



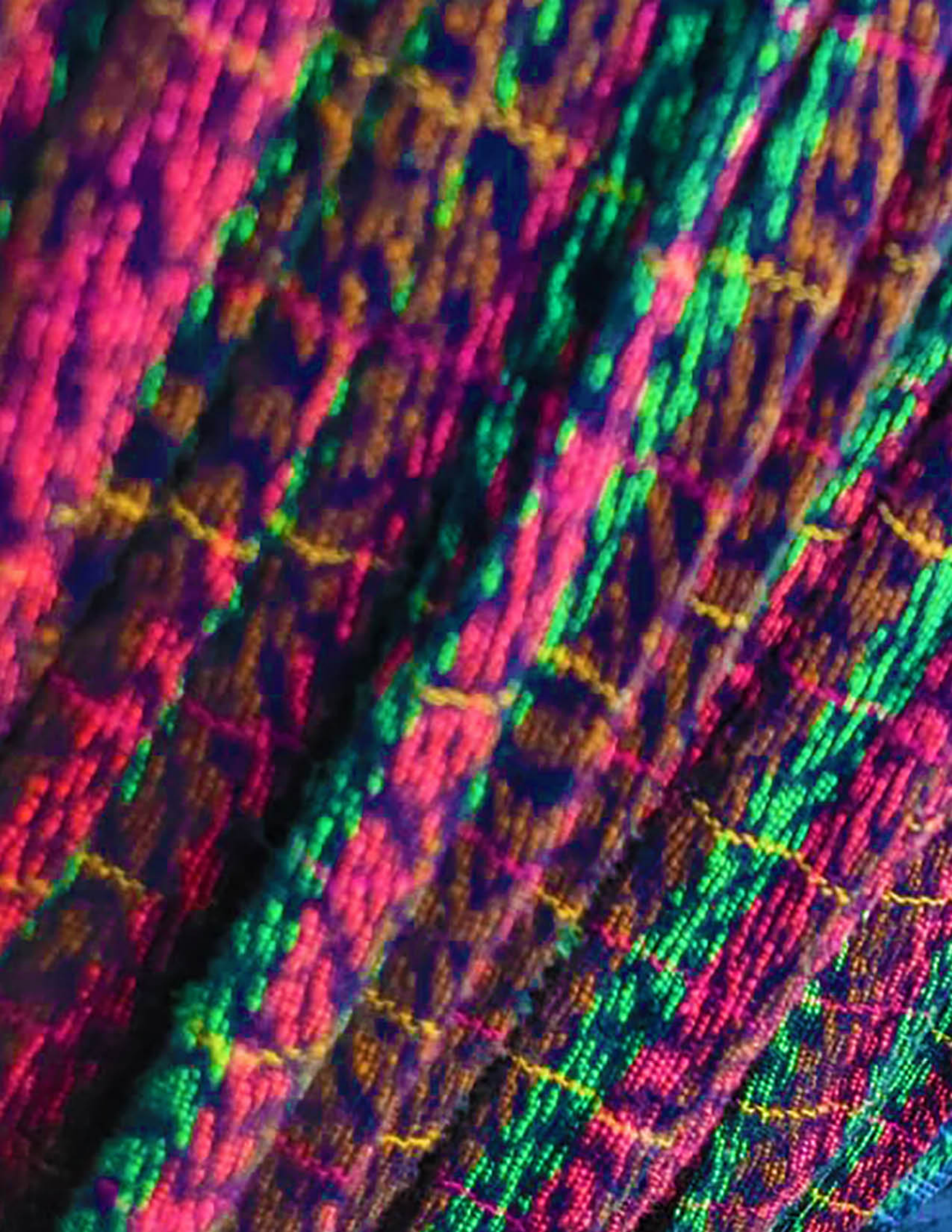
# Partial CEDAW Alternative Report on the Human Rights Situation of Maya Women in southern Belize

Prepared by the Sarstoon Temash Institute  
for Indigenous Management

Legal Analysis: *Dr. Isabela Figueroa, Universidad del Magdalena*  
Editorial: *Jennifer Tierney*

April  
2023







# *Table of Contents*

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>PARTIAL CEDAW REPORT .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1 .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>MAYA WOMEN'S CEDAW RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
<b>APPENDIX 2 .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>ARTICLE ON MOPAN MAYA WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVES</b>	

# Introduction

Last year marked the first time the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted a general recommendation on the rights of Indigenous women and girls (General Recommendation No. 39, CEDAW/C/GC/39). The CEDAW is a UN treaty body under the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights that monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women – the most important international treaty on women’s rights.

