean region looking for work.

On a national level, the people of the Coast are victims of exclusion and discrimination based on racism and xenophobia. This affects the sense of identity and self-confidence of many members of the society. At the same time, there are strong divisions between the ethnical groups in Bluefields, again originated in racist beliefs, and an ethnical hierarchy has been established in the community. Different sources and general perceptions point towards the Mestizos/as as the head of this hierarchy, but according to Robb (2005: 12) the Creole people consider their ethnic group the most powerful in society.

In this context, Bluefields counts for one of the municipalities with the lowest index in the region as the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) measurements constitutes a value of only 0,494. It goes without saying that the poverty level is high and that the vast majority of the inhabitants hardly live in decent conditions. The improvement of people's economic and social situation – consequently increasing the level of human development– constitutes a serious preoccupation in Bluefields.

The poverty of the Caribbean Coast has many explanations. The most important one is perhaps the persistent dependency on the Pacific region, both in terms of economical assistance and the need to import products, as well as the extraction of natural resources. At the same time the products from the Coast are not being optimally distributed due to lack of promotion. Prices are 15 – 20 per cent higher than in the rest of the country as a result of the factors mentioned above (IDH, 2005: xxviii).

The IDH shows that the human development index for Bluefields is one of the lowest of the Caribbean region. It goes without saying that the poverty level is high and that the

vast majority of the inhabitants hardly live in dignified conditions. In fact, if Bluefields were a country, it would have ranked as low as 151 of the 177 countries in the index. That puts Bluefields in the section for low human development index, in company with Haiti and 31 African countries. To highlight the differences between the Pacific and the Caribbean, Nicaragua as a nation ended up on 112<sup>th</sup> place in UNDP's measurements for 2005.

This imagery reflects the real Bluefields. According to the IDH, 6.6 per cent of houses in RAAS have running water indoors (this percentage also seems to reflect the situation in Bluefields, based on general observation), and the remainder of households and businesses are dependent on public or private wells. The water, whether coming from tubes or wells, is not apt for human consumption. The IDH claims that 40 per cent of the urban population (RAAN and RAAS) defecates in open air due to lack of adequate sanitary systems and latrines. The systems that function are often not very strategically placed and end up contaminating the well water (IDH, 2005: 77). The deprived situation is due to the low share of only nine per cent of the national health budget, combined with a poorly developed infrastructure that does not permit the construction of a proper water system.

Homeless adults and children, beggars and vendors heavily represent the urban sector of Bluefields, seeing that poverty and lack of employment opportunities has resulted in the search for alternative ways to survive. A large number of the people occupying the streets are women. Alcoholism, drug abuse and prostitution are all growing problems in Bluefields. There are also many women working out of their homes, selling food and other goods, in order to add to the household income. Miriam Hooker<sup>11</sup> of *Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Costa Atlántica* (CEDEHCA), claims that women play an important part in the persistent problem of drug trafficking on the Caribbean Coast. Women have emerged as the main distributors of narcotics, usually using their home as base. Thus the high unemployment rates' most visible consequences are of course

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<sup>11</sup> Miriam Hooker interviewed in CEDEHCA, 23.05.2006. Quotes translated from Spanish.

poverty, high levels of activity in the drug business and the great numbers of the inhabitants in 'Ship-Out' or as migrant workers to other countries, mainly Costa Rica.

## 4. ANALYSIS

The analytical part is to a great extent based upon gender and development policies of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast. When it comes to human rights violations and how they might be considered to impede the empowerment of women, examples are provided from the Bluefields field research. Although an urban sector, Bluefields is regarded as relatively representative for the whole Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast.

This part is divided in three sub-chapters, in accordance with the initial three specific objectives that form the foundation for the research. The fourth specific objective is addressed throughout the last chapter of conclusions and recommendations.

### 4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S AGENCY IN DEVELOPMENT OF THE COAST

#### *4.1.1 Do Strong Women Equal Empowered Women?*

Women hold up more than half the sky. Of all the world's population; men and women, boys and girls, grandfathers and grandmothers, more than 50 per cent are female. In developing communities, more often than not, women are wives, mothers and care-takers. Normally, the women handle the animals, the food production and the sowing fields. They cook, they clean and they wash the family's clothes. These are strong women. How does that not contribute to development, one might ask?

