



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Committee on the Rights of the Child Sixty-first session

Summary record of the 1729th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 18 September 2012, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. Zermatten

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 pm.

Consideration of reports of States parties *(continued)*

Second to fourth periodic reports of Liberia (continued) (CRC/C/LBR/2-4; CRC/C/LBR/Q/2-4 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Liberia took places at the Committee table.*
2. **Mr. Gastaud** said that the Committee would appreciate further information regarding the reform of juvenile justice and asked whether the State party had put in place a programme for the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers.
3. **Ms. Sandberg** wished to know whether the procedure for accrediting and regularly monitoring the residential care institutions for children deprived of a family environment was systematically applied, particularly in remote areas of the country; what happened to institutions that did not meet the requisite criteria; and how the State party ensured that foster family placements were monitored twice yearly. Noting that a high number of children placed in orphanages ran away, she asked what measures had been taken to remedy that problem.
4. **Mr. Kotrane** said that, considering the dangerous working conditions to which many children were subjected, particularly in the rubber plantations, it would be useful to know whether the State party had adopted legislation in line with International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour and whether it intended to ratify Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment and work. He requested further information about efforts to establish juvenile justice.
5. **Ms. Wijemanne** asked what plans and programmes were proposed by the State party in order to provide wider access to mother and child health care, combat diseases that could be avoided through vaccination, as well as acute diarrhoea, anaemia, malaria and malnutrition, and promote breastfeeding. Information would also be appreciated on what the State party was doing to put an end to harmful traditional practices, early marriages and pregnancies and food taboos and to combat drug addiction among the young.
6. **The Chairperson** asked whether the State party was planning to take specific steps to eradicate corporal punishment at school.
7. **Ms. Duncan Cassell** (Liberia) said that, upon taking office in 2006, the Liberian Government had given special attention to public sector reform, involving the replacement of obsolete laws by new laws and the decentralization of services in order to make them available to the greatest possible number. With regard to the justice system, five judicial focal points were to be established throughout the country within three years and a juvenile court had already been set up in the Monrovia/Monserrado area, which would be followed by other counties once resources became available. In the present circumstances, ordinary courts were able to hold exceptional hearings to consider juvenile cases. It was planned that courts would eventually be set up to handle cases of sexual abuse and violence against women.
8. Awareness-raising workshops on gender issues and the specific needs of minors had also been organized for all persons working with children, such as judges, prosecutors, public defenders, police officers and nurses.
9. A diversion programme had been set up for children in conflict with the law, and young people had been trained to serve as advisers and act as intermediaries between problem children and the authorities. Minors for whom there was no choice but incarceration would be sent to the reform institution about to be set up and none of them

could be sentenced to life imprisonment, irrespective of the crime committed. All minors were required to be released at the age of 21 so as to have a chance of reintegration into society.

10. Courtrooms equipped with cameras were to be established in all the country's 15 counties so that children would in the future be able to testify away from the gaze of their aggressors.

11. Awareness-raising workshops would be held for magistrates in an attempt to bring down the particularly high rates of pretrial detention.

12. In collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Liberian authorities were making every effort to relocate families of unaccompanied minors; in the meantime, however, that was not preventing them from ensuring health care and education for those young people, including in French for those with French as their mother tongue. Moreover, 81 per cent of refugee children passed the exam set by the West Africa Examination Council.

13. A unit to combat transnational crime, including trafficking in human beings and arms and drug trafficking, had been set up within the police service, and several ministries had joined together to combat trafficking in children.

14. The Government had reopened a vocational training institution and was intending to focus in the future on technical training. In addition, it had established a task force to combat child labour and had adopted legislation to that end, thereby protecting children against the worst forms of labour under agreements with enterprises, which set a minimum age for recruitment and defined acceptable working conditions.

15. Lastly, in the event of a conflict, the provisions of the Children's Law took precedence over customary law.

16. **The Chairperson** wished to know what happened to juvenile offenders under the age of 16.

17. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) asked whether the State party was concerning itself with human capacity-building so as to be able, when the time came, to make the most of the material resources placed at its disposal.

18. **Ms. Tah** (Liberia) explained that Liberia was prepared to study the possibility of acceding to ILO Convention No. 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment. It also intended to define clearly the legal age of majority. A workshop on juvenile criminal justice to be held in November 2012 would offer an opportunity to discuss the treatment of juvenile offenders between the ages of 16 and 18.

19. **Ms. Lee** said that it was regrettable that ILO Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour was insufficiently applied in the country, as some out-of-school children were still forced to engage in dangerous work. What steps had the State party taken to make parents aware of the need to enrol their children in schools and what was being offered to them to make up for the loss of income and labour resulting from a child's enrolment in school?

20. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) said that, since the preparation of the periodic report, there had been a marked increase in the school enrolment rate of girls, following the rebuilding of schools that had been destroyed and thanks to school meals initiatives developed by the World Food Programme. With the help of the United Nations Children's Fund, the Ministry of Education had also launched school building and renovation campaigns in remote areas. A large number of teachers had been trained in order to fill vacant posts, with a resulting increase in the school enrolment rate in rural areas.

21. **The Chairperson** asked whether the State party had introduced early childhood education programmes, whether it offered education outside the traditional formal framework and whether vocational training was proposed to pupils.

22. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) explained that peace education was not included in school curricula but that there were “peace clubs” where children were encouraged to think about the causes of conflicts and ways of overcoming disagreements. As part of curriculum reform, peace education would henceforth be taught at school and textbooks would be modified accordingly. In addition, the Ministry of Education had adopted various measures to encourage women to go into teaching so as to limit the risk of children being victims of sexual harassment by male teachers. Any teacher found guilty of harassment was immediately dismissed. Following the mobilization of additional resources, the conduct of teachers was now closely monitored.

23. Vocational and technical education programmes, which were prominent in the new law on education, were designed first and foremost for young people who considered themselves too old to go back to school; they could thereby learn a trade and quickly find work. Some foreign companies with subsidiaries in the country were working in consultation with the Ministry of Education and proposed training targeted at the young with a view to developing a labour force adapted to their needs.

24. **Ms. Lee** asked what steps had been taken to prevent girls from dropping out of school, notably in the county of Montserrado, where school-dropout and repetition rates were particularly high.

25. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) enquired whether the provisions of the Convention were taught at school and covered in teacher training, as stipulated in the Children’s Law. The Committee would also like to know whether teachers and persons in contact with children received training on gender equality and the behaviour to be adopted in their work, so as to guard against cases of harassment and ill-treatment.

26. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) confirmed that the school completion rate was low, given that many children dropped out of school at the end of the first semester, particularly because of a lack of motivation. The Ministry of Education had decided to reintroduce an in-service teacher training programme leading to the award of an occupational proficiency certificate.

27. **The Chairperson** asked whether the State party had established an early childhood development strategy.

28. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) said that, in the context of the new law on education, the Government had drawn up an early childhood school care programme, which was currently being evaluated. Teaching materials and school premises had been adapted accordingly.

29. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) recalled that nearly 68 per cent of children did not attend school and would therefore be unlikely to benefit from improvements in the education system, particularly in early childhood activities. Was the State party proposing to develop in villages a parallel preschool system involving parents and traditional leaders, so as to take care of children before they were enrolled in school?

30. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) confirmed that State-subsidized early childhood development programmes were being implemented in villages.

31. **Ms. Cherue** (Liberia) explained that the Government had drawn inspiration from the Senegalese example of day-care centres run by parents and members of the community. There was currently only one, in Monrovia, but further institutions of the same type were planned in other cities in the country.

The meeting was suspended at 4.30 p.m. and resumed at 4.40 p.m.

32. **Ms. Cherue** (Liberia) said that, in recent years, the Liberian authorities had adopted a comprehensive health policy for children, which provided in particular for the distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets, vaccination campaigns and water and sanitation programmes. That policy was still hampered, however, by a lack of human resources, even though each county now had two doctors. The inaccessibility of some remote areas during the rainy season was also a problem. There were not enough midwives, especially in the south-eastern part of the country, and the maternal mortality rate was very high. It was planned to train more midwives; their salary had been increased in order to attract more people to the profession.

33. Liberia received contributions from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS in support of its efforts to that end. Health-care centres in urban areas and in some rural areas, proposed HIV-screening tests to pregnant women, offered them counselling services and monitored their pregnancy. It was, however, often difficult to obtain the agreement of women to such prenatal monitoring.

34. The Adoption Bill had been approved by the House of Representatives and would be enacted into law in early 2013. Ratification of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption was one of the priorities of the Government, which was already endeavouring to bring the adoption process into line with the provisions of the Convention.

35. All childcare institutions must be accredited by the authorities. The National Inter-agency Accreditation Committee, composed of representatives of various ministries, Save the Children and UNICEF, visited institutions and checked that they were in compliance with childcare standards. If they were not, they were forced to close; children were then transferred to another institution.

36. Many children were placed in orphanages by their parents, who did not have the means to raise them. The Government was carrying out a deinstitutionalization programme aimed at returning children to their biological families, and some orphanages had been turned into day-care centres. In recent years, few cases had been reported of children running away from orphanages.

37. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection was seeking to establish a formal framework for the practice of childcare by a member of the extended family or an elder, including tracking and monitoring the child's treatment.

38. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) requested fuller information about the training of social workers and the use of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

39. **Ms. Cherue** (Liberia) said that, in Liberia, there were only two training institutions for social workers and that, up to the present time, they had been offering a six-month course of training; however, a bachelor's degree in social work had recently been established. The authorities referred to the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

40. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) said that children with disabilities were not yet integrated into ordinary schools, as required by the new education law. They were mainly in the care of private facilities, which relied on external funding and Government subventions. A memorandum of understanding had recently been signed with Handicap International on a programme for persons with disabilities.