Even though the treaty was ratified in 1981, this is the first-ever binding instrument focused on the intersectional discrimination and human rights violations faced by Indigenous women and girls. The analysis and testimonies below reveal how policies that affect Indigenous women and girls cross several ministries -- from natural resource management, economic development, health and education to labor and vital statistics.

The General Recommendation guides State Parties to correct historical discrimination and recognize Indigenous women’s leadership and agency to protect biodiversity and offer climate change solutions. In paragraphs 4 and 5, the Committee offers a detailed approach for how States can use an intersectional, intercultural, multidisciplinary gender perspective that serves as an accountability tool. According to the CEDAW, accountability begins by documenting the gaps between the recommendations and national policies in alternative or shadow reports.

This is the first partial alternative CEDAW report from Maya women in Belize. The recommendations were developed in workshops about their rights under the Convention organized by the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management as part of the EU project, *Promoting and Protecting the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Maya Women in Toledo*.

Under this project, SATIIM developed a participatory method of human rights training, analysis and reflection for Maya women who have historically been invisible and unheard. Belize government reports to the CEDAW, along with NGO reports, have excluded their voices.

The following report offers a legal analysis of the gaps in Belize’s obligations as a signatory to the CEDAW, as well as recommendations from the Maya women participants in SATIIM workshops. Interspersed in the analysis are direct quotes from women that underscore their marginalization.

Many Maya women do not exist legally. Many report they do not have identification or birth certificates. After giving birth, their children’s Maya names are often misspelled, which means their papers are inaccurate. Government bureaucracy is not bilingual and increasingly requires access to technology inaccessible in Maya villages.

Maya women are invisible in a health system that does not respect traditional midwifery or cultural concepts of privacy. Without safe or even emergency transportation, Maya women in advanced stages of pregnancy or those who have



just undergone cesarean section surgery find themselves alone on the back of a motorcycle or a pick up truck. One woman had to walk in the rain with her newborn baby.

The first Appendix, “Maya Women’s CEDAW Recommendations,” explicitly demands changes to these everyday realities of Maya women. The report also features hopes expressed by Maya women in human rights workshops, as well as excerpts from interviews with them.

Appendix 2 features an article that summarizes interviews with Maya women about their human rights.

It is hoped that this Partial Alternative Report is a catalyst for an ongoing conversation with Maya women of southern Belize about the policies that affect their lives.

*Let these conversations  
– and all policy for Maya women –  
be guided by the principle:  
Nothing for us without us.*

**Maya Ch’oc**

Executive Director

Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management



# Executive Summary

Given that the Belize government has not reported to the CEDAW Committee since 2005, there is a dearth of information and no baseline data on Maya women (not even basic numbers of how many there are.)

The new administration elevated the status of the National Women's Commission from advisory body to a statutory body under the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs. Yet to date, there has been no policy discourse, or even objectives, disseminated about Maya women.

## ***Preliminary observations of this partial Alternative Report:***

### **Article 1**

There are no Acts in Belize that define discrimination against women as established under the CEDAW.

### **Article 2**

Despite mentioning Indigenous peoples in its preamble, the Belize Constitution does not recognize specific rights for Indigenous peoples.

### **Article 4**

Belize has no special measure for Maya women to secure their advancement and greater participation in public policies. There is no documentation of gender issues from the perspective of Mayan women, nor any efforts to train and educate public officials on issues related to their rights and interculturality. Gender and intrafamily violence remain invisible.

### **Article 6**

Belize remains on the Tier 2 Watch List for trafficking of women and girls for the second consecutive year. There is no data on the widespread sexual exploitation known as, *fichera*, that targets young Maya women and adolescent girls, the most impoverished people in Belize.

### **Article 7**

All policies that affect Maya women, notably those relating to health, gender violence, education, and land rights, are developed without any prior consultation. Maya women are generally unaware of their rights and the policies that affect them and have no intercultural access to justice.

### **Article 9**

A lack of identification marginalizes Maya women in the Belize economy, limiting their economic participation to the informal sector.

### **Article 10**

Marginalized by language and culture, most Maya women do not complete secondary education, which excludes their languages.

### **Article 14**

Without land rights, Maya women are vulnerable to food insecurity, conflict, gender-based domestic and other forms of violence, the denial of or limitation of access to property rights, and the violation of their inheritance rights.

# Partial CEDAW Alternative Report on the Human Rights Situation of Maya Women in southern Belize

In November 1996, the State of Belize submitted combined Initial and Second Reports to the CEDAW Committee, followed by a combined Third and Fourth Periodic Report of Belize (CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4) in July 2005. For close to 20 years now, no additional report has been presented.

