



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Forty-third session

Summary record of the 877th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 28 January 2009, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gabr

later: Ms. Neubauer

later: Ms. Gabr

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

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

Combined second and third periodic report of Cameroon (continued) (CEDAW/C/CMR/3, CEDAW/C/CMR/Q/3, CEDAW/C/CMR/Q/3/Add.1)

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

Articles 10-14

2. **Ms. Zou** Xiaoqiao said that the Committee appreciated the Government's efforts to provide sex-disaggregated information. She asked whether the new measures, including free primary education and scholarships for girl students, were applicable to students in rural areas, and what results had been achieved. It would also be interesting to hear more about the content and implementation of the policies to remove inequality in education. According to alternative sources, girl students were sometimes sexually harassed by male teachers at schools, particularly in rural areas, so that parents were reluctant to send their daughters to school. She asked whether that problem still existed and how widespread it was.

3. She was aware that Cameroonian law penalized sexual harassment. She wondered whether any efforts had been made to sensitize teachers, especially male teachers, on that issue and whether there was a complaint mechanism for students. She asked whether the Committee responsible for the review of school textbooks would look at the textbooks of both public and private schools. It would also be interesting to know whether there was a specific body to ensure that the contents of textbooks promoted sexual equality.

4. She had heard that despite the legislation offering refugees the same educational opportunities as local residents, there were still many refugee children, especially girls, who did not go to school. She wondered whether the Government had taken or intended to take specific measures to ensure that refugee girls had access to education.

5. **Ms. Patten** noted that the report contained very little information on women's employment in either the private or public sector. She wondered whether any

sex-disaggregated data was available on women's participation in the labour force and suggested that it be included in the next periodic report. Some information had been provided on civil service employees, but the Convention also applied to the private sphere and article 2 (e) set out the legal obligation to eliminate discrimination by enterprises. She wondered how Cameroon monitored implementation of the Labour Code and how it ensured that there was no discrimination in hiring and remuneration in the private sector.

6. The report referred to discriminatory practices in the private sector, such as the recruitment of women on the condition that they did not become pregnant. She wondered how the labour inspectorate addressed that issue and asked for data on the cases considered. It would be interesting to hear about the mechanism for labour-related complaints and information on the number of employers prosecuted.

7. Labour contracts were freely negotiated, a policy that ignored entrenched discrimination against women and their lack of bargaining power which often forced them to accept low pay and poor working conditions. She wondered whether the Government planned to address that situation. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights had expressed deep concern on that issue as long ago as 1999 and had reminded the Government of its obligation to ensure that workers enjoyed favourable conditions of work. The same Committee had also called on Cameroon to introduce specific legislation and policies to prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace. She wondered whether the Labour Code would be revised in that connection and provisions included to address the needs of working women for affordable childcare services.

8. In Cameroon, as elsewhere, women often worked informally because of lack of access to the formal sector. In view of the precarious working conditions in the informal sector, she asked what efforts were being made to promote and strengthen microenterprises and other employment opportunities and to facilitate the transition from the informal to the formal sector. As the report had referred to the Government's political will to extend social security to the informal sector, it would be interesting to have details of the social security reform committee, including its mandate, the work done so far and the number of women members. She wondered what the prospects were for success in extending social security to the informal sector.

9. **Ms. Bailey** wished to know whether the large numbers of women working in informal agriculture were primarily waged workers on holdings owned by men or unpaid workers in subsistence farming on family land. In the latter case, she asked whether they sold surpluses at markets in order to generate an independent income. The report referred to a growing trend, in view of the fall in prices for cash crops, for men to switch to food crops, which had previously been women's responsibility and she wondered what impact that had had on women in terms of their livelihoods.

10. The data supplied showed that the formal sector was relatively small, accounting for just 17.4 per cent of the workforce in both public and private sectors. There was vertical sex segregation, with men dominating managerial positions, and probably also horizontal segregation of occupations. She asked whether any measures were contemplated to address the barriers to women moving into non-traditional occupations and management positions in the formal sector and what was being done in the education system to tackle stereotypes about appropriate occupations. It would be interesting to hear what areas were pursued by the high percentage of girls in the technical education sector and to what extent it reproduced the existing occupational segregation. She was also concerned that the Labour Code reinforced discrimination in hiring practices and wondered how that was being addressed, especially in relation to the wage gap between men and women.