To be strong is not enough to qualify as an empowered woman. Empowerment of women is not about turning into a woman who can maintain complete control of family matters. If that woman at the same time does not possess the power to decide how to use her capacities as a human being, control her fertility, choose whether or not she will be educated, and decide and have the possibility to send her children to school, she can not become an agent to improve development in her community. Regardless of the fact that

women hold up half the sky and take great care and control of their family, women cannot lift their family out of poverty if they have no access to household decision-making.

On the other hand, if women are granted an equal voice in their families and in their communities, if they are regarded as business women as well as wives, as teachers as well as mothers and politicians as well as housewives, women will to greater extent have the opportunity to contribute to the eradication of poverty and to the development of their community.

Interestingly, it has been referred to the society of Bluefields as a matriarchal society. It is a trace of truth in this statement. There are more women than men in Bluefields, mainly due to the labour emigration. The number of single women is higher than in most developing societies, especially in Latin American terms. It seems as the women make the community move. It is true. But even so, these women are discriminated against; they are excluded from political seats of power and they are beaten, violated and scandalised. And in all areas of development research and human rights lobbying and advocacy, women do not emerge as a group in need of special attention. The UNDP Human Development Report, published in 2005, is not an exception.

#### ***4.1.2 Analysis of the UNDP Human Development Report for the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast***

The UNDP Human Development Report for the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast indicates the lack of development in the region through figures and facts, while it at the same time provides suggestions on how to stimulate economic growth and human development. It can be argued that the Report lacks a logic focus on human development strategies such as empowerment and agency of women.

Already in 1995, UNDP started integrating the gender-related development index (GDI) as a means to discover whether or not the different countries were complying with the



responsibility to end gender inequity. The index is based on gender differences in life expectancy, earned income, illiteracy and enrolment in education.

GDI is not utilized in the Report for the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast.

According to Norman Howard<sup>12</sup> at UNDP's office in Bluefields, "the data is not registered divided by gender. (...) some times we have this information, sometimes not, and in order to not contaminate the data, we're using general information, because at the moment it is difficult to gender disaggregate." A system to effectively disaggregate data by gender still does not exist on the Coast, and thus the women's situation and their contribution to society cannot be officially accounted for.

Perhaps because of the dedicated focus on the diversity and identity of the Coast people, some essential aspects regarding human development has been partially or completely disregarded in the Report. Independently, during interviews, both Hooker and Howard point to the contributions of the young population and the women's agency to be amongst these missing components.

The introduction of the Report emphasises the importance of overcoming the breaches of human development through capacitating persons that belong to historically excluded human groups (IDH, 2005: 1). It can be interpreted that women constitute such a group. The term exclusion keeps reappearing, but the Report fails to refer to women in this context. Nor is gender equity mentioned as one of six pending obstacles to development, although cultural discrimination and the exclusion of indigenous and Afro-Caribbean communities are (IDH, 2005: 15). It discusses the general empowerment of persons, but still without making reference to women (IDH, 2005: 18).

The Report does briefly recognize women as emerging participants in society through new movements and organisational formations, but similarly emphasises the weakness of these in terms of geographical, ethnic and thematic coverage. It refers furthermore to the

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<sup>12</sup> Norman Howard interviewed in UNDP's offices, 24.05.2006. Quotes translated from Spanish.

*lack of a female agenda that should guarantee gender equity, political and economic participation and equal access to benefits of development (IDH, 2005: 134). On the other hand it does not provide any contextual explanation on the importance of this female agenda, why and how to empower women, and effectively how they could and should become agents to improve their own wellbeing and that of others in society. Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica (CEIMM), underlines the capacities women have developed to construct a culture of peace in spite of being the principal victims of violence (IDH, 2005: 149).*

As the main existent document for the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast on human development and its many challenges, it is both questionable and worrying that the concepts of gender equity, the empowerment of women and women's role as agents to improve the human development index have not received further attention.

