



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
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Summary record of the 807th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 3 August 2007, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Šimonović

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Initial report of the Cook Islands
(CEDAW/C/COK/1; CEDAW/C/COK/Q/1 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of the Cook Islands took places at the Committee table.*

2. **Mr. Rasmussen** (Cook Islands), introducing the initial report of the Cook Islands (CEDAW/C/COK/1), said that his country, in its efforts to understand the implications of the Convention and to tackle the challenges faced by the women of the Cook Islands, had received valuable support from the Government of New Zealand, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

3. There were many reasons to be positive about the situation of women in the Cook Islands. From the start of self-rule in 1965 and for two decades, a woman had held the position of Speaker of Parliament. Currently, the Deputy Speaker was a woman, and the country had one female Cabinet minister and three female Members of Parliament. More women than men held titles of paramount chief, the highest order of customary title. The number of women in the professions and heading their own businesses was on the increase. In addition, women had served as heads of overseas missions of the Cook Islands and as heads of ministries. Lastly, women were regarded as the backbone of the family and the linchpins of the close community relations that were so important in the Cook Islands.

4. Traditional values had shaped the roles of men and women in the Cook Islands from the earliest days of its history. Subsequently, a number of other factors, such as the advent of Christianity and the introduction of Western political and legal institutions, had influenced the definition of gender activities and roles. The Cook Islands had become a party to the Convention through New Zealand's ratification in 1985 and had acceded to the Convention in its own right in 2006. As a result, the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women had been recognized as

the ultimate goal of efforts to improve the situation of women in the Cook Islands.

5. One of the problems faced by women of the Cook Islands, particularly those from the outer islands, was that they lacked opportunities for education. Factors such as early pregnancy and the clear designation of women's domestic duties exacerbated the problem. It was also virtually impossible for women to enter the Church as members of the clergy. The greatest challenges to achieving compliance with the Convention were the fact that the country's islands were scattered over such a large area, which made communications difficult, and the difficulty of convincing men in particular to accept that inequalities between men and women had a negative impact on national development.

6. In 1985, the Cook Islands had become a party also to the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. In the same year, it had hosted a Pacific islands regional conference on women. However, in the ensuing decade, the country had made only limited progress in promoting gender equality. In 1995, it had participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women and had become a party to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. As a follow-up, it had adopted a National Policy on Women, together with a National Plan of Action for its implementation, and had arranged for both documents to be translated into the Cook Islands Maori language and disseminated throughout the country. The economic recession of 1995 had somewhat distracted attention from the importance of implementing the Convention, but the country's dynamic women's organizations had worked hard to sustain national commitment to the advancement of women. Cooperation between the National Council of Women and the Government had been strengthened; in particular, they had worked together on the organization of the biennial national conferences on women.

7. The Cook Islands had just withdrawn all three of its reservations to the Convention, relating to the recruitment of women to the armed forces, traditional and cultural practices (articles 2 (f) and 5 (a)) and maternity leave provision (article 11, paragraph 2 (b)). Women of the Cook Islands were currently serving in a peace mission to the Solomon Islands and in the New Zealand, Australian and United States armies. The Government's proposal to withdraw the reservations on

traditional practices had recently been accepted by the Koutu Nui, a group of chiefs that advised the Government on matters relating to customs and land. The Cabinet had recently approved a legislative reform package that would include provisions on maternity leave.

8. The equal right of women and men to own land and property had long been recognized by the Land Court, which also now recognized women's right to the title of chief. Women had enjoyed the right to vote and to stand for Parliament since the Cook Islands had become self-governing in 1965. The Convention had been translated into the Cook Islands Maori language in 2001 and disseminated throughout the country. Copies had also been distributed to all Government ministries and agencies and to all gender-based NGOs. Women from all parts of the country and from all walks of life had participated in the preparation of the initial report through a nationwide consultation process. The draft report had also been widely disseminated for public comment.

9. One of the Government's major priorities in the allocation of budget funds was the provision of equitable access to health and education for both women and men. Universal education for all children up to the age of 15 had been achieved, together with a high literacy rate and low child and maternal mortality rates. In addition, the first female High Court judge — a New Zealander — had recently been appointed, and a number of women of the Cook Islands were Justices of the Peace.