11. **Ms. Rasekh** commended the Government's action of involving both men and women in reproductive health and taking both preventive and curative action. The responses to the list of issues and questions (CEDAW/C/CMR/Q/3/Add.1) contained a statement of the Government's views on abortion, which she respected, but it did not answer the question raised by the Committee concerning a review of the legislation on abortion and increased access to contraceptives and education at school. The report contained some information on sex education, but for a country the size of Cameroon, an experiment with curricula in 15 schools was not sufficient to address the problem of illegal abortion and unwanted pregnancy among teenage girls. She asked for further information on actions taken to prevent unwanted pregnancy among young women and schoolgirls in Cameroon. She also asked what mechanisms were in place to address the

increase in HIV/AIDS among women. The report provided no information on other types of health problems, such as the incidence, prevalence and prevention of breast cancer, cervical cancer and water-borne diseases, all of which were prevalent in Cameroon, and no mention of legislation, actions, policies or programmes to prevent them.

12. According to 1993 data contained in a United Nations report, the numbers of physicians, health-care workers and nurses in Cameroon were very low. She wondered whether there had been any change since that time and whether any action had been taken, especially in rural areas, where women usually had little access to health care. Lastly, she asked for details of education and awareness-raising programmes among communities, families and parents in order to prevent and stop harmful practices which had severe long-term health consequences for girls and women.

13. **Ms. Murillo de la Vega** understood that the Government was determined to combat inequality, despite the continuing influence of traditional customs. The Constitution offered equality, but there were still laws that reinforced male privileges. For example, the reference to the head of the family in article 113 of the Civil Code contradicted the principle of equality, because the husband could take decisions that affected his wife. Women had little access to bank loans because property was required as collateral and so they had to set up women's cooperatives to obtain credit. It was also important to consider how such social behaviour was created. A daughter had little value in the family because she would eventually move to her husband's place of residence. She wondered whether the current reform process would eliminate those discriminatory provisions. In another connection, the Committee welcomed the hospitality extended to refugee women by allowing them to occupy land, but it seemed that it was only available to single, separated or widowed women.

14. **Ms. Zou Xiaoqiao** said that the Government in Cameroon had done a lot to eliminate inequality in rural areas and it would be interesting to see statistics showing the changes that had taken place since 2000 owing to the Government's new programmes and measures. Information on women's participation in public life and on education in rural areas should also be provided, including the numbers of men and women receiving education. As for health care in rural areas, she wondered what kind of preventive measures had

been taken for women in terms of HIV/AIDS, family planning and maternal and infant mortality.

15. It would be useful to hear why the percentage of women receiving training in rural areas was so low. She asked whether specific measures would be taken to ensure their participation, such as quotas. Lastly, she wondered what measures were in place to help women in rural areas to prevent and protect themselves from violence, whether shelters were available to them and what kind of recovery measures and other services, including health services, were provided.

16. Women clearly played an important role in the rural economy, yet it was difficult for them to have access to credit or loans. She asked what measures were planned to improve business conditions for rural women. It would also be interesting to hear about the impact on rural women of the various credit cooperative and microfinance programmes.

17. **Mr. Nkou** (Cameroon) said that as Cameroon had 475,000 square kilometres and a population of 18 million, there was no shortage of land and in the few areas that were overpopulated, problems were usually resolved through dialogue. In most of the country, whoever wanted to cultivate land was free to do so and therefore women always had access to land.

18. Cameroon had a modern banking system, with a central bank, commercial banks and a stock market, and it also had a traditional system of cooperatives. Many people used the traditional system and it was not just women who had difficulties with the modern banking system's requirements of guarantees and fixed incomes. In a cooperative, each individual contributed what they had and honour was the only guarantee.

19. With regard to training, men and women had equal rights and duties. School was compulsory for girls and boys to the age of 14 years and all parents wished their children to have an education. Discrimination was not possible or acceptable, but unfortunately, the resources available were insufficient to provide adequate schooling and health care, although education, followed by health care, received the largest State budget allocation. There were also two systems of social security. The small modern sector had private social security, which was not available to poorer people, and there was a second system based on women's associations. Each woman made a contribution and the funds were available to support whoever was ill. There were also some initiatives

supported by Western countries to help extend the social security system.

20. There was no discrimination in the Civil Service as recruitment was based on competitive examinations, and there were also women in the armed forces, the police and the gendarmerie. There were many women teachers and in the health sector, female workers even outnumbered the men. Women should be encouraged to participate, but men should not be placed at a disadvantage. Lastly, he said that efforts were being made to combat sexual harassment in the workplace. The penalties were severe and a civil service employee could lose his job.

