



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

Distr.: General
25 February 2002

Original: English

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

Summary record of the 438th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 18 June 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. González

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

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

Initial and second periodic report of Belize (continued) (CEDAW/C/BLZ/1-2)

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

2. **Ms. Belderamos Garcia** (Belize), referring to the Church/State educational system, said that although a great proportion of the population was Christian, preponderantly Catholic, the number of practising Catholics was low. The Catholic schools, being generally better, were highly regarded, and many non-practising parents had their children baptized solely for the purpose of producing the required baptismal certificate for later admission to a Catholic primary school. The State recognized, however, that it had the major responsibility to ensure a proper education for all its citizens, and would have to devise policies on teenage dropouts and on the conditions for teachers.

3. Regarding the financial resources available for the advancement of women and gender equality, the Women's Department had a total of \$250,000 available for its programmes, composed of its 5 per cent share of the budget of the Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth and its 40 per cent to 50 per cent share of the budget of the Charities Fund. That funding ensured, among other things, a monitoring mechanism to publicize the CEDAW Convention, which was not as well known in Belize as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The women's development officers in the Department working in each of Belize's six districts, were responsible for training women with regard to the provisions of the Convention as well as informing them about the Family Court and the social services available to them. Further impetus towards familiarization with the Convention would come from the National Women's Commission, the advisory body presided over by the First Lady.

4. Although the Government had not yet taken specific action to deal with the whole issue of teenage pregnancies and consequent school dropouts, it recognized the need for it. Some progress had, however, been made in helping battered women and dealing with domestic violence generally. The

Women's Department had a counsellor who met with both women and men to discuss such problems. There was no overt discrimination against immigrant women. The Government recognized their children as Belizeans and fully integrated them into the schools and the health care programmes. Under the current Amnesty Programmes for illegal immigrants, approximately 20,000 to 30,000 were seeking and would receive permanent residence. Given its multi-ethnic society, Belize would ensure that the Convention was translated into various languages for the public.

5. The current Government was trying to lead by its commitment to law. In January 1998, while it had still been the opposition party, it had, after extensive consultation with non-governmental organizations, issued a Women's Agenda in three areas, legal, socio-political and economic. Following that Agenda now that it was in power, the Government intended to enact equal-pay legislation that would do away with the current two-tier minimum wage, which was higher for manual workers and persons working in bars than for shop clerks or domestic workers, who were mainly women. The Government had, two months earlier, reformed the marriage laws so that the granting of child custody and maintenance could not be made conditional upon the mother's living arrangements after separation.

6. Although it might not be a popular measure, the Government very seriously intended within the next three years to enact legislation assigning a monetary value to household and child-rearing activities performed in the home, for consideration by the courts in the division of matrimonial property; and it had promised to codify property rights acquired in the course of a marriage or an established common-law union. The Government would draft legal protections for the inheritance, alimony and property rights of common-law spouses, using Barbados legislation as model, as well as that of other Commonwealth and Caribbean countries. A bill criminalizing marital rape had already been drafted and would shortly be introduced.

7. A Family Violence Unit was in the process of being set up within the Police Department that would work with the Family Court and meet with victims in a positive, supportive environment. At the same time, the police would be trained to take a more sensitive approach to victims. On the economic front, a Small

Farmers and Business Bank had been set up to provide credit to women for microenterprises.

8. **Ms. Musa** (Belize), turning to health issues, said that Belize had excellent health care, with mobile units bringing clinics and nurses to remote areas. There had nevertheless been an alarming rise in the incidence of AIDS between 1986 and 1998, giving Belize the highest infection rate in Central America and ranking it eleventh in the Caribbean as a whole. The data collection, of course, might not be accurate, because only the declared cases had been recorded. In general, nurses did keep gender disaggregated health statistics, but the breakdown often did not appear in the final statistical reports, a problem that had to be remedied at the government level. The 2000 census would provide a good opportunity for improvements on that score, and for obtaining some of the information the Committee members had requested.