## **4.2 ARE WOMEN REGARDED AS AGENTS TOWARDS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION?**

The analysis of the IDH indicates that even an influential institution such as the UNDP has not yet started to focus on an increased protection of women's human rights and the empowerment of women in order to foment the social and economical development of the region. Furthermore, seeing that the main contributors to the Report were individuals and rights based investigative organs of the Coast whose agendas include the protection and promotion of human rights and instruments to stimulate to development, this serves as an initial indicator of an incomplete focus on women, both in theoretical and practical terms.

### ***4.2.1 Lack of Special Politics Concerning Women***

Human development, human rights, diversity and the principle of no discrimination are important and familiar concepts in Bluefields, and in the majority of the Coast

communities. In this regard, it is alarming that there are no clear politics aiming to empower women. As Hooker puts it: “When it comes to the accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals and to ensure women’s further participation to exit poverty, - there are really no policies to further include women.” None of the organisations on human rights, development or autonomous rights in Bluefields provide specific programs directed towards women, neither in connection to gender based violence nor to participation and empowerment.

#### ***4.2.2 Some Positive Aspects and Pertinent Challenges***

The reality of a weak women’s agenda underlines the importance of the existence of other organs such as the *Comisaría de la Mujer y Niñez* (Commissary on Women and Children), *Mi Familia* (Ministry of the Family in Nicaragua) and the Women’s Centre IXCHEN. Also the creation of the Inter-institutional Network of Women, struggling to promote women’s rights and ending violence, is of great significance to the women of Bluefields. The Network is made up of representatives from various human rights organisations, community groups, or women that are otherwise active on a political level. The Network is involved in several projects, and during the main research period the topic was concentrated around the change of regional government with the historical election of a female President, Lourdes Aguilar. Women across Bluefields are proud of, and positive to, this important change, but are worried that Aguilar’s political power is more symbolical than real due to the surrounding influential personalities in the regional politics, traditionally characterized as being corrupt and *machista*. Aguilar took her seat in May 2006, so it is yet early to take into consideration changes regarding the social and political situation of Bluefields and the RAAS.

After talking to representatives of these organisations, however, it is clear that the lack of funding and weak organisational and practical structures hamper the important work inherent to the organs. *Mi Familia*, for one, acts as an organ for support and registration of cases of abused women and children, but with only four employees and no vehicle, the assistance they can offer the numerous victims of violence and abandonment that contact

the Ministry is extremely limited. Its most important responsibility is perhaps re-directing victims of violence to the Comisaría. This commissary is part of the Police Force of Bluefields and was established in the early 1990's. The Comisaría mainly receives charges on domestic violence and offers immediate legal and psychological assistance to the victim. A persistent problem, although improving, is the underreporting of domestic violence and the women's fear to go through with the charges once they are reported.

Nicaragua has ratified the CEDAW, Beijing and all Inter-American instruments on human rights, including Belém do Pará, but unfortunately, the national and regional judicial systems tend to interpret the legal base from a religious and patriarchal moral perspective that discriminates against women and thus violates women's human rights. Further alarmingly, Marielis Rodríguez<sup>13</sup> of IXCHEN claims that Nicaragua only ratifies these instruments in order to comply with international pressure and that signed Conferences and Declarations to a great extent are ignored due to these not being obligatory. In Bluefields, the access to legal assistance and a fair trial is extremely difficult seeing that it only exists one fiscal for the entire RAAS.

#### **4.3 HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS: A HINDRANCE TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY**

The women of the Coast, not unlike the feminine population in a global context, belong to a vulnerable and discriminated human group based on their gender. To sum up, these women of multiethnic background live in a city founded upon an ethnic hierarchy in a region discriminated by the central government of one of the western hemisphere's poorest countries. Needless to say, the common problems women suffer for being women affect the female population of the region severely.

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<sup>13</sup> Marielis Rodríguez interviewed in IXCHEN, 19.05.2006. Quotes translated from Spanish.

