



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

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

**Summary record of the 433rd meeting**

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 14 June 1999, at 3 p.m.

*Chairperson:* Ms. Kim (Vice-Chairperson)

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*In the absence of Ms. González, Ms. Kim, Vice-Chairperson, took the Chair.*

*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)**

*Combined initial and second periodic reports of Belize (continued) (CEDAW/C/BLZ/1-2; and supplemental report (English only))*

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

*Article 10 (continued)*

2. **Ms. Abaka** said that she was concerned about the disparities in access to quality education between urban and rural areas reported in paragraph 96 of the report, which meant that girls living in rural areas faced double discrimination. Despite the religious nature of the society and the large Catholic majority, rates of teenage pregnancy were very high. She would like to learn more about the reasons for that trend and why there was no uniform policy that would enable teenage mothers to resume their education. Another critical problem in education was that teachers were poorly trained. She was also concerned that, although the literacy rate had improved in general, the rural-urban gap was widening. She wondered if the effects of structural adjustment and perhaps privatization in education and health might have exacerbated the rural-urban split. She praised the report for its frankness, which facilitated the search for solutions.

3. **Ms. Goonesekere** said that she wished to stress the need for higher education. The report provided insufficient information in that regard. It also failed to explain why Belizean girls, who were reported to be performing better than the boys on standardized tests and moving to the secondary level at a higher rate than the boys, had fewer job and career opportunities available to them. The situation was particularly acute in rural areas, where women lacked training and marketing skills and hence earning power. Throughout the country, women's lack of earning power made them more likely to resort to consensual relationships, in which they had few legal rights. Prostitution of the young was also connected to the lack of job opportunities. What was missing was access to

vocational training or higher education beyond the secondary level. Moreover, affirmative action programmes designed to overcome historic inequalities would fail if there were no qualified women to promote. Nor could such measures eventually be phased out unless programmes for upward mobility through education were in place.

*Article 11*

4. **Ms. Corti** said that work discrimination appeared to be a widespread problem, despite constitutional guarantees and the existence of regulatory institutions. Labour regulations, for instance, failed to protect shop assistants, some workers in small-scale agriculture, domestic workers and piece workers, all categories in which women were heavily represented. While government policies in public-sector employment might set the standard, as the report indicated in paragraph 140, in many countries the private sector managed to evade the rules. She would like more information on private-sector compliance, particularly with regard to equal pay for equal work.

5. The report stated that there were no affirmative action policies in place in public service. If seniority was the prevailing basis for promotion, she would like to know how the Government planned to achieve equality in the civil service and more specifically to harmonize maternity leave with seniority provisions. According to the report, a labour force survey had shown that the female labour force was more highly educated but less well paid, less likely to be employed, and more likely to experience long-term unemployment than the male labour force (para. 149). She would be interested to hear what policies the Government was contemplating to redress that situation.

6. She would appreciate an explanation of the differences between the general maternity benefits described in paragraph 137 and the civil service maternity benefits described in paragraph 142. She would also like to know whether a uniform minimum wage proposal described was still only a non-governmental proposal or whether it had been taken up by the Government.

7. **Ms. Hazelle** said that she, too, would appreciate clarification on the differences between the maternity leave provisions under general labour regulations and those applicable to civil servants. She would also like an explanation for the apparently contradictory

statements in paragraph 151 of the report to the effect that the Government did not support childcare arrangements, but that day care was subsidized by the Government. The lack of affordable, adequate day care was a major obstacle to employment for single parents, who headed 59 per cent of families.

8. An issue of deep concern to her was the dismissal of female teachers owing to pregnancy. She failed to understand why, since the Government provided most of the school financing, it could not influence policy in that regard. She would like to know what plans the Government had to end the situation and what the Labour Commissioner and the Labour Advisory Board were doing in that and other areas, such as regulatory protection for domestic workers.

