



**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 first part* of the 425th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 7 June 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gonzalez

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* The summary record of the second part of the meeting, to be reconvened in the afternoon appears as document CEDAW/C/SR.425/Add.1.

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

Opening of the session: Commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

1. **The Chairperson** said that 18 December 1999 would mark exactly 20 years since the General Assembly had adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Women's efforts ensure recognition of their rights had begun with the suffrage movements of the mid-nineteenth century, continued through the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations during the 1930s and culminated in the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations, which enshrined gender equality among its fundamental principles. The Commission on the Status of Women had been established in 1948, the same year as the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Innumerable conventions, agreements, resolutions and other instruments had since been adopted to reaffirm those rights.

2. However, none of the international or regional instruments adopted over the years had been able to eliminate discrimination against women *de jure* and *de facto*, despite the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1967. Therefore, on the initiative of the Commission on the Status of Women, the elaboration of a legally-binding convention had begun in 1975. After complex and sometimes delicate negotiations on the Convention, in defining the concept of discrimination itself and in the areas of employment, education and health in particular, a decision had been reached that the mechanism to monitor implementation would follow the pattern established for the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and a provision allowing reservations to the Convention had been added as well.

3. When the Convention had been adopted, there had not been a great deal of support for a mechanism that would allow the Committee to hear communications from individuals concerning implementation by States parties. The issue had resurfaced a few years earlier, and it was welcome news that, in addition to commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Convention, the Committee could also celebrate the completion of the negotiations on the text of the First Optional Protocol. Women in future

would thus enjoy an international legal framework that would complement national legal systems in promoting and protecting their human rights and fundamental freedoms, one of which was freedom from gender discrimination.

4. **Ms. Fréchette** (Deputy Secretary-General) said that the roots of the Convention could be traced through the whole history of the United Nations and its efforts to codify human rights. Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that everyone was entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth without distinction of sex, and since then, all international human rights instruments had purported to apply to women and men alike. Yet the experience of seeking to secure those rights for women in practice had convinced women's rights advocates that nothing short of a "bill of rights for women" would be needed if women were to achieve true equality in the home and full citizenship in the community. The General Assembly had concurred in 1979, with the adoption of the Convention.

5. Unfortunately, international legal codes were not self-implementing, nor was national legislation. True equality for women required work on many fronts at once: building political will, creating an enabling legal environment, raising awareness and practising advocacy. It required programmes and projects to level the playing field for women in their access to resources and their opportunities in public and private life. At the intergovernmental level, for more than half a century the Commission on the Status of Women had provided guidance, inspiration, and on occasion, candid criticism on steps related to women's status and advancement. The preparation of and follow-up to the four world conferences convened over the past 25 years had inspired women to demand that their voices should be heard regarding public policy, legislation and public spending on issues of direct concern to them.

6. Yet even as the twentieth anniversary of the Convention was being celebrated, women's human rights continued to be disregarded and violated all over the world in different ways and to varying degrees. Women were victims of rape and sexual violence in the home and in war. The majority of the world's poor and illiterate were women, and they continued to earn 75 per cent as much as men. Their work in subsistence farming and family businesses was ignored in conventional statistics, and no social security or health benefits were provided for such work. Women were

also deprived of basic health rights, as could be seen from the shocking maternal mortality rates in some countries. Those failures could be directly related to the continued under-representation of women in nearly every political forum. As an illustration, in the official photograph taken at the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, there were 185 male heads of State and Government and only five women.

7. There were currently 163 States parties to the Convention, and even in States which were not parties, the Convention was used to influence legislative processes, Government policies and public opinion. Inspired by the Convention, diplomats and activists had joined forces at the 1998 Rome Conference to ensure that the Statute of the International Criminal Court codified rape and other forms of sexual violence in armed conflict as crimes against humanity. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Member States had committed themselves to achieving universal ratification of the Convention by 2000. Surely, the most fitting way to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Convention would be to begin the new millennium with a truly universal commitment to equal rights for women everywhere.

8. **Ms. Ider** recalled that, during her term as first Chairperson of the Committee, the rules of procedure had been drafted and adopted and procedures for consideration of reports from States parties worked out. Although the discussions had sometimes become emotional, members had always managed to find common ground in a spirit of friendship. Over the past 20 years the importance of the Convention had grown. Of all the international human rights instruments, it had the highest number of States parties. However, it also had the highest number of reservations, including those to substantive articles. Much also remained to be done in putting the Convention into practice in domestic legislation.

9. **Mr. Ndiaye** (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), reading a message on behalf of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was an occasion to mark rather than to celebrate. The adoption of the Convention had been a milestone on the road to of full equality for all women. While tribute must be paid to those who had fought for the adoption of the Convention and the observance of its principles, the

ways in which implementation had failed to match up to the provisions and ideals of the Convention must also be borne in mind.

10. The advancement of women's rights was a common responsibility. Over the years, the United Nations had striven to create a legacy of internationally agreed strategies, standards, programmes and goals to advance women's rights around the world. The Charter itself had been the first international agreement to proclaim gender equality as a fundamental human right, a key principle which had been reaffirmed at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights. The Convention was the most comprehensive, legally binding treaty on women's human rights. It was an explicit statement on the responsibility of States to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and to ensure not just de jure rights for women, but also the de facto enjoyment of those rights.