As we understand, the due date to evaluate Belize compliance with its duties according to CEDAW is in May, 2023, and so far, we have no indication of any Report being drafted by the government. In fact, as this Committee noted that in its 2005 Report, Belize did not “provide sufficient statistical data, disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and rural and urban areas, on the practical realization of the principle of equality between women and men in all areas covered by the Convention.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2010 Census, around 11.3% of the Belizean population is composed of Mayan individuals.<sup>2</sup> A major challenge faced by Maya women, as noted by the Committee 2007 General Observations Report (GOR) is the widespread poverty among them, which facilitates violations of women’s rights.<sup>3</sup> Specific challenges are related to access to health, education, nationality and domestic violence, as we will further present.

This partial alternative report was developed to make the Committee aware of some of the specific challenges faced by the Maya women of Belize which impair or nullify their exercise of women rights under the CEDAW.

## **1) Optional Protocol**

Belize ratified the CEDAW in March, 1990. In December, 2002, Belize ratified the Optional Protocol; however, it does not recognize the oversight of the Committee provided for in Protocol’s Articles 8 and 9.

## **2) Belize’s general duties according to CEDAW and related to Indigenous Women**

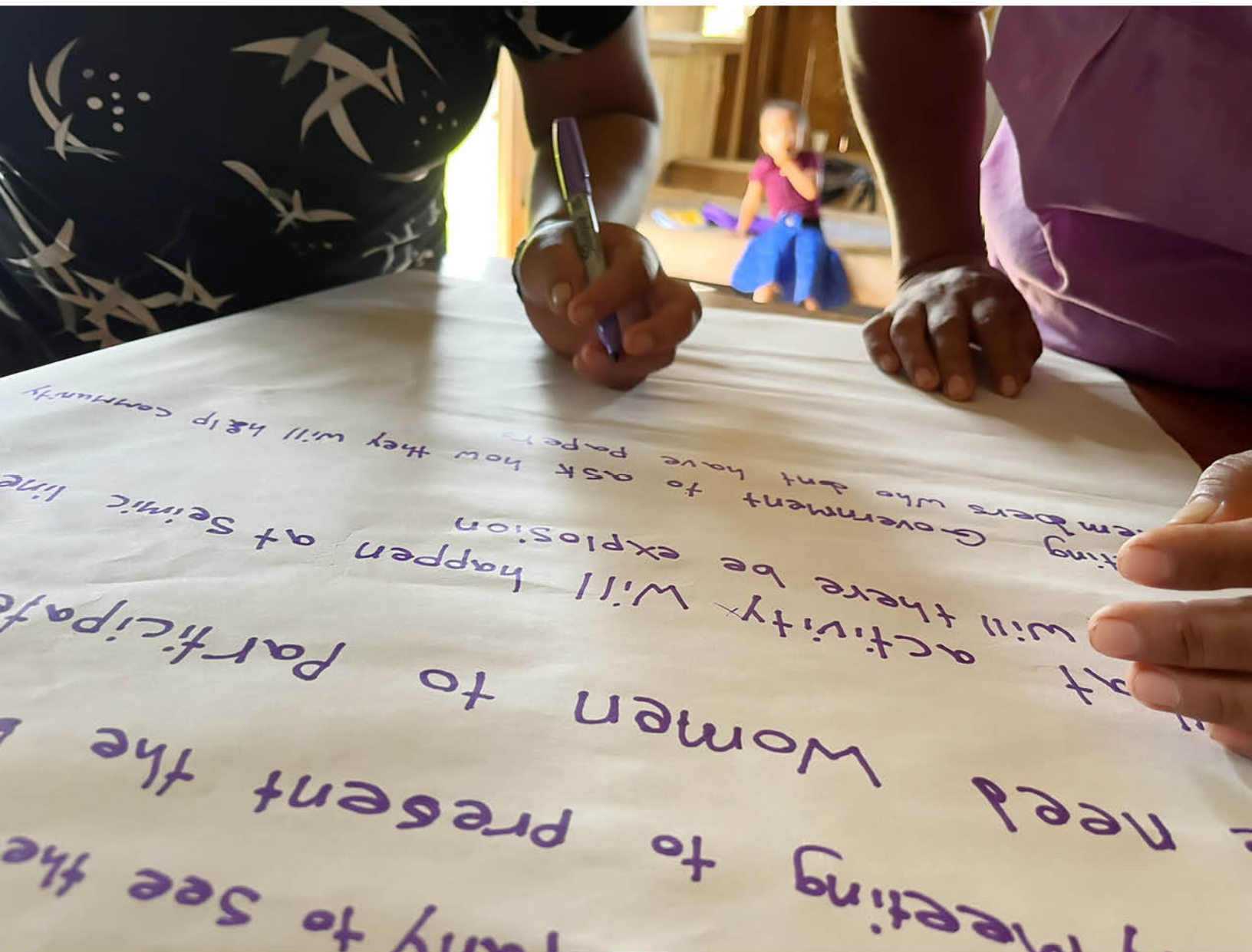
---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Belize. 10 August 2007, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Belize Population and Housing Census. Country Report, 2010. [http://sib.org.bz/wpcontent/uploads/2010\\_Census\\_Report.pdf](http://sib.org.bz/wpcontent/uploads/2010_Census_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Belize. 10 August 2007, p. 3.