10. The most recent biennial conference on women had focused on women's rights as set out in the Convention and had resulted in the adoption of a two-year action plan to advance the implementation of the Convention. With the help of various parties, a training exercise had recently been conducted in preparation for the dialogue with the Committee. In addition, a law reform committee had recently been formed, one of whose tasks would be to facilitate the implementation of Convention-related legislative reform. The Cook Islands also expected to accede to the Optional Protocol in the coming weeks.

11. Efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women would be intensified in the future. Priorities would include the formulation of a national gender policy, the acceleration of gender mainstreaming in key Government ministries and

agencies, training in gender issues and awareness-raising. The definition of discrimination set out in the Convention would be incorporated into domestic law, and special measures to increase the number of women in decision-making positions would be identified. Lastly, a comprehensive programme of law reform would be implemented to ensure that all national laws would be consistent with the Convention. Priority in that regard would be given to laws relating to sexual offences, employment protection, equality in marriage and family life, protection from discrimination, and protection of vulnerable groups such as women with disabilities, migrant women and women living in rural and remote areas. His delegation would welcome the Committee's support and guidance in its endeavours.

Articles 1 and 2

12. **Ms. Patten**, welcoming the State party's undertaking to ratify the Optional Protocol and its efforts to eliminate discrimination, asked what level of priority was being accorded to the process of law reform and what time frame was envisaged for that process. It was vital to incorporate a definition of discrimination — preferably in line with article 1 of the Convention — into domestic law so that it could be invoked in the courts. Noting that legal aid was currently available only to accused parties in criminal cases and that the cost of access to justice was high, she asked what plans were in place to improve access to justice for women. Lastly, she requested more details of the budget allocation for the promotion of gender equality in the current year and future years.

13. **Ms. Shin**, noting that she had learned a great deal from her participation in the training exercise for the Cook Islands' dialogue with the Committee, agreed that there was an urgent need for law reform and that a mechanism should be put in place to ensure a gender-sensitive budget not just in the current year but for the long term. Priority should also be given to the collection of gender-disaggregated data in all areas, so as to provide a sound basis for gender-related policies.

14. **Ms. Saiga**, welcoming the State party's withdrawal of its reservations to the Convention and its intention to ratify the Optional Protocol, requested more information on the content of the Labour Bill, particularly its provisions on maternity leave and sexual harassment, given that the report mentioned the difficulties faced in gaining acceptance of such provisions. Since Parliament was in session for a

relatively small number of days each year, the State party should indicate how bills were prioritized. Lastly, she requested more information about the relationship between Parliament and the traditional advisory bodies known as the House of Ariki and the Koutu Nui.

15. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a member of the Committee, commended the participatory process that had been employed for the preparation of the State party report. However, it seemed that Parliament had not been involved; future reports should be submitted to it for its consideration.

16. Having welcomed the withdrawal of the reservations to the Convention, she said that it was vital to incorporate the Convention fully into domestic law. Priority should be given to amendment of those laws already identified as incompatible with the Convention. In addition, the definition of discrimination in national law should be consistent with the provisions of the Convention. Lastly, she asked whether the principle of equality had been embodied in the Constitution or in other national laws, and what legislative measures were envisaged for the practical realization of that principle, in line with article 2 of the Convention.

17. **Mr. Rasmussen** (Cook Islands) said that the consultant retained by the Government to review the policing situation in the Cook Islands had recommended substantial changes to policing laws. In response, the Cabinet had established a law reform committee to consider specifically such issues as police powers. That committee had identified the need to establish a law commission, a bill on the establishment of which was currently under consideration.

18. The report's passage through Cabinet had initially been very difficult owing to entrenched attitudes among the predominantly older, conservative, male Cabinet members. Progress was, however, being made. He had been working closely with the Crown Law Office to identify areas where legislation needed to be reformed in order to take account of women's issues. He was fairly sure that one of the law commission's recommendations would be the incorporation of the Convention into domestic legislation.

19. The working group established to lead those reforms had proposed that Government staff should be guided by those objectives. Medium-term initiatives included a law reform package to improve the Constitution. In the medium to long term, it planned to

work on more substantive areas of legal reform. He did acknowledge, however, that the process was likely to meet a number of challenges.

20. A number of structural changes had taken place in the Cook Islands. After many years of coalition Governments, one party had won a majority in the most recent elections. It was something of a novelty finally to have a single-party Government that could actually decide policies which would remain in place for an entire term of office.

