



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

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

Summary record of the 483rd meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 26 June 2000, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gonzalez

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

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

Initial report of Cameroon (continued)
(CEDAW/C/CMR/1)

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

2. **Ms. Ngo Som** (Cameroon), responding to questions and concerns raised by the Committee in connection with the initial report of Cameroon, said that a sectoral strategy for the advancement of women was being developed to change traditional attitudes concerning polygamy, forced marriages and genital mutilation and to integrate the gender perspective into development. That strategy sought to strengthen institutions, gather gender-disaggregated data, improve the status of women, eliminate violence and discrimination against women and promote awareness of women's role in society. Traditional attitudes were, however, deep-rooted and would be difficult to eradicate. While it was not, therefore, possible to give a timetable in that regard, the political will to eliminate them existed, the constitutional framework had been created and action plans were being implemented. There would be periodic reviews of progress made.

3. Despite the poor macroeconomic climate, Cameroon had created an environment favourable to the empowerment of women, and most of its citizens were aware of women's right to participate fully in society. Incorporation of the gender perspective was a key requirement of all programmes undertaken in cooperation with international partners, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, through an impact study yet to be launched, would ensure that women truly benefited from those programmes.

4. The Convention, since ratification, had become an integral part of the juridical system and could be invoked before the courts by any citizen. The National Civil Law Reform Commission established in 1993 to prepare laws taking into account ethnic concerns as well as positive customs in the various regions, had been requested to use existing provisions of the Civil Code to draw up a family code, using also as models relevant texts from neighbouring countries as well as the United Kingdom. The provisions of the Convention

would be integrated into the family code. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, in cooperation with national institutions and non-governmental organizations, would continue the fight to eliminate existing discriminatory provisions and promote women's rights. In that context, the Ministry would give priority to revitalizing the Consultative Committee for the Advancement of Women.

5. The budget of the Ministry of Women's Affairs for 2000-2001 was approximately 2.3 billion CFA francs, an increase of some 30 per cent. Matching funds contributed by the State to cooperation projects with United Nations institutions totalled 145 million CFA francs. Although three quarters of the funds budgeted by the State were for salaries and operating costs and one quarter was allocated to working with women in the field, it was her intention to reverse that situation and provide more funding for support services, training, capacity-building, health and education in order to improve the status of women.

6. Her Ministry currently employed approximately 600 persons, but more and better-trained staff needed to be recruited. To that end, the Ministry intended to gather together all necessary resources for the advancement of women. Priority would be given to persons having the necessary scientific and technological training to lead the struggle to eliminate poverty among women, improve their health and reduce their workload.

7. In order to alleviate the negative impact of structural adjustment programmes on women, the Government had modified working hours, encouraged the consumption of local products and strengthened price controls. In addition, a legislative reform relating to the right of freedom of association had led to the rapid growth of women's cooperatives, associations, non-governmental organizations and joint projects in all sectors of the economy. Numerous structures had been created to assist in the financing of such initiatives, and, in the context of the fight against poverty, projects had been undertaken in partnership with donor countries and bilateral, regional and international bodies. In addition, "tontines", or self-financing village groups, active in various regions and cities of the country, had been set up to finance income-generating activities or invest in the production of goods and services.

8. With regard to rural women, she said that unemployment insurance was available only to formerly salaried employees, and rural women were therefore not eligible. However, a non-governmental organization named CERAC (Circle of Friends of Cameroon) played an important role in lessening the workload of rural women and eliminating poverty by providing them with food-production and processing equipment, sewing machines, etc.. To ensure that rural women had access to credit, priority had been given to the creation of a fund for financing income-generating activities, which had provided 100 million CFA francs that year. The fund complemented the work of savings and credit cooperatives established under cooperation projects with partners such as Canada and the United Nations Development Programme.

9. Violence against women continued to be an obstacle to full implementation of the Convention. Some measures had already been adopted and in-depth studies were under way to fully assess the situation and suggest possible solutions. Counselling services for women victims of violence would henceforth be provided at the Centres for the Advancement of Women. Non-governmental organizations and other associations were working with the Ministry of Women's Affairs to support victims of violence, and professional associations had been formed to provide support on legal and medical issues to female victims of violence. The Ministry of Women's Affairs continued to work to eliminate stereotypes, within the framework of its plan of action, in the areas of improving the legal status of women and the advancement and protection of young girls. The results of studies undertaken by a watchdog group for Cameroonian women would provide the basis for specific actions to combat discriminatory customary practices encountered.