# Discrimination against Maya Women of Southern Belize



*Maya women dream of giving recommendations for policies that affect our lives. So we want to understand our human rights*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' re xk'eb'aleb' lix chaab'il na'leb'/k'a'ux naru tenq'ank sa'chaq'rab' ha'an nax mux ru qaj yu'am. Ut naqaj xtawb'al ru xk'ulub'poyanam.*



## Article I

For the purposes of the present Convention, the term “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 equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

There are no Acts in Belize that define discrimination against women. The term “discriminatory” in the Belize Constitution means:

affording different treatment to different persons attributable wholly or mainly to their respective descriptions by sex, race, place of origin, political opinions, colour or creed whereby persons of one such description are subjected to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of another such description are not made subject or are accorded privileges or advantages which are not accorded to persons of another such description (16, 3).

This definition is not according to international human rights standards, as some public measures or policies will have disproportionate and negative effects on Indigenous women. The CEDAW establishes that discrimination against women shall be a distinction, exclusion, or restriction which has the effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women of human rights. A general definition of the term “discriminatory” focused on formal equality is not enough to address direct or unintentional discrimination, as foreseen in Article 4.

**Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW’s Article 1 in relation to Maya women rights.**

### **Legally, many of us don’t exist.**

*Legally, many of us don’t exist. There are so many barriers for Maya women to access government departments, such as vital statistics and social security. While they boast online access, advances in technology aren’t necessarily progress in our communities where we don’t have internet or computers.*

# Lack of Specific Policies for Maya Women



*Maya women dream of leading their communities. So we want to see women in leadership positions.*


*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' re k'amok b'e reheb' xk'aleb'aal.*

*Ut naqaj rilb'al li qana'chineb'wank xk'anjel sa'jolomink.*

## Article 2

States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake:

- (a) To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, 10 through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle;
- (b) To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women;
- (c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination;
- (d) To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation;
- (e) To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise;
- (f) To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women;
- (g) To repeal all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women.



According to General Recommendation N° 39, the prohibition of discrimination shall be applied together with the protection of the rights to self-determination and integrity of indigenous lands, territories, and resources.<sup>4</sup>

Despite mentioning Indigenous peoples in its preamble, the Belize Constitution does not recognize specific rights for Indigenous peoples. The state of Belize has the duty to consult with Indigenous peoples on those policies or legislation that might affect their rights. Belize, however, has never consulted with the Maya people on any policies related to health, integrity, education or development in general, and tends to legislate for the rural area with no distinction of ethnicity.

According to general Recommendation N° 39, “the failure to protect the rights to self-determination, ancestral land use and the effective participation and consent of indigenous women in all matters affecting them constitutes discrimination against them and their communities”.<sup>5</sup>

### **Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW’s Article 2 in relation to Maya women rights.**

#### **Maya Women’s Meetings**

*Maya women’s meetings are noisy. Speaking through the intermittent calls of babes in arms and toddlers underfoot, the women discuss their rights under CEDAW. Typical meetings with only male leaders proceed in an orderly fashion with the everyday challenges of Maya family life left unsaid.*

---

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights of indigenous women and girls. Draft, para. 11: The Committee acknowledges that the vital link between indigenous women and their lands often forms the basis of their culture, identity and survival. Indigenous women face lack of legal recognition of their rights to land and territories and wide gaps in the implementation of existing laws to protect their collective rights. The lack of legal recognition of indigenous peoples is evident worldwide in constitutions, and laws. There is also an increasing need for recognition of indigenous peoples in treaties. This situation is frequently compounded by the execution in indigenous territories of economic and development projects without their free, prior, and informed consent. Governments and third-party actors frequently implement investment, development, tourism, mining, logging, and extraction activities in indigenous territories without undertaking consultation processes designed to secure the consent of the indigenous peoples affected in line with international human rights standards and environmental sustainability. This undermines indigenous women’s and girls’ access, use and enjoyment of their ancestral territories and traditional lands; vital natural and water resources; and essential sources of livelihood.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights of indigenous women and girls. Draft, para. 21.

# Lack of Special Measures for the Advancement of Maya Women




*We want to be empowered to contribute to our community wellbeing.*

*Waqlesinklinkil qa k'a'uxre resinkil chi uub'ej qa k'alebáal jo'qana'chin.*

## Article 4

1. Adoption by States Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present Convention, but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.
2. Adoption by States Parties of special measures, including those measures contained in the present Convention, aimed at protecting maternity shall not be considered discriminatory.