21. All women had access to legal aid and legal representation. Kinship connections played an important role in that regard too. As a lawyer, he had a social obligation to represent his extended family free of charge. It was not therefore difficult for women to obtain a lawyer. The main reason that women of the Cook Islands went to court was to defend their equal inheritance rights in land disputes. There were concerns, however. For example, the Cook Islands Women's Counselling Service (Punanga Tauturu Inc.) had been set up to advise women who were victims of domestic violence and abuse.

22. Turning to budgetary matters, he said that the central islands and the less developed outer islands always had conflicting interests. The annual budget — \$100 million in 2007 — covered all activities, including Government administration. Following the economic crisis in the mid-1990s, the budget had been cut and the overly large public service restructured. Today, the public service was much smaller, ensuring that resources were distributed fairly.

23. The Gender and Development Division received a token budget to cover staff costs. When specific activities required funding, it could use its contingency budget. The Division had only one or two staff members, but staff could be seconded from other ministries if necessary. It was important to bear in mind that the Cook Islands was a very small country.

24. Data collection in the Cook Islands was complicated. Because of the oral tradition, there were few written records. Even though much more could be done, the Government had begun to address the issue, including by collecting data on tourism and retaining a consultant to produce data on maternity, among other issues. He was confident, therefore, that with time the situation would improve.

25. The Labour Bill had met with significant opposition from the private sector. There was, however, a clear need for such legislation, given the lack of protection in that sector. The Government had been lobbied intensively on the subject and was committed to enacting the Bill, in all likelihood at its next session.

26. The House of Ariki had been established in acknowledgement of the importance of traditional chiefs. Its role was primarily ceremonial; the Government decided whether to endorse its view on a particular matter. If an official failed to consult with the local chief, however, he might not be re-elected. The Koutu Nui were more active and more militant.

27. In the past, it had been difficult to have any prioritization of bills, as the main priority of any political party had been to stay in government. Now that a majority Government was in power, that had changed.

28. The Constitution did not make a distinction between men and women, but simply stated that all Cook Islanders were subject to its provisions. It was frequently invoked in Parliament and during changes of Government, and contained a wide variety of provisions. He could certainly envisage the Convention being incorporated into domestic law, but parliamentary approval would be required first. Under the normal procedure, new legislation received three readings, at the last of which it was approved by the Governor General.

29. Lastly, draft legislation needed majority approval in Parliament, which was the supreme body in the Cook Islands and often met in camera. The role of the opposition was to stimulate debate and provide a system of checks and balances.

30. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a member of the Committee, said that it was important to involve Parliament in the process, since the Convention was legally binding.

Article 3

31. **Ms. Tavares da Silva** was curious to know why the Women's Division had been renamed the Gender and Development Division and why the work programme had moved from concentrating on activities targeted solely for women to incorporating the entire community irrespective of gender and age (report,

para. 2.11). Had those changes brought any added value?

32. While welcoming the Government's Gender and Development Programmes and National Sustainable Development Plan, which contained specific goals for women, she wished to know how coordination and gender mainstreaming were ensured and who monitored implementation.

33. Lastly, she would be interested to know why the report focused so much on disabled women and girls, and young women, when other groups of women required attention too.

34. **Ms. Neubauer** said that the resources allocated to the body now known as the Gender and Development Division seemed to have decreased in recent years. She therefore questioned the Government's commitment to granting the Division the resources it needed to carry out its tasks. She also wished to know more about the link between the Division and the Cook Islands National Council of Women.

35. **Ms. Dairiam** asked the State party to explain the link between its gender mainstreaming exercise and the National Council of Women. She also wished to know whether Government departments had been given any training on their obligation to incorporate women's rights or any orders to report on compliance with that obligation.

36. The National Sustainable Development Plan included targets for the advancement of women, but also aimed to promote the private sector as the engine for economic growth. Noting that privatization in other countries had not always helped women's rights, she wished to know how the State party reconciled those seemingly conflicting provisions.

Article 4

37. **Ms. Tavares da Silva** said that the State party's comments on temporary special measures (report, para. 4.2) suggested a lack of understanding of article 4 of the Convention. The purpose of such measures was not to disregard merit or give women special assistance, but rather to compensate for years of discrimination against women and accelerate change. In that sense, they were valid mechanisms for pursuing equality and establishing a balance. General recommendation No. 25 provided a detailed

explanation of temporary special measures and practical modalities.