10. In that context, the Government intended to take legal and legislative steps to prevent polygamy, and early and forced marriages. Given the negative effects of early marriage on the development of young girls, the National Civil Law Reform Commission and the Ministry of Women's Affairs had imposed 18 as the minimum age for marriage, and the Ministry intended to ensure that that limit was enforced while at the same time continuing to promote awareness of the desirability of the higher age limit.

11. The Ministry also intended to address the problem of children born outside marriage, who had

reduced rights to inherit the property of the father. That was a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and was discriminatory towards the mother who, alone, had to ensure the well-being of her child. In the area of family planning, the current population policy was being reviewed. Family planning centres had been established as a basic component of the primary health care programme. Several associations and non-governmental organizations were also active in the area of family planning.

12. Turning to education, she said that a committee was currently revising school textbooks and had instructions to eliminate all gender stereotyping. Although the number of girls attending school had dropped from 86.8 per cent in 1990-1991 to 67.4 per cent in 1995-1996 as a result of the economic crisis, in particular the lowering of salaries and devaluation of the CFA franc, those figures had risen somewhat to 73.4 per cent by 1998-1999. Education for young people, and girls in particular, was a Government priority, and that year the Ministry of Education had received its largest budget allocation. Counsellors would encourage students, including girls, to study the sciences. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, in cooperation with national women's non-governmental organizations, intended to support such efforts, and the Ministry would strengthen partnerships with the Ministry of Education, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the area of non-formal education for women and young girls.

13. With regard to prostitution, an issue of concern to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, as well as the Ministries of Social Affairs and Youth and Sports, studies were to be undertaken with a view to developing specific actions and improving programmes currently under way. Prostitution was illegal and both prostitutes and their clients were subject to the same penalties. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was committed to proposing more severe penalties for the latter. The law alone could not however eliminate a social phenomenon which had many causes. The best weapons for that purpose were education, poverty eradication and greater awareness on the part of those involved, including girls and women themselves. The law also provided for houses of prostitution to be closed when acts of prostitution were proven to have

occurred, although it was difficult to prove such allegations in court.

14. As far as the participation of women in politics and public life was concerned, neither the Constitution nor current electoral laws required a wife to have her husband's authorization in order to participate in politics. Moreover, the law authorizing husbands to stop their wives from engaging in paid work was not applicable in that regard, since participation in politics could not be considered paid work under the law. Cameroonian women were very active in politics, including within the governing party, which had a women's branch that played a key role in the promotion of women to decision-making positions both within the party and in other areas of national life. Women were represented on the political bureau and the central committee and held 23 per cent of the top positions within the Party.

15. No discrimination was inherent in the electoral code. Only sociological factors prevented the large-scale participation of women. Many women's associations, such as the League of Women and Child Education carried out activities to encourage women to enter their names on electoral lists, vote and stand for election as well as to train them for leadership positions. While the Government did not yet have a draft law on quotas, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was developing plans that would help to identify women with strong political potential, provide them with financial assistance and enhance their leadership capabilities.

16. Turning to women's employment and discrimination against women in the workplace, she said that women held many decision-making positions in all branches of the civil service. While no women held senior positions in local government, many held such positions in the army and police. However, women civil servants and civil society were making efforts to make the Cameroonian authorities aware of the need to address that issue. In that regard, plans to collect gender-disaggregated data concerning all levels of activity throughout the country would shed more light on the matter. The majority of female heads of household did not have enough education to hold down jobs. Many of them worked in the agricultural or informal sector. In her view, the Ministry of Women's Affairs should take steps to ensure that men also contributed to the education of their children born out of wedlock. The Labour Code contained positive

discrimination provisions which protected the reproductive rights of women.

17. With regard to women's health and efforts to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the Government had put in place a sectoral policy designed to facilitate access by disadvantaged people to primary health care and based on a system of community-managed health districts. There were also expanded immunization programmes against infectious diseases. With the assistance of the European Union and the Belgian Technical Assistance Programme, national agencies had been established to make quality, low-cost essential drugs available to health centres. Gender disaggregated data would shed light on the effective access of women to such medicines and the impact on their health.