9. She asked for information on the fate of the Women Workers' Union and its strike against Civil Textile Ltd., touted in the report as a breakthrough for women's rights to organize. According to the shadow report by the International Women's Rights Action Watch, the union leaders had been fired, the union had collapsed and the Government had granted the company an exemption from the Labour Act. If that was so, the implications were serious for women working in export-processing zones. Lastly, she congratulated Belize on having signed the Convention without reservations.

10. **Ms. Khan** said that she was pleased to learn from the report that the Government's 1990-1994 development plan specifically recognized women's threefold role as producers, reproducers and community managers (para. 28). She would welcome more information about the main features of the plan, in particular in regard to the question of women's employment.

11. She would also like to know whether the tendency of women, noted in 1993, to withdraw from the formal economy was due primarily to low wages or to lack of childcare or other support systems, and whether the chief causes for the marginalization of women in the labour force were gender stereotypes or lack of enforcement of labour regulations. In view of the high percentage of female-headed households in Belize, it would be reassuring to be told that the Government was taking measures to ensure the economic independence of female heads of household through access to employment and social security benefits. As to criteria for hiring and dismissal, she

trusted that they were the same for both men and women, in both the public and private sectors.

12. Information would be welcome on the present status of the Women Workers' Union; on Labour Act coverage of women working in economic processing zones or on plantations; on government programmes to assist rural women in developing self-employment, including credit facilities; and on the number of women, urban and rural, trained at the Centre for Employment Training. Lastly, she urged the Government of Belize to rethink its position on affirmative action measures. The use of quotas, particularly in the public sector, could help bridge the gap between education and job opportunities for women and thus break the cycle of male-dominated decision-making.

#### *Article 12*

13. **Ms. Abaka** said that she was deeply concerned at the phenomenon of children giving birth to children and at the statement in the supplemental report that some 78 per cent of deliveries were to mothers between the ages of 12 and 29. Moreover, Belize had the second highest rate of HIV/AIDS in Central America. In view of the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church, she wondered whether the Government would be able to design a programme to give the entire population, including prostitutes, access to condoms and to increase awareness of the risks of early pregnancy and HIV/AIDS.

14. The supplemental report stated that in 1998 one of every seven maternal deaths had resulted from septic abortions. She asked whether women suffering the effects of such abortions were treated on a priority basis in the country's hospitals. It was true that States parties had the right to pass their own legislation; however, since Belize had ratified the Convention without reservations, any legislation contrary to the letter and spirit of that instrument, including in the area of abortion, must be reviewed and, where necessary, amended.

15. It was unclear whether pap tests were available to women and, if so, whether they were provided at no cost and whether women were informed of the need to have the test performed. It would also be useful to have information on the problem of drug abuse. Lastly, she noted that as the frequency of tobacco consumption declined in the developed countries, tobacco companies

were increasing their efforts to promote smoking in developing countries, particularly among young people. She asked whether that problem had occurred in Belize.

16. **Ms. Goonesekere** said that the regulations concerning maternity leave did not appear to take into account the right to health and the fact that pregnancy was not a disability but a right of both mother and child. There was no justification for the distinction between maternity benefits in the public and private sectors, and the national legislation should be amended accordingly. It appeared that the absence of a support structure for working women, including childcare arrangements, had caused women to be perceived as shirkers. That problem should be addressed, and men should be included in the task of parenting. Furthermore, owing to the low level of education among Belizean women, the majority of working women held blue-collar jobs and were thus more likely to be exposed to violence and harassment in the workplace. She asked the delegation to comment on those matters and to state whether there were any health regulations to protect women from occupational hazards.

#### *Article 14*

17. **Ms. Regazzoli** said that it was important to raise the standard of living of rural women in order to reduce the trend towards migration to the cities that was common to all countries. She asked whether the Government planned to develop a major programme to provide rural women with training and access to credit.

18. **Ms. Ouedraogo** said that she was concerned at the effects of structural adjustment measures and asked whether there were any gender-specific data showing the percentage of women living in poverty and in absolute poverty. It was important to give rural women training and access to credit and to consider ways of combating the customs which made it difficult for them to own land. She asked the delegation to provide information on the availability of housing, water and electricity in rural areas, since problems in that regard forced women to spend an excessive amount of time on household tasks and made it more difficult for them to engage in income-generating activities.