38. **Mr. Rasmussen** (Cook Islands) said that his delegation would need more time to prepare responses to some of the questions.

39. The apparent decrease in the budget for the Gender and Development Division had to be seen in context. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Social Services had about three staff members dealing with welfare payments of up to \$6 million, while the Gender and Development Division had one or two staff members to cover an expanding area and they were still in the process of identifying the needs that were to be addressed. The staff gathered information and made recommendations so that a decision could be taken by the head of the Ministry or, more frequently, by the Cabinet in a collective decision-making process. There was also the issue of financial resources and the relevancy of the National Sustainable Development Plan. Some of the donor agencies imposed certain conditions on the aid they provided to the Cook Islands.

40. The Government often worked with community organizations and the Gender and Development Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Social Services gave priority to its work with the Cook Islands National Council of Women, although in an ad hoc relationship, in order to synchronize the efforts of the Government and non-governmental organizations. Consideration had been given to establishing a more formal relationship.

41. He took note of Ms. Tavares da Silva's comments about temporary special measures to address past historical discrimination against women. As mentioned in the report, women of the Cook Islands preferred to be seen to stand on their own two feet rather than receive special assistance. His delegation understood the purpose of article 4 and there had been some instances of affirmative programmes to promote women's welfare and education, especially for women in the outer islands, who had less educational and other opportunities. Special measures were being considered in such cases.

42. Politics was seen as a yardstick for measuring women's participation. There was no special assistance for women entering politics: they had to rally support, find their own funding and put their name forward, just as men did. It was true, however, that the political

parties were still dominated by men who preferred to select male candidates. There were three women currently in Parliament and there had been others in the past.

43. The Ministry of Education had launched a very successful initiative whereby it paid for female secondary students to attend an employment week in Rarotonga. As part of that initiative, the annual Women in Science and Technology Conference gave students the opportunity to meet women working in traditionally male occupations such as air traffic controllers, meteorologists, policewomen, doctors, dentists, marine biologists and environmental scientists. Some boys had also expressed an interest in traditionally female occupations such as nursing and hairdressing.

44. The Gender and Development Division was putting together a list of women for nomination to Government boards and committees. That was an area where women had achieved a high level of participation.

45. There had been a question about categories of women other than disabled women and girls and young women. The report had also referred to women from the outer islands and women migrant workers. Policies were in place to protect migrant workers from abuse or exploitation in their jobs. Such areas had not been ignored but had not been included in the text of the report.

Article 5

46. **Ms. Gaspard** asked whether the fact of reporting on the Convention had contributed to advancing the situation of women or the awareness of discrimination against them.

47. In relation to stereotypes, the idea of respect for culture and traditions was very often used to justify discrimination, especially against women. Traditions and culture could also evolve and the report itself provided the example of the change in women's status brought about by the arrival of missionaries.

48. She asked for more information on the Government's work to address stereotypes. Negative stereotypes had consequences for women, not only in terms of their minority status in relation to decision-making posts, but also in terms of violence. She asked what specific measures the Government was taking to

ensure that women and men were presented in an egalitarian fashion.

49. **Ms. Begum** welcomed the Government's initiative to rewrite the science and social science curriculum in a gender-neutral manner but noted that stereotypical attitudes persisted in the system. Women still held stereotypical roles in the workplace and were socialized to accept sexual harassment, for which there was no legal recourse. There was also no law against domestic violence, although it was the most frequently reported crime against women in the Cook Islands.

50. Inadequate legal aid was another significant impediment to victim protection. Marital rape was not recognized as an offence, and the growing prevalence of sexual violence against women was a major cause of mental stress. She asked whether the Government planned to enact legislation on sexual harassment and sexual violence in order to protect women from prejudices, stereotypical attitudes and violence. She asked for detailed information on any existing victim protection mechanisms and support services. It would also be interesting to know more about the role of the Ombudsperson in reducing violence and how many complaints had been registered in the current year. She asked whether there were any training programmes on gender issues for judges, police and law enforcement officials to sensitize them to gender equality, human rights and stereotypes.