9. There was no doubt that teenage pregnancies were on the rise. Sixty per cent of the births were unplanned, which meant that the Government needed to provide family planning and spacing information to girls at an earlier age. Under a Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) programme, Belize had set up a Reproductive Health Committee that included representatives of the churches, among them the Roman Catholic Church. Cooperating with non-governmental organizations working in the field, the Committee would promote the rhythm method of contraception; provide some funding for mobile clinics in rural areas; and distribute condoms and contraceptives.

10. AIDS prevention and pregnancy control had been difficult because of the Catholic Church's opposition to the use of condoms. The current policy of urging abstinence and providing no information on contraception was, however, not working, and it was hurting the poorest, who had the most children. The Government's planned approach would be to show that women's health was at risk, and it would count on the assistance of the Belize Family Life Association, the primary non-governmental organization in the field. The Association had branches throughout the country and many programmes targeting young people and teenage mothers, and received public support. The Government itself would have to take steps to compel all schools to readmit girls who had dropped out because of pregnancy.

11. With regard to abortion, the hope was that better sex education would reduce recourse to it. Most abortions were induced by outside doctors or midwives and became walk-in emergencies in hospitals, where they were classified as miscarriages. Women in such situations were indeed discriminated against and not offered any counselling or contraceptives. The available statistics, however, did not provide a true picture, because abortions being illegal — although never prosecuted — were for the most part hidden. Hospitals did not routinely treat abortions as emergencies, and that increased the costs to the health system. The Minister of Health did offer free pap smears, but only to the 50 per cent of women who attended post-natal clinics. The newly established Cancer Society was considering the matter. The Belize Family Life Association provided pap smears, generally in the cities, for a fee accessible to most, as did private doctors for a higher fee. The danger of smoking was a concern, but not a priority. Women who smoked were 21 per cent more likely to develop smoking-related diseases, as opposed to 40 per cent in the case of men.

12. Regarding the Government's support for the elimination of discrimination, it should be noted that the National Women's Commission had received a 100 per cent increase in its financing. It also received referrals from the Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth to funding agencies expressing an interest in working in the different areas. The Commission was currently developing a strategic plan that it would submit shortly for funding. As an advisory body, the Commission could not implement programmes but it could identify funding sources, and propose and support programmes.

13. **Ms. Marin** (Belize) said that there were six judicial districts in Belize, the largest of which was Belize City. In the Belize City district, the Family Court, which had five magistrates, sat daily. In other districts, there was one magistrate for both civil and criminal matters, who also handled Family Court matters on special days reserved for that purpose. The Family Court dealt with such matters as legal separation, divorce, maintenance payments, child custody, and domestic violence. The Family Court, primarily because it was convened in camera, also addressed cases of sexual harassment.

14. Belizean legislation that prohibited procuring needed revision because it applied only to men and

since women also profited from the prostitution of other women. The interventionist approach described by Ms. Goonesekere was indeed interesting; Belize would be grateful for any further recommendations and suggestions in that regard. Since legislation prohibiting prostitution made no distinction between adults and children, in the view of the Government, legislation specifically condemning child prostitution was unnecessary. Similarly, since the Constitution prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnicity, religion and race, the enactment of legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex was likewise considered unnecessary. The Government was, however, reviewing all relevant legislation to ensure its compatibility with the Constitution.

15. In 1991, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) had conducted a survey of Belizean legislation to determine whether it discriminated against women, and had identified such discriminatory provisions as the exemption for marital rape and the maintenance ceiling. On the basis of that review, the Government was seeking to appeal and review discriminatory laws. Since 1993, the British military presence in Belize had been reduced from 6,000 to 200 persons. Prostitution and prostitution-related problems, which had centred around the military, had consequently shifted towards the tourist industry: the relevant legislation therefore needed to be reviewed.

16. Under the legal systems of the Commonwealth countries, it was necessary to prove the commission of a crime beyond reasonable doubt. Belize's Domestic Violence Act, however, provided that a protection order simply required a woman to demonstrate probable need for such protection. Similarly, rape legislation had previously required the corroboration of evidence on three points: identification, penetration and lack of consent. That provision had been struck from the law, the judge was now simply expected to give a strong warning to the jury where corroboration was lacking. Belize was conducting a review of its evidence laws in relation to violence against women.