Serious human rights violations against women and the persistent patriarchal social structure of the Coast communities constitute factors considered to have a negative impact on the city's human development level. Included as human rights violations are general discriminatory structures and actions based on gender and ethnic background, violations in the domestic sphere and in regards to access to sexual and reproductive health service.

#### ***4.3.1 Ethnic and Gender Based Discrimination***

“You haffi be de provider to be on top, dat is de law here.”

Hazel Wilson

Bluefields constitutes a typical Latin American machista society that is founded upon patriarchal paradigms. To a great extent this reflects the family structure where the man remains head of the family and the woman's role is first and foremost to be a good wife and mother. If there is a difference of opinion within the household, the decision-making is legitimately left to the man, seeing that women tend to agree with this practice. It is interesting to note, however, that there are explicit distinctions between the Mestizo and the Creole ethnic groups in this aspect.

As indicated by Miriam Hooker, the Mestiza women tend to stick to their traditional role in accordance to patriarchal patterns. Poor Mestizas constitute a predominant share of the number of housewives<sup>14</sup> in Bluefields (over 60 per cent)<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, Hazel Wilson<sup>16</sup> claims that more – and perhaps a lot more – than half of the Creole women are single (not married, divorced, separated) and are consequently heads of the households. She says that is because: “In Creole culture we are more open to tell somebody and in Creole culture we are more violent to defend (...).” Culturally speaking, Creole women supposedly don't put up with violence and tend to be “more scandalous den de Mestiza

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<sup>14</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the term “housewives” refers to single, married, divorced or widowed women with or without children whose main role in the family and the society is to engage in non-remunerated income activities within the household.

<sup>15</sup> ANFAMN – IXCHEN – ANESVAD (2005) “Demanda de servicios de Salud Sexual y Reproductiva de mujeres en edad fértil Bluefields, Urbano” (Power Point version facilitated by M. Rodríguez, IXCHEN).

<sup>16</sup> Hazel Wilson interviewed in FADCANIC, 26.05.2006. Quotes reproduced in her native language Creole.

woman”. At the same time, those who are still in a stable relationship with a man more often act as head of the household either by being the one with the main income or as responsible for managing the family economy. Another reason why these women end up alone and as head of the family, is the fact that the majority of men in ‘Ship-Out’ (labourers on international cruise ships) are Creole. They are gone months at a time – often during most of their adult life (Woods, 2005: 52).

The ethnic hierarchy and apparent physical differences between the ethnic groups have lead to tensions that further complicate gender-based discrimination. Miriam Hooker uses the term ‘multiple discrimination’ when she refers to the discrimination that affects indigenous and black women. Firstly they are discriminated against for being women, then for being indigenous/black and thirdly as being indigenous women and black women.

Hayling Rodríguez<sup>17</sup>, the Social Worker of the Comisaría de la Mujer y Niñez, reaffirms the fact that Bluefields is a machista society. She states: “The woman is the man’s property, and he is the macho that has to decide.” She is also aware of the new family structures due to the special conditions of some families as mentioned above, but she claims the traditional image of the ‘man as the provider’ is the norm. On the contrary, if a woman leaves her man and assumes the responsibility for herself and her children, other members of society tend to characterise her as a woman who is not able to satisfy her man (also sexually), or that she is a scandalous and ‘easy’ woman (Woods, 2005: 12).

#### ***4.3.2 Domestic Violence against Women***

The high level of domestic violence is an integral part of the reality of Bluefields, and the results of various statistical research as well as the testimonies of the different interviewees, strongly indicate that sexual violations, homicides, beatings and psychological violence are systematically performed against women of all age groups and across the different ethnical groups. A recent study of violence against women in

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<sup>17</sup> Hayling Rodríguez interviewed in Comisaría de la Mujer y Niñez, 15.05.2006. Quotes translated from Spanish.

Bluefields,<sup>18</sup> shows that out of 602 women questioned, 191 have experienced intra-familial violence at least once in their lifetime while 79 have been sexually abused at least once. 130 of the women answered that they at the present live with a husband who abuses them. Without doubt, this violence can be characterised as gender-based and structural, and coherently a violation of human rights.