51. **Ms. Simms** said that stereotypes continued to exist even within the most progressive legislative framework. Some stereotypes were protected in the name of culture and tradition, for example in relation to women's access to a certain type of land. In Pukapuka, women were suffering major health problems owing to their tradition of working in the taro swamps and they were now asking men to assist them in that work. Sharing the health problems with men might not be an appropriate solution and the Government should consider its obligation to educate the public about environmental issues as well as gender issues.

52. In relation to temporary special measures and stereotypes, she found it strange that all judges in the Cook Islands, including the first female judge, were appointed from New Zealand. She wondered whether that was a requirement in the legislation of the Cook Islands, which followed the Westminster model. Surely a judge could be found among the many people from

the Cook Islands who were living in New Zealand and benefiting from its impressive educational system.

53. Tourism was expanding in the Cook Islands and she asked what was being done to combat sexual stereotypes of island women in the Pacific and Caribbean islands. The single case of prosecution of a tourist referred to in the report was perhaps the tip of an iceberg.

54. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a member of the Committee, said that the State party had an obligation to prevent violence against women, protect women from violence, prosecute perpetrators and provide compensation. The new legislation should follow the Committee's general recommendation No. 19 on violence against women and perhaps make use of the specific recommendations made in the Secretary-General's recent report on violence against women (A/61/122/Add.1).

55. She asked for more information on the recommendation from the Cook Islands Women's Counselling Centre that the definition of rape be extended to include marital rape. She was interested to know what type of protection orders were available and how frequently were they used. Was it easy for women to obtain them? It would also be interesting to know what additional measures were possible to protect women against violence. She wondered whether statistical data were collected, as they were extremely important for conveying a clear picture of the incidence of violence and the preventive measures that were needed. Very few countries collected specific data such as the number of women murdered by their husbands or ex-husbands each year.

56. **Mr. Rasmussen** (Cook Islands), in reference to the idea that culture and tradition might be used to justify discrimination, said that the questions of the Committee members seemed to reveal an attitude to areas about which Cook Islanders as a people were very sensitive. Culture had always been seen as a justification of identity and the cultural upbringing of Cook Islanders was instilled in their inner being. For example, their connection to the land was something deeply spiritual, as was the case throughout Polynesia. Thus the shaping of the Cook Islanders was a complex phenomenon, with the cognitive sector of their brain dictating to them certain things that were uniquely Cook Islander. He gave examples of the traditional concept of the powerful decision-making woman,

drawn from all over Polynesia, including Samoa, Tonga, and Tokelau, explaining that the concept was also inherent in the values embedded in the Cook Islanders. Culture was something that could change. For example, when the Christian missionaries had arrived in the Islands, they had caused some changes in the culture. One change was that church attendance had become an integral part of Cook Island life, not only for worship but also, and perhaps primarily, for social relations and social cohesion.

57. However, the Government was aware of the dangers in negative stereotypes. The issue was how to identify those values that perpetuated stereotypes against women. It would be a huge task to try to overcome them, but the Government intended to try. It had explored several ways of doing so, primarily legislative change and challenges in the courts.

58. In response to the question about negative stereotypes in areas such as education, he observed that the islands' educational curriculum was aligned with the New Zealand system. The textbooks came from New Zealand and thus did not contain stereotypical depictions. As part of their training, teachers destined for the Cook Islands completed a course on human development, one module of which was gender education. The course examined the barriers to learning and the social structures that perpetuated discriminatory practices, as well as ways to mitigate their effect. However, it had to be acknowledged that more training was needed to eliminate stereotypes.

59. The Cook Islands were not a single cultural expression, but a whole variety of expressions. On one island, the value system dictated that it was the women who planted the land, which was why they were working in the taro swamps. The island's inhabitants could not simply be told to change their thinking about values, but government policy on raising the awareness of women and eliminating discrimination against them could certainly be influential. As for the specific matter of what the Government was doing about those women's health concerns, he pointed out that the populations in the outer islands were relatively small, and shrinking. Lured by greater opportunities elsewhere, particularly in New Zealand, for education, health, and welfare benefits, they were leaving in large numbers. The Government was trying to offer incentives to encourage them to stay, such as the appointment of doctors to the outer islands, or

infrastructure improvements, but the depopulation continued.

60. With regard to the issues of inadequacy of laws against rape, marital rape or domestic violence, and inadequacy of legal aid, the legislative reform initiated by the Government included work by a committee to ensure consistency between domestic law and the Convention. Since the whole process was being started from scratch, it was quite practicable to incorporate the requirements of the Convention.