17. **Ms. Fuller** (Belize) said that the Belize Organization for Women and Development (BOWAND) had conducted a campaign which had successfully raised awareness regarding the inequities in the provision of the minimum wage. As a result of that campaign, the Government had agreed to review existing minimum wage regulations and institute a system of equal pay for work of equal value. The

Women's Issues Network of Belize (WIN-Belize) had held a policy conference on employment and training, and had decided to conduct a campaign advocating a single minimum wage for all occupations.

18. Belizean maternity-leave policy involved both employers and the social security system. Those were not separate systems, but worked together. The employer paid social security contributions throughout the period of employment, and when an employee went on maternity leave, the employer was required to pay only one half of her wages or salary. The social security scheme provided a fixed allowance of maternity benefits, which complemented the employers' contribution. Although the Government of Belize subsidized day-care centres and a major employer of women, it did not in fact directly provide and finance day-care services. It would, however, carefully consider developing a day-care programme for both the public and private sectors, with a view to facilitating the active participation of women in society.

19. The issue of unmarried pregnant teachers had traditionally been seen as a moral, rather than a legal, issue. If, however, a complaint was lodged with the Labour Commissioner or the Labour Advisory Board, they would be obliged to address that issue. To date, no survey had been conducted on the reason why women earned less than men; the Government was, however, carefully considering the establishment of mechanisms to deal with that issue. WIN-Belize had taken up the matter of economic opportunities for women as a priority issue; its campaign against employment discrimination should serve to enhance the implementation of the Government's "Women's Agenda".

20. In the preceding three years, measures had been taken to increase the participation of women in non-traditional occupations. The Centre for Employment Training (CET) in Belize City was using a training model specifically designed for women; it was also anticipating the start of a major project, sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank, which would conduct market surveys to identify the demand for skills and would train 200 low-income women in those skills. It had been acknowledged that improving conditions for women in the labour force must include training in non-traditional jobs: in 1999, the Women's Department was offering training in electrical wiring, small-appliances repair and cement-blocking making. In addition, women would be given priority access to

the new Youth Start Plan, which sponsored training programmes for young people.

21. The Government had established a Small Farmers and Credit Bank, designed to target women and youth. Although the National Development Foundation of Belize had disbursed just over US\$ 10 million in loans to female clients during a two-year period, the Development Finance Corporation, set up in 1964 to provide credit to producers, had shown that in 1998 women had borrowed only 10.3 per cent of the total commercial portfolio. Furthermore, the Belize Enterprise for Sustainable Technology had lent only 10 per cent of its portfolio to women. Women were, however, specifically targeted under community-banking programmes, and 150 women had received over 900 loans. Women qualified for further loans when they had repaid the first. In addition, the Micro-Credit Component of the Social Investment Fund had earmarked 50 per cent of its credit funds specifically for women. Women did not lack access to loans; they lacked collateral and information and were impeded by the fear of entering into credit agreements.

22. **Ms. Catzim** (Belize) said that in 1991 a group of women employees had formed the Women Workers Union for the purpose of agitating for higher wages. When their employer had retaliated by dismissing them, they had brought their case before the Labour Advisory Board which had set up a tribunal. The tribunal had decided in favour of the union, and the Government, upholding legislation which prohibited companies from dismissing their employees for forming a union, had pressured the company to reinstate its employees. The company had complied, but several months later it had moved its operations abroad. Although the Women Workers Union had ceased to exist, its efforts had influenced subsequent events and decisions in the area of labour law and policy.