Law 230 of the Nicaraguan Constitution prohibits intra-familial violence, but as Hooker says:

“(...) our case is not that the legislation is bad, our situation is that the Republic’s budget does not cover the expenses to provide the necessary amount of fiscals and judges in order to process the crimes adequately. (...) and there is only one fiscal for each region. This is a serious problem within the Nicaraguan legal system, and it is directly affecting women’s rights. The situation is worse here than in the Pacific.”

Marielis Rodríguez at the Women’s Centre IXCHEN is preoccupied by the high number of sexual violations (over ten per cent of women in Bluefields have experienced rape at least once) and half of these victims are girls under the age of 15. The majority of these cases are not reported. She states: “When they abuse the little girls, it is considered a private issue. And better keep it that way, if not she’ll end up *macheteada*. That’s what they tell me.” The dark numbers of conjugal rape are expected to be high, seeing that when a woman is forced to have sex with their husband against her will, it is not perceived as rape. It is perceived as a marital obligation.

According to statistics utilized for a UNDP study<sup>19</sup>, Mi Familia weekly receives 15 cases of domestic violence directed at women and children. The Police and the Comisaría receive an average of five cases each day. Similarly, the vast majority of victims are women and children. More often than not, this violence occurs within the family, where such acts often are tolerated. For that reason, physical and sexual abuse, rape of children and women in the domestic sphere as well as spousal abuse, often go unreported in Bluefields and are thus not easy to detect. Hayling Rodríguez says that there has been an

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<sup>18</sup> IXCHEN (2005). ‘Violencia contra las mujeres en el sector urbano, Bluefields’.

<sup>19</sup> Bent, G., Fredersdorff A. (2005) ‘Enfoque intersectorial con apropiación local dirigido hacia la reducción de la violencia en la Ciudad de Bluefields’. UNDP Bluefields.

important increase of reports of domestic violence, and she assumes this is due to women breaking the silence, and not necessarily because the problem is increasing. However, when the cases of violence are reported, it has proved difficult to provide the adequate measures to protect the victims and to punish the perpetrators.

Hayling is a psychologist and holds the position as the social worker of the Comisaría. She accounts:

“The cases that most impact me are those women who during 20 – 25 years of marriage have endured everything: Infidelity, beatings, violence, him telling her that she does not fulfil the image of a real woman and then he forces her to have sex with him, and when she does not want to, he holds her down with force on the bed, hits her, opens her legs, penetrates her. This is actually a way of controlling her and she feels this repugnance and distance towards him. Then, the next day she has to serve him dinner and wash and iron his clothes. And the situation repeats over the years and because of her kids and not having elsewhere to go, she endures.”

Having to daily attend to women with testimonies of this kind, Hayling explains that they focus on motivating the women through raising their battered self-confidence. The Comisaría aims to re-establish the woman’s personal values in order to exit a violent environment and to defend her rights. In that way, the Comisaría is really fomenting the woman’s empowerment that leads to the ability to stand up for herself – to become an agent towards her own wellbeing. But the cycle of violence is hard to break and, unfortunately, Hazel Wilson of FADCANIC makes sense when saying: “But even de woman who know dem rights – fear overcome dem.”

#### ***4.3.3 Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health***

In poorly developed societies, based on ancient traditions on one hand and on religious and patriarchal norms and values on the other, the perceptions and knowledge on women’s rights and needs when it comes to sexual attention are diverse. More often than not these customs contradict the woman’s integrity and violate her human rights.



Religion is important in Bluefields, and the Church holds a solid position in society. 'Church' is a broad concept, both in a regional context, and in Bluefields, and includes the Catholic, the Evangelist and the Moravian to name but a few.<sup>20</sup> Although people claim that religion is losing its influence over family structures and gender issues, the different religious institutions are still an integral element of the social scene, and in spite of the various religious directions, the vision on the traditional family that includes women and men's roles in a patriarchal society is maintained. The Catholic Church in particular, is founded upon the values of sexual abstinence, virginity and holy matrimony. Within this framework, Catholicism obstructs the spreading of important information about, and the access to, family planning such as contraception methods and sterilization. The number of offspring is to a great extent left in the hands of God, and if not, the man tends to make that decision on behalf of the family.