#### *Article 16*

19. **Ms. Ouedraogo** said that paragraph 227 of the report stated that the legal age of marriage was 18 for both sexes; however, according to paragraph 230, the law prohibited marriage between two persons, one of whom was under the age of 14. The legislation in that area should be harmonized to ensure that girls were adequately protected from child marriage, particularly in view of the prevalence of early pregnancy in Belize.

20. Consensual relationships were extremely common, and the delegation had stated that 59 per cent of children were born out of wedlock. That was a major problem since single-parent families were usually the poorest in a society and were often headed by young mothers with no employment history and no means of supporting themselves and their children. She asked what the Government was doing to prevent that phenomenon.

21. **Ms. Goonesekere** said that the high number of consensual relationships, the prohibition of abortion and the restrictions on married women's right to own property were typical of the developments which had occurred in many former British colonies. In the case of consensual relationships, the British legal system, still nominally in force, rejected a social unit which might nevertheless be functional. In Belize, it appeared that the children of such unions were protected but that the women involved in them were not. The Government should study the problem and adopt measures to protect women and ensure the accountability of the men concerned.

22. **Ms. Feng Cui** asked the delegation to explain the difference between a family court and an ordinary court, to describe the family court's functions and jurisdiction and to explain its role in protecting the interests and rights of women, giving examples. She asked further whether the Department of Women's Affairs played a role in implementing the legislation designed to protect women from domestic violence.

23. **Ms. Balderamos Garcia** (Belize) said that, for the first time, the Government had issued a women's agenda, including plans to provide increased protection for common-law spouses in matters relating to inheritance, maintenance and child support. She thanked the Committee for its incisive, comprehensive questions and said that her delegation would provide detailed answers at a later date.

24. *The delegation of Belize withdrew.*

*The meeting was suspended at 4.05 p.m. and resumed at 4.15 p.m.*

*Report of the pre-session working group  
(CEDAW/C/1999/II/CRP.1 and Add.1-4)*

25. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling**, introducing the report of the pre-session working group (CEDAW/C/1999/II/CRP.1 and Add.1-4), said that the group had been convened from 8 to 10 February 1999, at the conclusion of the Committee's twentieth session, to prepare lists of issues and questions relating to the periodic reports that were to be considered at the twenty-first session. It was to have met, in addition, as a third working group of the Committee during the twentieth session but had been unable to do so because of the late submission of reports. Consequently, it had had to conduct its work under great pressure of time. It had considered the possibility of having more focused lists of issues and questions but, in the absence of any formal decision by the Committee to that effect, had confined itself to limiting the number of questions. The documents before it had been those listed in its report (CEDAW/C/1999/II/CRP.1, para. 5). It had also had before it information from specialized agencies and other bodies of the United Nations, as well as from representative of non-governmental organizations.

26. The pre-session working group had noted that all the reports received had followed the Committee's reporting guidelines. States parties had made significant efforts to implement the Convention through the passage of legislation and other measures, but women had yet to achieve de facto equality with men. In particular, their educational achievements were not mirrored in labour-market participation, and they remained under-represented in decision-making positions. Pay disparities continued to exist; while childcare services were inadequate, the number of women living in poverty actually appeared to have increased. Stereotypical attitudes persisted in all sectors. Attention to the health needs of women, particularly their reproductive health, remained low in some reporting States. Violence against women was prevalent, although it was not clear whether the problem was increasing or whether it was simply being more widely reported. The pre-session working group had noted with satisfaction the lively participation by women's non-governmental organizations in meeting

the goals of the Convention and their cooperation with some Governments in preparing State party reports.

27. **Ms. Abaka**, speaking as a member of the pre-session working group, said that the number of contributions by specialized agencies, other United Nations bodies, and non-governmental organizations had been disappointing, and the pre-session working group had not benefited from their expertise to the extent that it would have wished. Also, because of the late submission of reports, members of the Committee who served as country rapporteurs had been unable to provide the pre-session working group with draft lists of questions. The issues she had highlighted were serious ones, which must be addressed.

28. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a member of the pre-session working group, expressed support for the statement by Ms. Abaka.

29. **Ms. Corti** said that, in the past, the specialized agencies, other United Nations bodies, and the non-governmental organizations had made a very positive contribution to the work of the Committee. The Secretariat must ensure that all the necessary arrangements were made to enable them to participate in the activities of the pre-session working group.

30. **Ms. King** (Assistant Secretary-General, Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women) said that the Secretariat had made every effort to facilitate the participation of the entities concerned. All the specialized agencies had been invited to contribute to the activities of the pre-session working group and had been informed of the importance that the Committee attached to their input. Ultimately, it was for the specialized agencies themselves to decide whether they wished to submit reports. As for the non-governmental organizations, they preferred to use their limited resources to ensure their participation during the actual session, when they raised the issues of most significance to them. Those constraints must be taken into account.

31. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** said that, regardless of the problems that would inevitably arise during the period of transition, the non-governmental organizations should be made aware of the change in the Committee's working methods and of the date on which the pre-session working group would convene.

**Report of the Chairperson on activities undertaken between the twentieth and twenty-first sessions of the Committee** (*continued*)

32. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling**, reporting on her attendance on 13 April 1999, on behalf of the Chairperson of the Committee, at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on Human Rights, said that that day had been devoted to consideration of the agenda item on the integration of the human rights of women and the gender perspective. A number of special events had been organized in that context, including a briefing for the large number of non-governmental organizations present and a panel discussion in connection with the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, in which she had taken part, together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs. Mary Robinson, who had acted as moderator, the Chairman of the Commission on Human Rights, Mrs. Anne Anderson, the Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women, Ms. Patricia Flor, and the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender issues and Advancement of Women, Ms. Angela King.

33. In her statement during the panel discussion, she had drawn attention to the large number of States parties to the Convention, and urged those States that had not already done so to ratify or accede to it. She had also appealed to States parties to ratify the amendment to article 20 of the Convention. She had expressed concern at the many reservations to the Convention, drawing attention to the statement on reservations adopted by the Committee at its nineteenth session and calling on States parties to reconsider their reservations. She had welcomed the adoption by the Commission on the Status of Women of the optional protocol to the Convention, and had expressed the hope that it would be adopted by the General Assembly without amendment. She had also mentioned to the Committee's general recommendation on article 12 (Women and health), adopted at its twentieth session, and the changes in the Committee's working methods. She had placed particular emphasis on the Committee's willingness to receive information, both oral and written, from non-governmental organizations in the context of its consideration of the reports of States parties and had highlighted the cooperation between the Committee and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, noting that the

Chairperson of the Committee was to participate in the second expert group meeting on the integration of the gender perspective into United Nations human rights activities and programmes convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the High Commissioner.

34. Although there had been no opportunity for discussion after her statement, she understood that it had been very well received. She expressed gratitude to the Division for the Advancement of Women, which had assisted in the preparation of her statement and had facilitated her travel to Geneva.

35. **Ms. Aouij** welcomed the decision by the Commission to highlight women's human rights. She thanked Ms. Schöpp-Schilling, who had helped to raise the Committee's profile in Geneva, and expressed the hope that the Committee would continue to forge links with the Commission.

36. **Ms. King** (Assistant Secretary-General, Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women) said she agreed that the holding of the panel discussion and other events devoted to women's human rights represented an important step forward. The panel discussion had been well attended and well received. The Chairman of the Commission on Human Rights, had focused in her statement on the need to increase the number of women in delegations to the United Nations. Women must have the opportunity to participate not only in the area of women's human rights but in every other aspect of United Nations activities as well. In her own statement, she had highlighted the joint working plan between the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In describing the remaining obstacles to women's advancement, she had drawn on the Committee's report on progress in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (E/CN.6/1999/PC/4). The statements made during the panel discussion had complemented one another, emphasizing different aspects of the Committee's work and its impact on the United Nations system as a whole.

*The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.*