



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

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
Forty-first session

Summary record of the 840th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 8 July 2008, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Šimonović

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

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

Fifth and sixth periodic reports of Iceland (continued) (CEDAW/C/ICE/5 and 6; CEDAW/C/ICE/Q/6 and Add.1)

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

Articles 10 to 14 (continued)

2. **Ms. Patten** commended the State party for its exceptionally low unemployment rate but expressed concern about the number of women who worked part time. It would be useful to have relevant statistical data and to hear about any measures taken to address the particular situation of those women. She was particularly interested in the availability of childcare facilities in both the public and private sectors. Structural wage discrimination was a persistent problem in Iceland and she would therefore like to know more about the progress made by the three working groups established to deal with that phenomenon. In that connection, the State party should indicate whether the working groups had been mandated to study both the public and private sectors and whether they would address the question of occupational segregation.

3. She also wished to know whether the Ministry of Social Affairs planned to undertake a review of the wage structure in female-dominated professions and whether women were appropriately represented at the decision-making level within trade unions. Lastly, very few women occupied managerial positions in the fisheries sector. Since the committee appointed to address that issue did not appear to have made much progress, she wondered whether the Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture had taken any steps, including temporary special measures, to redress the gender balance. It would also be useful to have further information on occupational health and safety requirements in that sector.

4. **Ms. Zou Xiaojiao** recalled that, in its concluding comments on the State party's combined third and fourth periodic report, the Committee had expressed concern about the high rate of part-time employment among women. She wished to know why the survey on

the importance of part-time employment and non-permanent employment had not been carried out and whether the Government intended to carry it out in the near future. Had any efforts been undertaken to encourage more women to seek full-time employment?

5. Women working in the agricultural sector tended to receive lower subsidies than their male counterparts and, in the business sector, women entrepreneurs benefited from less capital investment than men. It would be useful to have an explanation of that phenomenon and to receive information on any initiatives introduced to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in those areas. She enquired as to the incidence of sexual discrimination in the labour market and asked whether any preventive measures had been taken. The State party should also indicate the special measures implemented to promote the integration of women with disabilities into the labour market.

6. **Ms. Arocha Domínguez** pointed out that the State party's reports did not contain any data on the employment situation of persons with disabilities. She would appreciate further information on that issue, as well as an assessment of the quality of the jobs available to migrant and temporary workers. On the question of part-time work, both the fifth and sixth periodic reports appeared to suggest that women were prevented from achieving their aspirations in the labour market because they tended to take more responsibility than men for the care of their families and households. She was concerned about the fatalistic attitude inherent in that assertion and urged the State party to address the underlying cultural patterns responsible for it.

7. **Ms. Jonsdottir** (Iceland) said that Iceland had one of the highest rates of female participation in the labour market. At present, women worked an average of 36 hours per week and 38 per cent of female employees worked part time. The statistics on part-time work were somewhat misleading, however, because any job with a workweek of 35 hours or less was considered part time. Thus, women who worked 35 hours a week in Iceland were classified as part-time employees, whereas in other European countries they would be regarded as full-time employees. The majority of women choosing to work part time were mothers of young children, although there was nothing to prevent those women from working full time. Indeed, childcare facilities, which were provided by the municipal authorities and regulated by law, were ubiquitous and affordable; all children under the age of

two could be accommodated, and fees amounted to between 12 and 15 per cent of the average salary. All childcare facilities had well-defined curricula and could cater to children with special needs.

8. Each of the three working groups on wage equality had a different mandate. The first had been tasked with devising a strategy to reduce the wage gap in the public sector; the second was responsible for developing a similar strategy for the private sector; and the third was an advisory group responsible for monitoring the overall progress of the project. The two ruling parties had also agreed that, during their term of office, they would conduct a study of salaries in female-dominated professions. The Ministry of Social Affairs would be involved in that initiative.

9. Minimum salary levels in the private sector were determined through collective bargaining. Individuals were then responsible for negotiating any additional remuneration with their employers. However, recent statistics had revealed a worrying trend: women routinely demanded lower salaries than men and, when asked to recommend a salary level for two colleagues, one male and one female, would usually recommend that the man should earn more than the woman. Research had confirmed that that behaviour was the result of a lack of self-confidence among women. Empowerment and training were therefore key elements of the Government's gender equality strategy.

10. A significant number of women occupied decision-making posts in public sector trade unions, primarily because the majority of female-dominated professions were in that sector. Although fewer women occupied similar posts in private sector organizations, their number had increased considerably in recent years.

11. **Ms. Gunnsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that, in 2006, there had been pre-primary and kindergarten places for 95 per cent of children between the ages of three and five. Under the Gender Equality Act, it was unlawful to dismiss an employee because of his or her family responsibilities. Nevertheless, in order to strengthen the protection available to female employees, the Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave Act had been introduced with a view to eliminating discrimination against mothers who wished to continue working. In general, the Act had been well received by employers, but attitudes did not change overnight and some men still found it difficult to ask for paternity

leave. Women's attitudes towards their careers were changing; an increasing number of them were working not just for financial reward but also because they wanted to.