23. The BOWAND minimum wage campaign, a direct consequence of those events, had resulted in the Government's commitment to reviewing minimum wage regulations. Furthermore, Belizean trade unions had recognized the need to lobby for regulations that would oblige employers to recognize and negotiate with them. The Government was happy to report that it had recently signed the International Labour Organization convention that required companies to recognize and negotiate with trade unions. Local laws must of course be reviewed to bring them into

conformity with that instrument. WIN-Belize would be working in cooperation with the Women's Department of the Ministry of Human Development, Women and Youth to ensure that labour laws were reviewed and programmes and policies enacted with a view to protecting the rights of women workers.

24. The reasons for the large number of households headed by single women were complex. That rate was higher in the Creole community, where common-law and visiting relationships were common, and where grandmothers often brought up children whose parents were working abroad. It was also higher among immigrant Mestizos, many of whom were widows whose men had died in armed conflict and who had moved to Belize in search of a better life.

25. The literacy survey conducted in 1992 had broken down the data by district, but not by rural and urban areas. Although it was strongly suspected that the literacy rate was lower in rural areas, that was unsubstantiated. The survey had not, however, shown gender disparities in the literacy rate. The current Government, which placed literacy high on its lists of priorities, had launched a pilot programme in which students would participate. On the basis of its results the Government intended to develop and implement a broad-based literacy programme. The influx of immigrants had lowered literacy levels, especially in rural areas where they tended to settle. Immigrants tended to be less educated than Belizeans and often did not speak English. Many immigrants were now moving away from agricultural work towards urban employment, a trend that would probably affect literacy rates in the cities.

26. The terms of reference of the National Council on Education included developing gender-neutral educational policies and monitoring observance of the rights of both students and teachers. It could therefore be the appropriate forum to take up the matter of pregnant girls expelled from school and pregnant unwed teachers. The Government intended to work with the Council to ensure that it developed, monitored and implemented policies that protected women. Rural areas did not lack schools. Rural children had less access to education because of infrastructure problems. Roads were often bad, and children had to walk a long way to school. In rural area, water and electricity were often lacking, and home environments were therefore less conducive to studying. The Government was, however, endeavouring to enforce mandatory schooling

laws, not by imposing penalties, but by working with families to eliminate impediments to their children's education.

27. The goal of the gender-management system, a Commonwealth initiative, was to ensure the introduction of gender issues into Government policies, programmes and activities. At the next meeting of Commonwealth ministers responsible for women's affairs and gender issues, Belize would present a proposal to enhance the visibility of women in Government bodies and to ensure that those bodies not only developed programmes on gender issues but allocated financial resources for that purpose.

28. **Ms. Balderamos García** (Belize) said that her Government faced many challenges. It was keenly aware that the majority of the young people at risk in Belize were boys, and was seeking to address their needs through appropriate programmes. At the same time, Belize remained committed to honouring its pledges to young women in the areas of education and employment and to eliminating discriminatory provisions and practices. Much needed to be done, and a balance would have to be struck.

29. **Ms. Hazelle** commended the openness of the Belizean delegation, which had frankly acknowledged those areas where improvement was needed. She welcomed the new Government's commitment to raising awareness of the Convention in the various ministries and among non-governmental organizations, and expressed the hope that that process would lead to the adoption of policies, programmes and legislation aimed at addressing the remaining inequalities in Belizean society, as well as the introduction of mechanisms to ensure the enforcement of such legislation. It was heartening to note that the current Government intended to fulfil the commitments that it had made while in opposition within the framework of the Women's Agenda. She remained concerned, however, at the situation of women employees in the export-processing zones. The granting to companies established in those zones of special exemptions from various provisions of labour law created a real risk that female workers would be exploited.

30. **Ms. Abaka** expressed satisfaction that the Government intended to review the existing arrangements with respect to young mothers who wished to resume their education after giving birth. Many girls, however, were reluctant to return to their

local school because of fear of stigmatization, and the education authorities must assist them in gaining admission to other schools. Given the high rate of hospitalization and maternal mortality in connection with illegal abortions, there was an urgent need to amend the relevant legislation with a view to broadening access to terminations within the formal health sector.