41. **Mr. Cardona Llorens** expressed concern that the new education law, which made it mandatory for parents to send their children to school, did not impose the same requirement on the parents of children with disabilities. Were those parents encouraged by awareness-raising measures to put their children into schools?

42. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) said that the parents of children with disabilities wanted their children to go to school but that the problem lay in the lack of suitable premises. The memorandum of understanding signed with Handicap International should lead to a solution.

43. **Ms. Duncan Cassell** (Liberia) said that a unit had been set up in the Ministry of Gender and Development to deal with issues relating to teenage girls and to address, in particular, problems of substance abuse and sexual exploitation, which a recent study had shown to be linked primarily to poverty. The boarding school system had been re-established and those schools would be admitting adolescent girls, who would benefit from all the necessary services on the spot, particularly in matters of health counselling. An economic empowerment programme for girls and women, designed to provide them with training in various occupations, was being implemented in three counties and should be extended to other counties.

44. A social cash transfer programme had been launched in two of the poorest counties. Its purpose was to help families to meet their children's needs, particularly by feeding them properly and sending them to school.

45. During the civil war, a very large number of families had taken refuge in the county of Montserrado. The current decline in the number of school enrolments in the county, particularly in Monrovia, was due to the development of other counties, which provided families with an incentive to return to their area of origin.

46. Because of the cross-cutting nature of the gender issue, all ministries and agencies were required to take account in their policies of the related guidelines that had been issued to them by the Government. In August 2012, initial training on the subject had been given to members of the national police service and to journalists; teachers would soon receive similar training in schools from teams led by the gender equality coordinator in each county, with the support of civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations.

47. **Ms. Cherue** (Liberia) said that a mental health unit existed in the Ministry of Health and Social Protection and that training was being provided to clinicians, with the help of the Carter Center, to enable them to give psychosocial support to victims of sexual aggression.

48. The problem of drug addiction, which mainly affected young people, was aggravated by the lack of psychologists and psychiatrists. The Ministry of Justice and Sport had recently set up an inter-agency committee to study ways of addressing the problem.

49. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection included not a Children's Protection Division but a Family Protection Division, which worked in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender and Development, particularly with regard to the dangers of illegal abortion, which was the only form of abortion available in Liberia

50. **The Chairperson**, while welcoming the establishment of criminal courts to handle cases of domestic violence, noted that the rate of violence, including sexual violence, remained very high, that corporal punishment was common and that there existed several harmful ritual practices that could lead to a child's death. He was therefore curious about the way in which the Government coordinated its action in respect of prevention, health care and justice.

51. **Ms. Duncan Cassell** (Liberia) said that there was a law on rape and that a bill on gender-based violence was being prepared.

52. **Ms. Tah** (Liberia) explained that a very large proportion of the population, even the most qualified and including law graduates, used the informal justice system, which they trusted more than the formal justice system. Even though trial by ordeal had been abolished

in 1935, it remained deeply rooted in traditional practice. People could not be convinced overnight that such a system was harmful; a radical change in mind set was needed.

53. Corporal punishment was no longer practised and could lead to prosecution for assault and battery. Children, families and the community as a whole were regularly called on in radio broadcasts to report such practices. While female genital mutilation was not prohibited as such in treaty-based law, criminal proceedings could be instituted for abduction or murder.

54. **Ms. Lee** wished to know on what grounds a person could be prosecuted for corporal punishment in the absence of an explicit prohibition of the practice at school or in the home.

55. **Ms. Tarpeh** (Liberia) explained that corporal punishment was indeed prohibited by law and that any teacher who had inflicted corporal punishment was subject to dismissal. It was essential for everyone to be continually on the lookout. It was also important to make parents understand that hitting a child was not a mere matter of discipline but a form of violence.

56. **Ms. Duncan Cassell** (Liberia) said that the new Children's Law and ongoing awareness-raising activities ensured that children were informed about their rights, in particular through community networks and through theatre groups which dramatized the provisions of the law so as to make them easily understandable.

57. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) expressed appreciation of the constructive, wide-ranging and fruitful dialogue between the Committee and the high-level delegation of Liberia, noting that it was composed exclusively of women. She welcomed the many advances that had been made, in particular the adoption of the Children's Law, and said that the Committee would make specific recommendations on certain points such as the improvement of coordination, the allocation of specific resources to children and juvenile justice.

58. **Ms. Duncan Cassell** (Liberia) said that Liberia was resolved to continue to further the rights of children and to progress in certain areas, particularly by drawing up a national plan of action and ratifying the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

59. **The Chairperson** said that he had taken due note of the delegation's commitment and that the Committee would be honoured if Liberia ratified the Optional Protocol on a communications procedure.

The meeting rose at 5.55 p.m.