12. Occupational health and safety legislation did exist in Iceland. In the fisheries sector, where many jobs involved the use of heavy machinery, compliance with that legislation was monitored by means of periodic spot checks. Lastly, a series of laws had been enacted to ensure that women with disabilities could join the workforce. Further details would be provided in the next periodic report.

13. **Ms. Jonsdottir** (Iceland) pointed out that the Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave Act had been implemented gradually over a number of years. At present, around 90 per cent of fathers availed themselves of their entitlement to paternity leave. A comprehensive impact assessment of the Act would soon be conducted.

14. **Ms. Astgeirsdottir** (Iceland) said that research on the status of persons with disabilities was an emerging discipline in Iceland, and would hopefully result in improved conditions for those individuals.

15. **Ms. Pimentel** asked why doctors, psychologists and entrepreneurs were not involved in the courses for prospective fathers. Given the slightly higher rate of HIV infection among women, it would be interesting to know what gender-based strategies had been adopted in order to reduce HIV prevalence among women and girls. Furthermore, additional information should be provided on the health care provided to victims of rape and on the mental health-care services available to women, including disabled, elderly, rural, migrant and refugee women.

16. **Ms. Dairiam** asked how the standards of the Convention were reflected in government interventions and whether the provisions of articles 1 to 5 had been incorporated into the Patients' Rights Act. If the Convention would not be incorporated into domestic legislation, it would be interesting to know how it would be made legally applicable. Furthermore, clarification should be made of the use of general recommendation No. 24 by the Ministry of Health.

17. **Ms. Begum** asked whether the education programmes provided to prospective parents had contributed to reducing incidences of domestic violence and to making men more responsive to

women's needs. The State party should clarify whether the Government had succeeded in reducing tobacco, alcohol and drugs consumption among women. Additional information should be provided on health packages available to women, especially disabled, rural and elderly women, and on government initiatives to address breast, cervical and lung cancer.

18. **Ms. Tan** said that additional information should be provided on provisions on land ownership in the agricultural sector and on the percentage of land owned by women, by men, and by women and men on a joint basis. Clarification should be provided of the special projects that had a bearing on the position of women in the labour market under initiatives established by the Ministry of Agriculture and of other measures to increase the number of women entrepreneurs. It would be interesting to know how many women had benefited from such initiatives.

19. The Committee would also welcome additional information on the strategies adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce to support women in the agricultural sector. The sixth periodic report indicated that men benefited from 80 per cent of public funds for business development in rural areas. It should therefore be clarified whether the Government was taking steps to address that imbalance.

20. **Ms. Astgeirsdottir** (Iceland) said that standards in the health-care system in Iceland were very high; infant mortality and maternal mortality rates were among the lowest in the world. Prospective parents were provided with excellent care by midwives who had six years of university education and who were able to provide psychological support to mothers. Fathers also benefited from the courses; fathers who took an active part in their child's birth became more involved in their child's upbringing and more responsive to the mother's needs.

21. With respect to alcohol abuse among young mothers, studies showed decreasing consumption among young girls and a slight increase among women over the age of 25. In general, tobacco consumption had decreased among young people of both genders. While it was true that there was a drugs problem in Iceland, it was difficult to say whether it was growing. With respect to cancer treatment, all women had access to a mammography and to screening for lung and cervical cancer.

22. **Ms. Gunnsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that the health-care system provided mothers with excellent support before, during and after birth. Following a birth, women could choose to go home within 24 hours or to stay in hospital longer. They could choose their midwife, who came twice a day for the first week, once a week for the following six weeks; after that, women visited health-care centres on a regular basis until their child reached the age of 18 months. Midwives were trained to check on the psychological welfare of new mothers and to offer them assistance if required.

23. With respect to land ownership in the agricultural sector, women who separated from their partner were entitled to half the property value regardless of the name in which the land had been registered. With regard to public funding, the Government acknowledged that there was a problem because men received a larger share of funds, and it would take action to gender-mainstream public funding mechanisms in the following government action plan on measures to implement gender equality.

24. **Ms. Astgeirsdottir** (Iceland) said that it was true that slightly more women than men were infected with HIV, and the reason for that was drugs consumption. However, the difference was very insignificant and there was no clear trend because the figures varied from year to year. Victims of rape were provided with excellent services and were able to seek treatment at emergency reception centres in Reykjavik and in northern Iceland. It was difficult to provide a short answer on the reasons why very few rape cases were taken to the courts.

Articles 15 and 16

25. **Ms. Halperin-Kaddari** asked whether mediation in divorce proceedings was a growing phenomenon in Iceland, encouraged by the Government, and, if so, whether there were safety measures in place to counter any potential for domestic violence. She understood that there was a trend towards joint custody of children and wondered whether there had been research on the effects of joint custody; in some countries joint custody was sometimes used by the father as a way to reduce child support payments. It seemed that in both formal and de facto unions there was an equal division of marital assets upon the break-up of the union; she would like to know whether there was any division of pension rights or pension expectancies and whether

allowance was made for the respective earning potential of the spouses.