21. **Ms. Epoh Adyang** (Cameroon) said that girls' education was guaranteed and encouraged at all levels. Three ministerial departments were responsible for education: the Ministry of Technical Education, the Ministry of Secondary Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and their combined budget was much larger than the budget of the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family. It was difficult to collect statistical data, but girls' access to schools had improved significantly, especially in the most remote regions in the west and extreme north of Cameroon. A number of development partners, including the United Nations Children's Fund and Plan Cameroon, were contributing to girls' education, with programmes for those remote regions.

22. **Ms. Tchatchoua** (Cameroon) said that all centres for the promotion of women had special health units which offered family planning services. The Ministry provided sensitization kits for community leaders and networks of women's associations. The networks prepared their own action plans, which included objectives for health. There were also community radio networks with programmes in local languages and women organizers in rural areas to ensure that services reached local areas. Some rural women were setting up traditional crèches so that some of them would stay with the children during the day while the others worked in the fields. The 2009 budget contained an allocation for crèche provision.

23. **Ms. Epoh Adyang** (Cameroon) said that broad consultations were held with many ministerial departments in order to reach agreement on the contents of school textbooks, which had to reflect the importance of rural and urban areas and the benefits of education, and show that employment in the army,

police and gendarmerie were not reserved for men. Sex education programmes were already in place through courses in education for life and love. The courses provided specific information for girls and boys, including on sexual harassment and how to recognize it. Awareness-raising in such subjects was very important. In remote areas there were rural organizers who passed on the information in the local language.

24. There were campaigns for the detection and prevention of diseases, especially sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, as well as general education on unwanted pregnancy. No subject was taboo, and the education of campaigns were intended for everyone. The centres for the promotion of women contributed to that process.

25. **Ms. Adebada** (Cameroon) said that sexual harassment was not penalized as such in Cameroon but it could be included in the new version of the Penal Code. At present, although a minor could not file a sexual harassment complaint, her parents could do so on her behalf, under the provisions of the Penal Code on the corruption of young people or indecent assault of a minor. If the girl was under 16 years of age, it would be treated as aggravated assault. The provisions did not refer specifically to girls, but they were usually the victims and the perpetrators were usually men. It was not a specifically rural problem but occurred everywhere.

26. All Cameroonians had access to employment in the civil service without discrimination if they had the necessary aptitudes and moral integrity. As for pregnant women, there was positive discrimination. Special provisions in the Labour Code included a prohibition on night work and a 14-week period of maternity leave, which could be extended in the case of illness. The Labour Code protected women, ensured that they received the same salaries as men and prohibited termination of employment on the grounds of pregnancy. If those provisions were not observed, women could go to court.

27. Information on the social security reform committee, its functions and the number of women members would be included in the next report. There were currently no special measures for childcare, but a nursing mother had the right to arrive at work one hour later or leave one hour earlier. As for women workers in agricultural enterprises, they were generally paid in cash rather than in kind.

28. The Civil Code provisions concerning the head of the family would be amended so that the provisions of the Convention were respected. At present, although the husband, as head of the family, had the right to choose the family's place of residence, the law also allowed the wife to go to court for permission to change her place of residence if she believed that her family was endangered. Women did not often take such action, but had the right to do so.

29. Banks in Cameroon would not finance agricultural activities for women or men, because there was no guarantee of the outcome. As they were private enterprises, the State could not force them to offer loans without guarantees and women were therefore often obliged to turn to cooperatives.

30. As for land ownership, Cameroonian women were free to purchase land in their own name. If a married man or married woman bought land, it was considered as community property. Women also had the same rights as men with regard to inheriting land from their parents, as confirmed by the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court. However, they sometimes had to go to court to demand their rights.

31. As for segregation in decision-making posts, there was certainly no obstacle to women being nominated and the focal points for gender were responsible for awareness-raising efforts. The statistical table showing which posts were held by women in the civil service was a useful tool.

32. Abortion was criminalized. An extensive family planning campaign had been undertaken and contraceptive pills were easily available. Even minors could obtain a prescription with parental consent. The media were contributing to the sensitization effort regarding unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and adolescents were involved in the campaigns so that they could spread the message among their peers. Sometimes theatre was used to show the effects of unwanted pregnancy.

33. **Ms. Epoh Adyang** (Cameroon) said that an additional 3,500 health workers would be recruited in March 2009 to improve the coverage of health services throughout the country, including in rural areas.