In the case of Maya women, these special measures shall be read together with the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1.4):

Special measures taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms shall not be deemed racial discrimination[.]

Belize did not provide sufficient sex-disaggregated data in its 2007 Report, nor did Belize provide ethnic-disaggregated data. In fact, Belize has no account of how many Maya people are living in the country today, which doesn't allow it to present sex and ethnic disaggregated data.

Belize did not establish any special measure for Maya women to secure their advancement and greater participation in public policies. Currently, the Government of Belize is preparing a Land Policy specific for the Maya people of Southern Belize. The participation of Maya women in the discussion and definition of such policy is essential for it to be effective in protecting their rights. There is no official facility, however, for their informed participation.

The State of Belize has not made any effort to understand gender issues from the perspective of Mayan women, nor has it made any effort to train and educate its public officials on issues of Indigenous peoples' rights and interculturality. In fact, Belize has no specific data on domestic violence within Indigenous families. Human rights reports, however, indicate that "indigenous women are 35 times more likely than non-indigenous women to be hospitalized due to domestic violence".<sup>6</sup>

It is the duty of the state of Belize to ensure that the justice system offers a timely response to Indigenous women and girls who are victims of gender violence. This implies designing and implementing policies for the prevention of gender violence that have interpreters, translators, anthropologists, psychologists, health professionals, spiritual authorities, cultural mediators, in short, policies that incorporate the gender perspective from a multicultural perspective.<sup>7</sup> Without these measures that integrate the perspective of Maya women into public policies, cases of gender and intrafamily violence will remain invisible and go unpunished.

## **Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW's Article 2 in relation to Maya women rights.**

---

<sup>6</sup> United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. 5th Volume. Rights to Land, Territories and Resources.* New York, 2021.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wpcontent/uploads/sites/19/2021/03/State-of-Worlds-Indigenous-Peoples-Vol-V-Final.pdf> p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations. *The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights of indigenous women and girls.* Draft, para. 27.

# Lack of Protection of the Safety for Maya Women and Girls



*Maya women dream of defending the welfare of women and children. So we want to develop rules that govern our community and enforce them.*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' li xkolb'al, re tenq'ank rik'in kawal, tz'akonik li qana'chineb' ut saaj'al. Ut naqaj xyiib'ankil, ch'olob'ankil li chaq'rab'naj b'eres qaj K'aleb'aal ut tento qaj b'eresiik.*

## Article 6

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.

According to the General Recommendation N° 39, “indigenous women and girls are disproportionately at risk of gender-based killings; disappearances; trafficking in persons; contemporary forms of slavery; exploitation; forced prostitution; sexual servitude; and domestic work which is not decent, safe, and adequately remunerated.”<sup>8</sup> Sexual exploitation affects especially teenage Mayan girls under a scheme known as *fichera*. According to the former Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, Joy Ngozi Ezellio (2014), “it refers to a practice whereby men pay a higher price to drink in the company of adolescent girls or young women who work in bars. The practice has been identified as a gateway to prostitution. Fichera has been found by investigators to be a common thread in many suspected cases of trafficking in persons.”<sup>9</sup>

Belize received classification on the Tier 2 Watch List for human trafficking, and its main targets are women and children.<sup>10</sup> Being listed in Tier 2 Watch means, according to the US Department of State:

The Government of Belize does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included initiating more trafficking investigations, convicting a trafficker, and screening for potential trafficking victims during joint labor inspections. However, **the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts from the previous reporting period. The government did not initiate any new prosecutions against traffickers and continued to apply victim identification procedures inconsistently, despite improvement in this area.** Although reports of official complicity were common, the government did not investigate any instances of official complicity in trafficking-related offenses. Therefore Belize remained on Tier 2 Watch List for the second consecutive year.<sup>11</sup> [emphasis added]

**Belize is not complying with CEDAW’s Article 6 in relation to Maya women rights.**

### “Think about the man”

*A Maya woman went to the local police station to report a sexual assault. There was no woman there, or anyone trained in sexual assault. The official who met her tried to talk her out of making the report. ‘Think about the man; he will be separated from his children. – Do you want that?’ She left without filing the report.*

<sup>8</sup> United Nations. *The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights of indigenous women and girls. Draft, para. 9.*

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. *Informe de la Relatora Especial sobre la trata de personas, especialmente mujeres y niños, Joy Ngozi Ezellio. Adición Misión a Belice. A/HRC/26/37/Add.6, par. 9.*

<sup>10</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/human-trafficking-in-belize/>

<sup>11</sup> US Department of State. *2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Belize.* <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/belize/>



# Discrimination Against Maya Women in Political and Public Life




*Maya women dream of being decision makers.  
So we want to be involved in community planning.*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och'  
ha'aneb'junak chi sumenkil k'ulub'anb'il  
na'leb.  
Ut naqaj okenk sa' k'uub'ank  
sa'k'aleb'aal.*

## Article 7

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.