The values set forth by the religious institutions in Bluefields also affect the way parents bring up their children and what they teach them in regards to their sexuality and reproductive functions. Informal education on these topics is especially important in developing countries such as Nicaragua, where formal sexual education in primary and secondary education is still inexistent. The Director of Education at the Secretary of Education in RAAS, Arcelia Jackson, expresses her concern for the lack of informative educational material that reflects the reality of adolescents' life in the national and regional context. A couple of years back, a new and integral educational plan on sexuality and reproduction was approved by all social and political instances, - even the Catholic Church gave its approval (although this should not be necessary seeing that Nicaragua supposedly has no State religion), until the Minister of Education used his veto right at the last minute. As Jackson expresses: "The Minister turned out to be more *papista* than the Pope." Since then, a new plan has not been developed and the children and adolescents of Nicaragua and Bluefields are still being taught about the human body and its reproductive functions according to a curriculum based on biblical material.

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<sup>20</sup> Due to the settlement of European colonists, including British, German and Dutch, various Christian beliefs have been introduced to the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast. Others not mentioned are the Adventist Church, the Baptist, Jehovas Witnesses.

Also, according to Rodríguez at IXCHEN, ancient customs inherited from indigenous cultures, such as counting knots on the umbilical chord as to determine how many children are yet to be born, still influences women's approach to contraceptive methods.

The access to sexual and reproductive health services in Bluefields has been and continues to be limited. The financial resources in the health sector are scarce and the hospital of the city is in relatively poor shape. The Women's Centre IXCHEN, an organisation that has existed since 1989 elsewhere in Nicaragua, was not established in Bluefields until April 2006, after several years on hold. According to a study effectuated in 2003<sup>21</sup>, 53 per cent of women in Bluefields have had problems in connection to their sexual and reproductive wellbeing without having received proper assistance.

First and foremost, IXCHEN is a centre for support and information as well as provider of medical services such as gynaecology check-ups and HIV-tests. Seeing the centre is in its initial phase, the use so far has been limited and the lack of funding continues to negatively affect services in general. Dr. Marielis Rodríguez is the Director of IXCHEN and expresses her deep concern for the lack of attention to women's health issues. IXCHEN is the only alternative centre for women looking for sexual and reproductive health services, and takes a great responsibility in this matter by inviting young people to meetings where they teach them about sexuality, reproduction and contraception. Thus the centre fills an important gap between expensive private clinics and inadequate public services whose priority areas do not include this type of service. IXCHEN has in a short time emerged as one of the most important providers of information about sexuality and reproduction to young people, given that formal education in this field does not exist. The traditional values of abstinence and fidelity are maintained as the only real prevention of early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, but as Rodríguez puts it:

“Abstinence in a machista society is an almost impossible option, seeing that the woman is not able to decide over her own body already from the first relationship she is in. Abstinence could be an adequate form of prevention when the woman can say no. But here in Nicaragua, the woman cannot say no. They are even raping her in her own home.”

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<sup>21</sup> According to 'Demanda de servicios de Salud Sexual y Reproductiva de mujeres en edad fértil Bluefields, Urbano'.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has demonstrated that Bluefields is a poor community with low human development. Similarly it has exposed the Blufiteñas' difficult situation in an economically deprived patriarchal society. Women's participation in production and public life, and as important protagonists in unpaid domestic labour and in educating the family, are not highly valued.

### **5.1 IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER WOMEN AGENTS TO SOCIAL CHANGE**

With foundation in international development theory and practice, as referred to throughout this paper, clear conclusions can be drawn. The affirmation that claims women to have a special role in the eradication of poverty, and as agents towards social change and human development, has wide consensus amongst individual state politics, international organisations and NGOs, as well as academics and development experts. Countries that have placed focus on gender equity, and a profound inclusion of women in politics and labour have proved to achieve a higher level of social and economic well-fare for all its inhabitants, such as seen in European countries and in a majority of the states of the northern hemisphere. The countries that, on the other hand, continue to disregard the obligation to break down gender disparities, as stated by the MDGs and international human rights instruments, have a substantially slimmer chance to climb the development ladder.

The Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast's extremely low value in the UNDP's development index was the initial reason to attempt to discover the underlying causes for the poverty and the slow development of the area. As the IDH was published and thus a relatively profound historical, geographical, infrastructural and political foundation was at hand to explain the social challenges of the region, it was impossible not to disregard the fact that

the Report did not seem to focus on women and their agency in development. This led to the hypothesis that one important reason why the prosperity of the Coast has been put on hold, is the disregard of women as important individual agents to eradicate poverty and stimulate the development of their communities.

The following subchapters will elaborate on the further findings, based on this initial conclusion that it is a country's responsibility to focus on gender equity, to empower the women and to actively consider women as imperative agents toward social change and development.

## **5.2 WOMEN ARE NOT REGARDED AS AGENTS TOWARDS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION**

It has been argued that some groups, mainly the Creole ethnic group, of women in Bluefields can be considered very strong women. Some has even taken this observation thus far as to refer to this particular community as a matriarchy. For the purpose of this concluding chapter, the affirmation of the existence of a matriarchy, is regarded as simplistic. Although there is a majority of female inhabitants in the city, and that a higher number of single mothers are heading the urban households, the real decision-making power of these women is limited. As argued in the analytical part, the women, although taking sole responsibility for themselves and their family, they are often disvalued as 'real women' seeing they 'do not want a man' or 'cannot keep a man'. Sometimes the apparently single women and mothers are dependent on the income from spouses or family members that work overseas, and in many cases, their own family or that of their spouse, control these women's daily activities.

Similarly, the traditional patriarchal families stand extremely strong amongst the Mestiza ethnic group and the various indigenous communities in Bluefields and on the Coast in general. In most cases, women are kept from many forms of public participation, such as

political and organisational activity, work outside the home and attending higher education. Over 60 per cent of the women in urban Bluefields are housewives. That shows that an overwhelming number of women are still assuming the traditional ‘duties’ according to their gender, performing unpaid work that continues to be disregarded as an important aspect of the family economy. This often impedes them from exercising a real influence on the household’s financial supplies. At the same time it is highly probable that those women that do not characterise themselves as housewives still do all or most of the domestic work and take responsibility for the children. Thus the number of women affected by time-poverty – working double and triple shifts, juggling their professional duties with their domestic ‘duties’ – is more than likely very pronounced. Without integral governmental policies to empower these women, they have little or no chance of becoming active agents to the improvement of the social and economical development of their community.

Through the thorough analysis of the IDH and the parallel discovery of a weak focus on gender-related politics and the obvious lack of programs on how to empower women and stimulate their participation in public life, it is clear that Bluefields and the other communities that make up the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast is far from perceiving women as important agents to improve human development of their community and in the region.

### **5.3 PERSISTENT HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IMPEDE WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY**

It is evident that Bluefields constitutes a community where women experience serious gender-based discrimination in its many dimensions. Violence against women, such as domestic and sexual violence, and limited access to sexual and reproductive health care services, are flagrant violations of human rights. Considering the high number of reported cases, the frequently withdrawn charges and the repeatedly affirmed under-reporting of such acts of violence in Bluefields, there is no doubt as to characterise this persistent

violence against women as direct, systematic and structural. Structural violence is a human rights violation.

Women who experience repeated physical, sexual and/or psychological violence in the domestic sphere are often not able to exit that vicious cycle due to many reasons. These reasons can be merely personal or they can consist of a mix of personal and external factors, such as social structural violence and the lack of political life. As this paper affirms, Bluefields constitutes an example of a community on the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast where patriarchal norms and religious values stand very strong. Most girls and women growing up in such an environment, adapt to the roles that society expects them to assume. The Blufleñas are good wives and great mothers – first and foremost they live for others instead of focusing on a personal project of life. This is what tradition tells them is the correct way to live.