34. **Ms. Ameline** said that the challenge for any equality policy was to ensure that women not only benefited from programmes but were development actors themselves. In the case of rural women, efforts

were needed with regard to provide them with training and access to credit. She wondered whether the professional status of a woman with her own business, however small it was, would be recognized.

35. *Ms. Neuberger (Reporter) took the Chair.*

36. **Ms. Pimentel** recognized that abortion was a very sensitive issue in many countries. She agreed entirely with the views expressed by the State party in the responses to the list of questions and issues concerning the importance of future generations and of children in family life. However, there were other aspects to consider, such as women and children who became pregnant as a result of rape. Of course life was important, but the mother also had the right to a life of dignity. Consideration should also be given to the effects of clandestine abortion and maternal mortality and the Committee's general recommendation No. 24.

37. *Ms. Gabr resumed the Chair.*

38. **Ms. Bailey** said she was interested in hearing about the large group of women who worked in the private and informal sector, as only 3.8 per cent of the total female workforce was employed in the public sector. Women's organizations apparently provided some social security coverage in rural areas, but it was the Government that should be responsible. In another connection, she had been surprised that there was no reference in the report to the role of education in reproducing the social and cultural norms that affected relations between men and women in all areas of life.

39. **Ms. Patten** asked whether there was a ministry responsible for labour relations and to what extent the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family cooperated with it. Under the Convention, the Government had a legal obligation to use all means to eliminate discrimination against women in employment yet, despite the years that had passed since ratification of the Convention without reservation, discriminatory provisions were still in force, such as a wife requiring her husband's consent to her working outside the home. She wondered whether the legal reform had already eliminated those provisions.

40. The report had referred to the political will to extend social security entitlements to the informal sector and the fact that the issue would be addressed by the social security reform committee. She asked for more information on that subject and also asked about legal protection for domestic workers, who were

mainly women. Independent sources had provided information on exploitative working conditions and she wished to know how the Government was addressing that situation.

41. **Mr. Nkou** (Cameroon) assured the Committee that it was increasingly common in Cameroon for both spouses to work and that it was very unlikely that any husband would object to his wife's employment. As for social security, the reform committee was considering a number of ideas. One possibility was to use women's associations, which were already involved in organizing microcredit, as the basis for extending social security coverage.

42. The legislation was clear: there could be no discrimination in employment and no difference in salary for persons performing the same work. In the private sector, salaries could be negotiated by the employer and the employee, but in large agricultural enterprises, everything was codified, including the salaries. Most of the workers were women who earned about 100 euros a month. In smaller agricultural enterprises, most of the workers were men, but their salaries were the same.

43. **Ms. Adebada** (Cameroon) said that only a man's children, and not his widow, could inherit his property. In the case of death or divorce, the Civil Code provided that the couple's community property should be liquidated and the wife's share returned to her. The heirs would then receive the husband's property as their inheritance. Sometimes women hesitated to make their claim and took no action, either because of family pressures or because they remarried. In the case of divorce, even when a judge had designated a notary to carry out the liquidation, it did not always take place.

44. A woman's status as the head of a business was recognized. There were a number of women heads of enterprises in Cameroon, and they had organized themselves into the Cameroon association of business women. In rural areas, women usually worked in an association, or network of associations as they had not yet assimilated the concept of an enterprise and did not understand that they could create rural agricultural enterprises.

45. Although article 337 of the Penal Code prohibited abortion, there were exceptions which covered the cases referred to. Abortion was permitted in the case of rape or when the life of the mother was in danger.

46. Statistics on workers in the private and informal sectors would be available in the near future. Cameroon had two ministries responsible for labour: the Ministry of Labour and Professional Education and Ministry of Labour and Social Security.

47. **Ms. Tchatchoua** (Cameroon) said that the promotion of women's rights and gender equality was a cross-cutting issue and that the Ministry worked with all departments and focal points. Few statistics were available, but the Ministry was working with the focal points and future reports would include more precise data.

48. Education did play an important role in eliminating stereotypes. The gender approach was applied not only to the administration but also to projects for work with families. Children's organizations worked to inculcate the concept of equality between the sexes. A manual on gender, community development and other issues for the leaders of those organizations had been published with support from the United Nations Population Fund.

49. **Ms. Epoh Adyang** (Cameroon) said that the social security reform committee included women members and had already held its first meeting, which had been chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Security.

50. **Ms. Patten** requested clarification of whether the 1981 decree that enabled a husband to oppose his wife's employment had been revoked.

