

MANAGUA, 5 November 2010 - Nicaragua has made some progress promoting gender equity and the empowerment of women, but it will have to step up efforts and overcome a number of hurdles if it is to eliminate inequalities between the sexes at all levels by 2015.

This view was expressed by U.N. experts, Nicaraguan authorities and representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at a two-day seminar on Nicaragua: Women, Work and Leadership, which ended Thursday in Managua.

The 2015 deadline was set by the world's leaders in 2000 for achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The seminar dealt with the third MDG, on promoting gender equality and empowering women.

The eight MDGs are to halve the proportion of poor and hungry people in the world, from 1990 levels, achieve universal primary education, reduce child mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters, promote gender equity, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and develop a global partnership for development.

María Rosa Renzi, head of the MDGs unit in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office and the local representative of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), said Nicaragua has a good chance of eliminating gender inequality at all educational levels by 2015.

According to 2005-2009 figures from several sources, quoted by Renzi, more girls and women have entered the educational system in Nicaragua, and a solid framework of laws has been approved to support and guarantee women's rights.

Preschool, primary, secondary and university education enrolment rates in Nicaragua are now higher for women and girls than for men and boys.

"Enrolment in primary, secondary and university education has grown significantly in the last 10 years," Renzi said. Between 1997 and 2008, secondary education coverage rose from 29.9 percent to 48.1 percent of girls, and from 24.8 percent to 42.9 percent of boys.

The Nicaraguan constitution states that education is a basic universal human right that is both free and obligatory.

"Education is the key to development. That is why equity requires that women as well as men should have more and better education. If either sex falls behind on education it is a cause for concern," Renzi said.

Despite progress in formal school enrolment, gender equity in other spheres continues to face hurdles, according to the U.N. expert.

One problem is the quality of educational content: what is taught in classrooms reproduces gender stereotypes that perpetuate discrimination against women and their subordination in society, she said.

Women are also still exposed to gender-specific violence, Renzi said.

"At work, women receive unequal pay compared with men's wages. The proportion of women in political positions and government decision-making posts is low. The same is true in professional associations, trade unions and other areas," the expert said.

Furthermore, the labour market continues to perpetuate a gender-based division of labour, and women tend to be relegated to lower skilled jobs.

According to UNDP statistics, the rate of violence against women remains high, and they have little recourse to justice in these cases.

For example, the Institute of Legal Medicine reported 11,313 cases of domestic violence in 2009, compared to 10,189 in 2006. Over 70 percent of the victims were women.

Only one-quarter of the incidents were referred to the office of the public prosecutor for investigation and possible prosecution.

Isabel Green, head of the Nicaraguan Women's Institute (INIM), said these problems are a legacy of previous governments and neoliberal policies "that fostered models which excluded women in all spheres of Nicaraguan society."

Green attended the opening session of the seminar, which was organised by the international news agency Inter Press Service (IPS) in partnership with the UNDP, with the support of Puntos de Encuentro, an NGO. It was sponsored by The Netherlands through the MDG3 Fund.

The Nicaraguan official stressed that the left-wing government of President Daniel Ortega has generated "a culture of change and equality, through public policies and social programmes directed at improving women's quality of life."

According to Green, social programmes like Zero Hunger and the Bono Productivo Alimentario, a food production voucher scheme, have benefited over 50,000 poor women.

More than 35,000 women micro-entrepreneurs have benefited from funding and loans thanks to the Zero Usury programme, which according to Green demonstrates the government's commitment to the empowerment and independence of Nicaraguan women, and to the fight against poverty.

In September the government announced that the extreme poverty rate had fallen to 9.7 percent, from 17 percent in 2005.

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, with 47 percent of its 5.7 million

people surviving on less than two dollars a day. More than one million women, out of the nearly three million in the country, suffer extreme poverty, according to the Nicaraguan Institute of Information for Development.

In the view of Pablo Mandeville, the permanent UNDP representative and resident coordinator of U.N. agencies in Nicaragua, the MDGs, to a greater or lesser extent, "are achievable, but this will require additional efforts by all sectors."

"Without gender equity in a society, comprehensive development is not possible," he said, while calling for united efforts on the part of public institutions, civil society organisations, the media and journalists. (END)

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