This reality, and especially looking at the high number of housewives, reflects a grave lack of independency, both economic and in terms of personal integrity. A woman that is economically dependent on her husband or partner, tend to endure violence in an asymmetric power relation from fear of an uncertain future on her own. At the same time there might be children involved, and in many cultures, keeping the family together for the sake of the children is a prevailing priority. All of these aspects based on patriarchal traditions are trans-cultural and of global dimensions. The only difference is that in some societies women are more affected than in others. The situation tends to be more pronounced in developing countries. And the situation is pronounced in Bluefields, and it is pronounced throughout the whole Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast.

An inverse concern is the already mentioned high number of single Creole mothers. Although these women are moving towards independency through empowerment, the society characterise them as ‘scandalous’ and in many cases less of a woman. As Socorro Woods similarly expressed, the society tends to blame the women for a ruined relationship, by assuming she is not a satisfactory housewife and mother and/or not able

to sexually please her husband/partner. Unfortunately, it is not revolutionary news that women tend to blame themselves for the violence they experience in their home.

It can thus be concluded that violence against women is often both a cause and a consequence of the low social and economic status of women. Empowerment of women is necessary to break out of a violent relationship. For women to break out of a violent relationship they need to feel that there is an alternative and that they can make it on their own. Independency through education and work outside the home<sup>22</sup> are paths to empowerment. However, in poor and patriarchal societies, women have a more profound need to receive adequate help and real support to move on independently. When they learn how to value themselves and their abilities as persons – not just as mothers and wives – this may lead to new levels of wellbeing that would proliferate to other members of the family and the society. Consequently, this could have a positive impact on the level of human development.

It is extremely important to focus on women's sexual and reproductive health in Bluefields. It has been demonstrated through the testimonies of experts, statistical material and the high fertility rate, that they do not receive the satisfactory attention in this field. Furthermore, it is clear that women's bodily integrity is oppressed by social structures such as the patriarchy, and indigenous and religious beliefs. When a woman's human right to family planning through information and access to contraception methods and sterilisation is disrespected, this signifies grave consequences to the quality of her life, her family's wellbeing and to the society as a whole.

Most importantly, the women of Bluefields need to recognise that they have the right to bodily integrity, especially in regards to sexuality and reproduction. Integral advocacy to inform women about their options in family planning, both through formal and informal education and community campaigns is vital to expand women's awareness of this aspect. In this regard, it is similarly important to educate all inhabitants about

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<sup>22</sup> It should be emphasised that all work outside the home is not necessarily empowering, such as perhaps being exploited to a certain degree as cheap labour at the multi-national companies in the area.

contraception and why it is important to reduce the fertility rate and what the positive effects can be. Educated women who are aware that they are the only ones that should decide over their own body and reproductive system, have become empowered women. Empowered women's agency is important to reduce the fertility rates. A reduced fertility rate in poor societies constitutes a key aspect to improve wellbeing in the family and the community. Consequently, this may have a positive impact on the level of human development.

#### **5.4. HOW CAN WOMEN ACT AS AGENTS TOWARDS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE REGION**

Briefly summarised: Bluefields is poor and the human development index is very low. Women's human rights are blatantly violated, they are discriminated against and persistently excluded from the public sphere. The women of Bluefields are not regarded as vital agents to solve social problems, in spite of the global recognition on women's agency as a key to improve the level of human development.

It is particularly important that developed nations and international organisations, as well as the Nicaraguan national and regional government, assume their responsibility and put actions behind their political strategies for human development. This can be in form of funding, empowering and educating non-governmental organisations to focus on gender equality, and provide economic and practical support to the Nicaraguan government for the implementation of a budget that also reflects the needs and interests of women.

As one of the Western hemisphere's poorest countries, Nicaragua is in an eternal circle of lack of financial capital, and a vast majority of social issues remain unresolved. That is why it is considered of extreme importance to focus on gender equity as both a means and an end to many of these social problems. Through the empowerment of women, developing countries such as Nicaragua, will experience immediate benefits from a



strengthened essential asset to the labour and intellectual force. From the moment all actors of society are included on equal terms in all aspects of private and public life, this will start to eradicate poverty and lead to an increase in human development.

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