18. As far as the promotion of women's and children's health was concerned, her Ministry envisaged a partnership with United Nations specialized agencies such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and the United Nations Children's Fund in the areas of food and nutrition, hygiene and the prevention of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. In order to combat HIV/AIDS, the Government had set up a committee to implement the national programme against AIDS, whose primary aim was to raise awareness of the disease among the most vulnerable population groups as well as among traditional leaders and religious authorities.

19. The Demographic and Health Surveys data on deliveries without professional assistance would be supplemented with information generated from various studies. She did not have reliable figures on abortions conducted in Cameroon. However, since that was an area of particular concern to her Ministry in its drive to improve reproductive health, it would conduct research with a view to identifying the extent of the problem.

20. As far as safe drinking water was concerned, the Ministry of Mines, Water and Energy was assisted in its activities aimed at distributing drinking water throughout the country by several specialized non-governmental organizations as well as Italy and Japan within the framework of bilateral cooperation. As part of its efforts to ease the workload of women and improve their health, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was making efforts to promote access by women to drinking water. Lastly, stressing her Government's

commitment to the advancement of Cameroonian women, she said that, if it benefited from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, considerable resources would be allocated towards speeding up the implementation of ongoing projects and programmes for that purpose.

21. **Ms. Ouedraogo** applauded the creation by Cameroon of a national plan of action and the appointment of a number of focal points in various ministerial departments as positive steps towards the empowerment of women. Equally laudable was the participation of non-governmental organizations in policy-making decisions. However, the Committee was still concerned about the persistence of such customary practices as polygamy, the levirate and genital mutilation. In that regard, she hoped that the rapid adoption of a new family code would help to address that major concern.

22. The special programmes for rural women that the Government planned to put into place through the provision of special funds also represented positive measures, as did the allocation of the highest budget to the education sector, which was the key to ensuring equality of opportunities. She urged the Government to speed up the ongoing projects and submit its combined second and third periodic reports in order to get back on schedule, since the submission of the initial report had been somewhat delayed.

23. **Ms. Abaka**, endorsing the recommendations and comments of the previous speaker, expressed the hope that the large budget allocated by the Cameroonian Government to education would make it possible not only to enrol more girls in school but also to keep them in school at least until the end of the basic-education cycle. It was particularly important to implement programmes that encouraged girls, especially in rural areas and poor urban districts, to remain in school. It was equally important to widely disseminate the results of the dialogue between the Government and the Committee among the population, including men, so that people could begin to ponder solutions to the problem of discrimination against women. Thus, when the Government prepared its next report, Cameroonians would know what progress had been achieved.

24. **Ms. Aouij** welcomed the Government's political commitment to promoting the advancement of women. While the law by itself was not sufficient to eliminate discrimination, it was the indispensable legal basis for

harnessing the energies of the population and played the role of a catalyst for the entire society. Moreover, the law was capable of bringing about changes in attitudes, including with respect to education. Thus, if there were binding laws that required girl children to stay in school until a certain age, and punished parents who took their children out of school before that age, school enrolment would increase, while the drop-out rate would fall. That positive step would make parents accountable to the Government for their actions. Similar laws had been adopted in her country. Education was a fundamental step towards the emancipation of women. She hoped that in its next periodic report, Cameroon would provide news about the implementation of all the various projects that were currently being elaborated.

25. **The Chairperson** endorsed the concerns and suggestions of Committee members and welcomed the various manifestations of political will by Cameroon to comply with the Convention. That political will was evidenced by the participation and cooperation of non-governmental organizations and other actors of civil society in the country's political efforts. That would not only enhance the implementation of the Convention, but would also provide support for strengthening policies for the advancement of women. She welcomed the establishment by the Government of a strong institutional mechanism in the form of a Ministry of Women's Affairs and its action to integrate a gender perspective into all its programmes and policies. Lastly, she hoped that the outcome of the Committee's review would be brought to the attention of all the sections of the Government as well as civil society and non-governmental organizations.

The meeting rose at 11.45 a.m.