26. **Ms. Tan** requested statistics showing the trend in the number of divorces and the number of households headed by single women in urban and in rural areas, including the reasons for such situations, for example, divorce, death or abandonment. She wondered whether Iceland had an ageing population, with the attendant problems of a greater number of widows and single parents. She would also be interested to know what happened if a divorced father defaulted on child maintenance payments, what was the situation of older divorced women and what inheritance rights the divorced spouse and the children might have. If women immigrants had the same rights as Icelandic nationals, the Government might have to make efforts to inform them about their rights under Icelandic law, particularly if they were required to have their marriages registered.

27. **Ms. Astgeirsdottir** (Iceland) said that the number of divorces appeared to be declining; the Government was interested in researching whether the increased use of paternity leave was resulting in more stable families. Iceland had a relatively young population, since its fertility rate was among the highest in Europe. However, Icelanders also had a long life expectancy, so that municipalities were required to provide a variety of services for older persons. For more severe health issues the central Government provided services. There were occasionally problems of inadequate space in care facilities, but in general the trend was to place more responsibility on the Government and less on the families for care of the elderly.

28. With regard to the economic consequences of divorce, property was divided equally. Upon a divorced spouse's death, a former spouse did not have inheritance rights but the children did. Child maintenance was paid to the parent with custody through a special fund, which handled collection, so that the custodial parent received payments promptly and did not have to deal with the problem of default. Mediation in divorce was a growing trend, but admittedly there were problems.

29. **Ms. Jonsdottir** (Iceland) said that, although joint custody arrangements addressed the issue of time spent with the children, each child had only one legal address and child support would go to that parent. A divorced mother had the advantage of lower rates of day care

and priority admission of her children to day-care centres. Statistics showed that 15.1 per cent of households were headed by a single mother and 1.3 per cent by a single father.

30. In Iceland there was no stigma attached to being a divorced woman or a single or unwed mother, and such women were not discriminated against in the labour market. Informing immigrant women of their legal rights in Iceland was indeed a task for the Government, which it had addressed in a new action plan on immigrant integration that had been adopted in March 2008.

31. **Ms. Gunnsteinsdottir** (Iceland) elaborated that, although the spouses could agree that child maintenance payments would be made directly, they had the option of having payments made through the Social Security Institute. Monthly payments were thus assured, and a special Government agency dealt with collection. Different earning potential did not affect the equal division of marital assets, but if a man had a higher income his divorced wife could claim larger child support payments. With regard to pension rights in case of divorce, the fifth periodic report detailed some cases in which the Supreme Court had awarded a division of pension rights when the wife had not worked outside the home.

Follow-up questions

32. **Ms. Dairiam** said that she had no doubts about the quality of maternal and child health services provided in Iceland, but the provisions of the Convention went beyond reproductive health. She had not received an answer to her question whether the Ministry of Health was aware and had made use of general recommendation No. 24, which explained what the Committee meant by a gender-sensitive approach to the delivery of health care generally.

33. **Ms. Belmihoub-Zerdani** asked whether, if a couple lived in a rented apartment and then divorced and the wife was awarded custody of the children, the divorced husband would be required to pay the rent on the apartment, and whether, if the wife did not work, the husband would be required to pay maintenance for her and the children.

34. **Ms. Neubauer** said that she understood the reasons for decriminalizing prostitution; she was interested to know whether, since the law had been changed, any charges had been brought by women for

violent treatment or coercion that they had suffered while providing sexual services and whether any charges had been brought against persons exploiting prostitution. With regard to restraining orders, she understood that approximately 15 had been issued each year in the metropolitan area but would like to know how many applications for a restraining order had been filed.

35. **Ms. Gunnsteinsdottir** (Iceland) said that she could not answer the question about the Committee's recommendation No. 24 but would report to her Government on it and make sure that it was taken into account in the next report. With regard to a divorced couple who had lived in a rental apartment, the husband would not be required to pay the rent, but would be required to pay child support. The divorced wife would be entitled to special benefits from the municipality and would receive social assistance if she was not working.

36. Her delegation did not have information on case law concerning violence against prostitutes or exploitation of prostitution since decriminalization, nor did it have information on the number of applications for restraining orders, but would address those questions in future. Lastly, her delegation appreciated the opportunity to come before the Committee and had found the dialogue very helpful. It would try to fill any gaps in information in the next report.

37. **The Chairperson** said that it was evident that Iceland had achieved substantial progress in gender equality over the past six years. The new Law on Gender Equality constituted partial incorporation of the Convention into the national legal system. Incorporation could be an ongoing process, and there were various ways of accomplishing it. The important thing, especially since Iceland was a party to the Optional Protocol, was that its laws should provide for protection of all the rights set forth in the Convention.

38. The delegation would be receiving the Committee's concluding observations setting out its concerns and recommendations; the Government should consider them carefully and disseminate them. Efforts should be made to raise the visibility of the Convention and Optional Protocol at the national level. The Government should also look closely at the Committee's general recommendations, which explained the scope of the different articles, in particular general recommendations Nos. 19, 24 and 25,

and have them translated and put to use when considering its new gender equality policy.

The meeting rose at 4.40 p.m.