11. The Convention was a critical tool for implementing women's rights. Social justice could not be achieved without equality and freedom from discrimination for women. A tangible way for Governments to show their commitment to women's rights would be for the optional Protocol to the Convention to be adopted by the General Assembly and for Governments to sign and speedily ratify it. Moreover, the Convention should be fully integrated into national development plans. The ratification and implementation of the Convention should clearly be at the centre of every country's strategy to promote women's human rights at the dawn of a new millennium.

12. The previous week, the Office of the High Commissioner, together with the Division for the Advancement of Women and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), had brought together the special rapporteurs and the chairpersons of human rights treaty monitoring bodies to assess and identify entry points for gender integration into their work. The ideas and recommendations stemming from that gathering would be very useful to the three agencies involved. Remarkable women were championing human rights in all walks of life. Efforts should be redoubled to ensure that women everywhere could live in dignity, peace and freedom, consistent with the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

13. **Mr. Desai** (Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs) said that tremendous work was being done in the area of the advancement of women. In his view, decolonization, democratization and the advancement of women were the three most important trends of the twentieth century. In the period prior to the establishment of the United Nations, the driving force for the advancement of women had been the suffragette movement and the role women in national liberation movements.

14. During the second part of the current century, the United Nations had spearheaded the drive for the advancement of women through such instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Considerable efforts had been undertaken to integrate women's issues into the work of the United Nations, which had sought to give expression to the concerns voiced by a very effective women's movement. That was reflected in the Committee's work as well as in that of the Commission on the Status of Women and various international and world conferences on women. In that regard, he welcomed the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention at the most recent session of the Commission on the Status of Women, and hoped that it would have the required number of ratifications by the end of the year in order to come into force.

15. The work of the United Nations in the area of women's rights had broken new ground in other fields. In that regard, the legal obligations that Governments accepted as parties to the Convention, other instruments and the plans of action adopted by major United Nations conferences were only the beginning. Governments had to undertake programmatic actions to enable people to exercise the rights provided for under those instruments. The work being done on gender equality within the United Nations was becoming increasingly important. Gender equality was not just the concern of the Committee and the Commission on the Status of Women; it was also a vital part of the work of other bodies dealing with economic and social issues. In that regard, one of the commitments arising from the World Summit for Social Development related specifically to gender equality and the advancement of women. The outcome of the Copenhagen Summit had shown the clear link between gender equality and the other areas of commitment, such as poverty

eradication, the promotion of full employment and social integration.

16. Gender equality was central to achieving the other aims of economic and social development and had, therefore, to be mainstreamed into other areas of United Nations work. That was why the Department of Economic and Social Affairs had been entrusted with the responsibility for the Division for the Advancement of Women and the task of supporting the work of bodies dealing with the advancement of women. Lastly, he hoped that the coming century would mark even greater advancement in gender equality in all aspects of political, economic and social life.

17. **Ms. King** (Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women) said that the Convention was not only a legally binding international bill of rights for women in all fields. Unlike the other human rights treaties, it obliged States parties to take action to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure their equality with men in the private sphere as well as public spheres. It was the only human rights treaty, for example, which affirmed women's reproductive rights and identified culture and tradition as critical forces in shaping gender roles and family relations, and which addressed the crucial role of rural women in the economic survival of the family and the particular problems they faced.

18. During her tenure as Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women, the Committee had experienced one of its most exciting phases of development, attracting increased interest from Member States, the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations partly as a result of the global attention given to women's issues in the wake of the Fourth World Conference on Women. The Committee had begun to meet twice a year, had adopted two important general recommendations, and had improved its methods for the consideration of periodic reports, allowing for a fuller, more focused dialogue with States parties. Most recently, on the basis of a proposal by the Committee, the Commission on the Status of Women had approved an Optional Protocol to the Convention, which was expected to be adopted at the forthcoming session of the General Assembly and to enter into force in the year 2000. The Protocol would add further dimensions to the work of the Committee.

19. Reviewing the contributions made by the seven previous chairpersons of the Committee, she congratulated all past and current members and pledged her continued support to the Committee as it faced the challenges of the new millennium.

20. **Ms. Ertürk** (Director, Division for the Advancement of Women) said that, in her earlier experience as a delegate in presenting her country's periodic report to the Committee in 1997, she had been impressed with the crucial guidance that the Committee's recommendations had provided to her Government as it strove to secure women's rights. As incoming Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women, she intended to maintain the professionalism and efficiency of the Division's support for the Committee's work. Once the Optional Protocol entered into force, challenging new responsibilities would call for the Committee's usual commitment and flexibility in developing new working methods.

21. Non-governmental organizations had used the Convention and the Committee's constructive dialogues with States parties to sharpen the focus on women's rights; and their informative work on the national scene had added an essential dimension to the implementation of the Convention. Since the Committee's inception in 1982, 72 experts from a wide range of professional backgrounds had served on it. Initially, 70 per cent of the members had been lawyers, but in recent sessions more sociologists and feminist activists had joined the ranks. Extending an individual welcome to all former members in attendance at the current commemorative meeting and conveying greetings from a number of others unable to attend, she expressed gratitude to them for laying the solid foundation upon which the Committee could now continue to build.

The meeting was suspended at noon.