61. Until recently, the public had felt that the police was inadequately dealing with burglaries or violence including domestic violence. The police had claimed to be under-resourced, but on Rarotonga at least there was a relatively large police force that the Government had seen as being fairly inactive. It had therefore commissioned an objective review of the functioning of the police force. The recommendations from the review had been wide-ranging, and in particular a neutral Police Commissioner, from outside the Islands, had been appointed. As to why judges were appointed from New Zealand, he said that kinship relationships on the Islands were so strong that the Government had feared that judges or a Police Commissioner appointed from within the population, might not be impartial.

62. Training programmes were in place for the judiciary and for law enforcement agencies. For justices of the peace, many of whom were recent female appointees, there had been workshops in Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, covering issues of jurisdiction, or domestic violence, or the implementation of the Crimes Act. A domestic violence unit had been established in the police force, which provided regular training to front-line officers.

63. The statistics on domestic violence showed that the number of cases had been declining slightly over the past three years: 151, 145 and 116 cases. Protection orders to shield women from violence were available under the legal system of the Cook Islands. They might remove a woman from an abusive relationship and place her under the protection of a family or an authority, or alternatively they might stipulate a distance that a man must keep away from her. However, on a small island it might be physically impossible for the stipulated distance to be respected. There were admittedly some serious deficiencies in the system, in the sense that the protection orders were often not observed, and enforcement agencies did not

respond as quickly as they should. In addition, it was impossible to obtain an order over the weekend, although a non-molestation order could be issued with validity until the Monday morning, when the appropriate justice ministry office reopened. He hoped that with the changes in the regulatory environment, and the new emphasis on policing and dispensation of justice, the standards would be raised.

64. **The Chairperson** recalled that the New Zealand Government had recently appointed a task force on violence against women, which would be analysing all cases in which women had been murdered by their former husbands and reviewing the country's legislation on domestic violence. That might possibly be the subject of a bilateral agreement between the Cook Islands and New Zealand.

Article 6

65. **Mr. Flinterman**, noting that the Crimes Act of 1969 included a provision criminalizing slavery and the slave trade, asked whether that could be used as a basis for prosecution of perpetrators of modern-day slavery, i.e. trafficking of women. He had also noted that the Crimes Act criminalized not only the exploitation of prostitution, in full accord with the Convention, but also prostitutes themselves. He asked whether that latter provision was enforced and, if so, what measures were employed to help former prostitutes, such as assistance to find alternative employment. He wondered why the Government had opted not to criminalize the purchase of sex. Also, the report had stated that a package of law reforms had been passed relating to security and trafficking in persons, while the responses to the list of issues and questions (document CEDAW/C/COK/Q/1/Add.1) noted that the new laws had not yet been used. He asked whether those law reforms included assistance to the victims of trafficking.

66. Finally, the report also stated that there were no reliable data on organized prostitution since no research had been done, and that the police in the country did not consider organized prostitution to be a problem. That was surprising, given the importance of the tourist industry to the Cook Islands.

67. **Mr. Rasmussen** (Cook Islands) said that prostitution was not legalized. It was almost invisible in the Cook Islands, although it could not be said not to exist. It was true that the tourism industry invited the

practice of prostitution and the Government had measures in place, not necessarily to stop prostitution but to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, concerning which there had been a major upsurge in public education and awareness over the past two years.

68. The immigration laws of the Cook Islands permitted visitors to enter the country without a visa. There was no screening, except for criminal convictions, which meant that anyone who had a passport could visit and stay for 30 days. Concerned that this type of free access would encourage people to come to the Cook Islands to buy sex, the Government was now developing new immigration policies and laws. The so-called cultural performances were very provocative, being based on the stereotype of the scantily clad hula girl. The country was trying to move away from that image, by promoting a new brand that would be about authenticity. Many of the tourists were second- and third-time visitors, who came back for the islands' relaxed atmosphere. The Government wanted to convey to them the notion that Cook Islanders were human beings, not objects to be exploited. Unfortunately, no statistics were available on prostitution, but it was known that it was available to the crews of the cruise ships. The Government was keeping a watchful eye on that activity, with some progress having been achieved in policing it. The previous policing regime had been woefully inadequate for years, and a fresh attitude was being taken to the situation.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.