31. While the Government's policy of promoting breastfeeding was commendable, it must ensure that pregnant and lactating women were aware of the risk of transmitting the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) through breast milk, particularly in the light of the high incidence of HIV in Belize. She would welcome more information in the State party's next report on the provision of mental health services for older women. As women lived longer, it was important to ensure that those extra years did not become a punishment because of low quality of life.

32. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** said that the introduction of the single minimum wage should be widely publicized in order to signal to employers, including foreign companies, that the Government regarded the equal treatment of men and women in the labour market as a serious issue. She expressed satisfaction that, in the future, women's unpaid work in the home would be recognized in divorce proceedings as a contribution to family income, and urged the Government also to consider dividing pensions between divorcing spouses. There was a clear need to introduce liberal sex education in the school curriculum in order to raise awareness among young people of the risk of the sexual transmission of HIV. The Government must work with Catholics who took a liberal stance on contraception to find a way of meeting that need within the Church-State system of education.

33. **Ms. Goonesekere** praised the professionalism of the Belizean delegation, and expressed the hope that the progress made in realizing the Women's Agenda would serve as an example to other countries in the region. She was concerned at the adversarial nature of divorce proceedings, and urged the Government to institute a requirement that couples should seek family counselling before petitioning for divorce. She welcomed the fact that corroborating testimony was no longer required in order to bring a charge of rape. However, the practice of having judges warn juries of the dangers of convicting without such testimony

simply perpetuated the concept of women as accomplices in sex crimes committed against them.

34. There was a need to amend the laws on trafficking and prostitution, which were rooted in the colonial past. The Government might wish to draw on the experience of such countries as India and the Philippines in that area. While the Belizean Constitution expressly prohibited gender discrimination, such provisions did not generally apply in the private sector, and the Government should therefore consider adopting a statute on gender equality.

35. **Ms. Ryel** concurred that additional legislation was necessary to give effect to the constitutional principle of gender equality, and said that such legislation must clearly define what was meant by gender discrimination, including indirect discrimination.

36. **Ms. Cartwright** said that it would remain difficult to secure convictions in rape cases and that women would be unlikely to report such crimes so long as judges had to warn juries of the dangers of convicting defendants in the absence of corroborating testimony. The implication of such a requirement was that women's evidence was unreliable. Given that the chances of being convicted were slim, men would continue to offend and sexual violence against women, which was a serious impediment to gender equality, would persist.

37. **Ms. Catzim** (Belize) said that companies established in export-processing zones were not exempt from labour law. The problem lay in enforcement. Companies that violated labour law could lose their right to operate within the zones, as had occurred in the Women Workers' Union dispute.

38. **Ms. Balderamos García** (Belize) said that, in fact, few women were employed in the export-processing zones, which currently functioned mainly as free trade areas. However, the Government intended to establish additional zones with a view to attracting manufacturing companies, and the issue of women's employment rights would then come into play.

39. **Ms. Marin** (Belize) said that counselling was provided for all parties prior to proceedings relating to legal separation, custody and maintenance. The family court employed 11 counsellors for that purpose. Counselling was, moreover, a prerequisite for bringing

disputes for settlement before the family court. She acknowledged that the current procedure in rape cases was far from satisfactory, although the removal of the statute on corroborative testimony had, nevertheless, been a major step forward. Formerly in the absence of such testimony, charges of rape had not been brought and perpetrators had instead been accused of sexual assault.

40. **The Chairperson** expressed appreciation to the Belizean Government, which had sent an exceptionally high-level delegation. The replies to the Committee's questions had been both detailed and informative. She was convinced that there was a genuine commitment in Belize to the promotion and protection of women's human rights. She called on the Government, which had introduced many commendable programmes and initiatives, to adopt a State policy on gender equality with a view to setting a standard in that area by which future governments would be bound.

41. **Ms. Balderamos García** (Belize) thanked the members of the Committee for their incisive and insightful comments. Many obstacles remained to be overcome and there was much work ahead, but her Ministry was able to draw on tremendous support from the First Lady, the National Women's Commission and non-governmental organizations. She recognized that, in order for true human development to take place, women must be brought into the mainstream.

The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.