There is no specific policy in Belize for the promotion of Maya women in the formulation of public policies that may affect them. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples protects the right of Indigenous peoples to be consulted before adopting legislative or administrative measures that may affect their rights. That standard is not observed by Belize. As reported above, health policies, gender violence, education, land legislation that affect Maya women are developed without any consultation. As a result, in most cases, Maya women are unaware of their rights, the policies that affect them, and do not have the means to access justice.

Despite the approval in 2022 of the Maya of Southern Belize Free Prior and Informed Consent Protocol, to date Belize has not demarcated the Maya ancestral territory, failing in offering collective security for the possession of the Maya People's ancestral lands. This prevents Maya women and their communities from fully exercising their right to participate in all matters that affect them. The uncertainty regarding the borders of the territory of each village brings conflicts over boundaries between neighbors, which creates tension both between Maya villages and third parties, and within the Maya villages. This dynamic increases the potential for internal violence that leaves the Maya family nuclei in a vulnerable situation, especially women and children.

**Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW's Article 7 in relation to Maya women rights.**

### **Our Voices Are Not Heard**

*Maya women aren't allowed to speak since we are judged as not knowledgeable in issues of planning and development. They think we don't know anything so we have nothing to say. We are starting to get out of our houses and learn, so now we'll try to go to meetings and speak up, but it won't be easy. Sometimes in a meeting, Maya women's voices are not heard.*

# Lack of Equal Rights to National Identity



*Maya women dream of access to land. So we want to revise inheritance practices and access rights.*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' tz'akonk sa'chanru naru eechanink ch'och'. Ut naqaj tz'ilok chirix eechanink ut roqsinkil qaj k'ulub'.*

## Article 9

1. States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality. They shall ensure in particular that neither marriage to an alien nor change of nationality by the husband during marriage shall automatically change the nationality of the wife, render her stateless or force upon her the nationality of the husband.
2. States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.

There is a high incidence of Maya girl children who do not have birth registration documents and who consequently cannot claim nationality and social benefits in the State party.<sup>12</sup>

The lack of identification marginalizes Maya women in the Belize economy, limiting their economic participation to the informal sector.

**Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW's Article 9 in relation to Maya women rights.**

## **Maya Babies in Legal Limbo**

*Maya names are spelled wrong on birth certificates. The mothers don't speak English; government workers don't speak Maya. How can we sign our names when it doesn't match our documents? Even when Maya women can get paid work, we can't get social security cards or benefits.*

*We face barriers to renew our identification documents. To get an appointment, we are supposed to download online applications, which is impossible without internet or a computer. Even if you can get an in-person appointment, the bus might not run that day. So we can't fix our babies' names in documents. So many Maya children are not registered. If you have a homebirth, they make it harder to register your baby.*

---

<sup>12</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Belize. 10 August 2007, p. 9.

# Discrimination in Education and Career Opportunities




*Maya women dream of contributing to our community's development. So we want more training opportunities.*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' re xtenq'ankil xwaqlesinkil qaj k'aleb'aal. Ut naqaj xhonal re xkomon toh tzolok.*

## Article 10

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

- (a) The same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas; this equality shall be ensured in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher technical education, as well as in all types of vocational training;
- (b) Access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality;
- (c) The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods;
- (d) The same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants;
- (e) The same opportunities for access to programmes of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programmes, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women;
- (f) The reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely;
- (g) The same Opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education;
- (h) Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning.



According to the Government of Belize, the country's literacy rate in 1998 was 75.1%, with a rate of 52.1% among Maya men and 47.7% among Maya women.<sup>13</sup> In 2007 the Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) World Report, Belize reported a country literacy rate of 76.9%<sup>14</sup>, meaning that the available information at that time showed insignificant improvement. We don't have updated data to offer, but there is no indication of improvement. The legacy of colonialism in Belize is extended by religious educational centers in the country, especially in rural areas, that frown on Maya cultural ritual. An imperialist educational curriculum was imposed on the country's population, especially affecting the Mayan people, who receive an education that does not harmonize with their daily needs nor does it prepare them for a more specialized workforce.

Education in Roman Catholic schools reinforces patriarchal gender roles and exerts subtle control over girls' bodies through the imposition of uniforms that are inappropriate for the country's climate, "and designed to deemphasize any sexuality and some schools require teenage girls to wear shapeless white dresses".<sup>15</sup> Marginalized by language and culture, most Maya women do not complete high school. Education in Belize is provided in English, even though most teachers speak English as a second language. There is only one high school that affirms the Maya traditions, and two Maya bilingual schools located in the south of the country. Other schools operate with teachers that are not properly trained in cross-cultural education, nor in any of the Maya languages (Yucatec, Mopan, Q'eqchi').

In these denominational Roman Catholic schools, the Ministry of Education and Youth provides salaries for underpaid teachers and minimal funding for supplies, as the church is seen as responsible for delivering educational service.<sup>16</sup>

**Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW's Article 10 in relation to Maya women rights.**

## **We believe in our Cultural Way of Life**

*We believe in our cultural way of life. We want to promote the traditional plants we grow on our lands. We need a Maya women's food market. Young women need access to land to be entrepreneurs. We need to get young women involved in working the land, since so many leave our villages for work.*

---

<sup>13</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Considerations of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Combined third and fourth periodic reports of State parties. Belize. CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4. 26 September 2005, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. The IFLA/FAIFE World Report Series. Belize. [https://cdn.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/faiife/publications/ifla-worldreport/24\\_ifla-faiife\\_2007\\_cr\\_-\\_belize.pdf](https://cdn.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/faiife/publications/ifla-worldreport/24_ifla-faiife_2007_cr_-_belize.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> George Ann Gregory. "Legacies of colonialism: The Education of Maya in Belize, p. 128. <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/HOT/HOT-9.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Yanira Oliveras-Ortiz, Wesley D. Hickey (2019) Educational Leadership in a Mayan Village in Southern Belize: Challenges faced by a Mayan Woman Principal. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*. Vol.23, Issue 1, 2020. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555458919874420>

# Discrimination in Maternal Health




*Maya women dream of healthy families.  
So we want to revive our traditional medicine  
practices.*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' re wanq  
kawal re xjunkab'lal.  
Ut naqaj xwaklesinkil lix roqsinkil xb'aneb'qaj  
xe'toon.*

## Article 12

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning.
2. Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph 1 of this article, States Parties shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation.





A major problem in Belize are the high maternal mortality rates caused by pregnancy and childbirth complications.<sup>17</sup> The leading causes of hospitalization among young women 15-29 years are related to pregnancy, childbirth and puerperium,<sup>18</sup> which largely affect women in rural areas, such as Maya women. Travel is difficult for pregnant women, especially when in labor, due to villages in remote areas where there is no access to emergency transportation, and most is slow and unsafe for pregnant and recent postpartum women. Belize doesn't integrate Maya traditional birth attendants into the national health system, nor does it recognize and train Maya traditional birth attendants.

The Committee expressed its concern about the inadequate recognition and protection of the reproductive health and rights of women in Belize.<sup>19</sup> In 2005 the government of Belize informed the Committee that knowledge of contraceptive methods was the lowest among the Maya population, where about 8% didn't even know of any method of contraception.<sup>20</sup>

Maya women's access to health care is limited through under-resourced community health centers or by traveling to urban areas where the available services are superior to the services available in rural areas. Maya women don't have a semi/full equipped clinic where they can see a doctor. Their community services also lack medication, which largely impacts children and women.

### **Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW's Article 12 in relation to Maya women rights.**

#### **I was alone, and no one spoke my language**

*In my first pregnancy a midwife helped me with herbs and massage. For my second, I had to travel on the back of a motorcycle to go to a clinic with medicine. I was in pain and bleeding. Later in the pregnancy, I started bleeding again, and I couldn't walk. I had to travel for an hour on the back of pick up truck to get to the local hospital. They told me I needed to go two hours away for an ultrasound. They said I needed a cesarean section. I was alone, and no one spoke my language. When they sent me home 48 hours later, I had to hire a car to get back home with my newborn, which cost me close to BZ\$1000.*

---

<sup>17</sup> Kesley Snodgrass (2017) Belize: Maternal Mortality and Morbidity. Global Public Health <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/pubh100global/10>

<sup>18</sup> Kesley Snodgrass (2017) Belize: Maternal Mortality and Morbidity. Global Public Health <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/pubh100global/10>

<sup>19</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Considerations of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Combined third and fourth periodic reports of State parties. Belize. CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4. 26 September 2005.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Considerations of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Combined third and fourth periodic reports of State parties. Belize. CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4. 26 September 2005.

# Lack of Rural Development Policies for Maya Women




*Maya women dream of lifting up our communities.  
So we want to be empowered to do it.*

*Lix Matk'eb' li qana'chineb' aj ralch'och' re xwaqlesinkil qaj k'aleb'aal.  
Ut naqaj xkawilal qach'ool, xtutuukilal qach'ool, kawaq qach'ool, xkwankilal qaj yehom sa'  
k'ulub'anb'il na'leb'.*

## Article 14

1. States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
  - (a) To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels;
  - (b) To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counseling and services in family planning;
  - (c) To benefit directly from social security programmes;
  - (d) To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency;
  - (e) To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self employment;
  - (f) To participate in all community activities;
  - (g) To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes;
  - (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.



The root of discrimination against Indigenous women is a lack of protection for their lands and violations of their right to self-determination. In Belize, the situation is no different. Currently, the government of Belize is developing a land policy to recognize, for the first time in its colonial and republican history, Maya lands. This policy was developed without any prior consultation with Maya people. The state of Belize has yet to officially recognize the Maya people as a collective legal subject, which prevents them from using official venues to complain and demand their rights as a collective subject.

The Maya women of Belize have innumerable problems related to the enjoyment of land rights, such as those identified in the General Observation 39:

The lack of legal title to the territories of Indigenous Peoples increases their vulnerability to illegal incursions and to the implementation of development projects without their free, prior and informed consent by both State and non-State actors. Indigenous women and girls – in particular those who are widows, heads of households or orphans – disproportionately face barriers in gaining access to land, resulting in the loss of their livelihoods and threatening their culture, their intrinsic link to their environment, their food and water security and their health. [...] They also experience challenges in owning, holding, controlling, inheriting and administering land, in particular when they are widowed and have to care for their families on their own. <sup>21</sup>

As many other Indigenous women in other parts of the world, Maya women of Belize are “particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, conflict, genderbased domestic and other forms of violence, the denial of or limitation of access to property rights, and the violation of their right to inherit their land.”<sup>22</sup> In general, Maya women’s decision-making is subordinated to their marital status and relationship with men.

**Belize is not in compliance with CEDAW’s Article 14 in relation to Maya women rights.**

---

<sup>21</sup> United Nations. *The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 39 on the rights of indigenous women and girls. Draft, para. 20, 21.*

<sup>22</sup> United Nations. *Department of Economic and Social Affairs. State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples. Rights to lands, territories and resources. New York, United Nations, 2021, p. 120*

## APPENDIX 1

### *Belize Maya Women's Recommendations*

1. Maya women have the right to participate in meetings and other development activities that affect their communities.
2. Maya women have the right to participate in demarcation efforts for their communities.
3. Maya women have the right to be informed and educated about their human rights.
4. Maya women have the right to participate in the development of community laws.
5. Maya women have the right to equal land ownership and to inherit land.
6. Maya women demand respect and revival of their traditional medicine.
7. Maya women demand scholarships for midwifery training of Maya women in traditional and modern medicine, and respect for their privacy.
8. Maya women demand safe, affordable transportation for pregnant women and new mothers. They demand accessible emergency services.
9. Maya women demand more leadership roles and direct consultation to develop policies that affect them.



## APPENDIX 2

### *Belize Maya Women's Dreams of Human Rights*

There is no exact translation for 'human rights' in Mopan Maya. Instead the Indigenous organization, the Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management, interviewed three generations of Maya women about dreams for their lives, for their daughters and granddaughters. Only then were they asked what 'human rights' means to them. Raylal, a grandmother, recalls how she was married at a young age, "So young I didn't even have a chance to think or dream about my future."

Raylal's father was abusive to her mother who would run away and leave her alone to care for her siblings. Her grandfather arranged Raylal's marriage with the advice, "since your parents are always fighting, the best thing for you is to have a husband who will take care of you."

When asked about dreams for her granddaughters, she hoped they could get the education she never received since it was "not the norm for girls at that time."

To Raylal, human rights means everyone – even girls -- can go to school, and no one can be mistreated by their partner. Her daughter, Yasil, had a different experience. She loved playing sports and even made it to a national tournament. But her school grades were so poor, she couldn't qualify for high school. Yasil dreams that her daughter and granddaughters finish school since "I don't want them to end up like me."

To Yasil, human rights means that Maya women have the right to speak up. "If something not good is happening to us, we should not tolerate it. We need to speak up."

Sastal, Yasil's daughter (and Raylal's granddaughter) dreams of growing up to help her mother "to repay her for all that she has done for me." She hopes her future children will help her if she can't finish high school. She hopes for grandchildren who are "educated with good jobs." To Sastal, human rights means "someone can be anything they want, and no one can prevent them from doing so."

As a whole, these interviews show that despite the substantial barriers, the dreams of self-determination and of freedom from violence and coercion, are growing stronger across generations of Maya women.

*All names have been changed to protect the identity of the interviewees.*





Sunflower Street, Punta Gorda, Belize  
Tel: +501-615-8536  
Email: [communications.satiim@gmail.com](mailto:communications.satiim@gmail.com)



**Funded by  
the European Union**