51. **Ms. Adebada** (Cameroon) said that the decree in question had not yet been revoked but its discriminatory provisions would be addressed in the context of the legislative reform. However, if a woman felt that its provisions affected her rights, she could invoke the provisions of the Convention in court. Unless she went to court, the authorities would not be able to take action. Very few men, however, would go to court to try to prevent a woman from doing anything. They knew the courts would not help them and would try other methods.

52. **Ms. Murillo de la Vega** commented that States should reform their laws without waiting for complaints to be made and a lack of complaints implied a lack of confidence in institutions.

Articles 15 and 16

53. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** clarified that the Committee was not concerned about the availability of land. It was

concerned to know whether women, especially in rural areas, had access in their own right to ownership and control of land and whether they could pass it on in the same way that a man could. In societies where a man had to pay a dowry to get married, the husband often considered his wife to be his property. For many women in rural areas, the reality was that their lives were regulated by customary law and they were subject to a man's authority. She understood that the bride price was not a legal requirement for marriage in Cameroon, and yet the practice persisted. She asked when the new Code of Persons and the Family would be adopted so that the discriminatory provisions of the Civil Code would no longer apply. The new Code should be adopted as early as possible.

54. **Ms. Belmihoub-Zerdani** said she understood that the draft Code of Persons and the Family brought the age of marriage to 18 years for girls and she asked when work had begun on the draft and what stage it had reached. Cameroon had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which also required the age of majority to be 18 years for boys and girls, without reservation. Even before the draft law was approved, action should be taken to harmonize Cameroonian legislation with its international obligations.

55. Cameroon had not yet prohibited polygamy, even though Islamic law did not allow polygamy. Men had interpreted one verse of the Quran as meaning that a man could take from one to four wives, despite the fact that the same verse stated that a man should abstain from polygamy if he could not treat all his wives equally. Women could also interpret the Quran and it was clearly impossible for a man to treat all his wives equally. Many Muslim countries had already abolished polygamy or made it so difficult that the result was the same. It was important to continue training magistrates and lawyers and encouraging people to use the courts.

56. There had been a reference to the liquidation of community property. She wished to know whether a woman could inherit from her husband if they had married under a regime of separate property and whether a husband could inherit from his wife under those circumstances.

57. **Mr. Nkou** (Cameroon) said that Cameroon was proud of the fact that it provided education to both men and women. Women now knew when a law contradicted the Constitution and could defend themselves. He was sure that no Cameroonian man

would ever prevent his wife from working as two salaries were always better than one. As for land, Cameroon had an abundance of fertile land and any woman or girl who wished to have access to it was free to do so. Women had the same rights of inheritance as men.

58. **Ms. Adebada** (Cameroon) said that no spouse could inherit from the other, regardless of the property regime. Only children inherited from their mother or father. In the case of death or divorce, the woman recovered her own property, but she might have to go to court to do so and a liquidator might be needed. If a woman died, the process was the same and the children inherited her property. The law did not refer to the husband or wife but to spouses. If there were no children, the Civil Code was very clear about the succession and there was no discrimination.

59. The dowry was merely symbolic in the regions where it was still practised. Under customary law, the dowry ceremony validated the marriage as a union of two families. The families came together and made an exchange to show that the woman had been given to the other family. If an excessive dowry was requested, the matter could be taken to a civil court, but usually the families would reach an agreement. The Government could consider prohibiting dowries, but it was a practice that linked two families.

60. The draft Code of Persons and the Family would set the age of marriage at 18 years for both boys and girls. As for polygamy, the spouses were free to choose the form of their marriage. The woman could refuse to accept polygamy and sometimes did so on the day of the marriage.

61. **Mr. Nkou** (Cameroon) thanked the members of the Committee for their questions and their understanding and expressed appreciation for their constructive comments and recommendations. Cameroon was committed to working for the protection and promotion of women's rights and every effort would be made to ensure that its next periodic report would contain all the information required.

62. **The Chairperson** said that there had been a friendly and animated discussion. She hoped that the members of the delegation would encourage the National Assembly to adopt the draft law on the prevention of violence against women and the draft code of family and persons as soon as possible. She commended Cameroon's ratification of the Convention

and the Optional Protocol and hoped that it would soon accept the amendment to article 20, paragraph 1, of the Convention regarding the times of meetings and sessions. The current economic difficulties should not be allowed to have a negative impact on women. Further efforts were needed to combat stereotypes and to encourage more women to enter politics and the diplomatic service. There should be more awareness-raising programmes and campaigns and further work on the formal and rural sectors. Consideration should be given to successful examples of microcredit programmes in other countries as they could be appropriate for Cameroon. More statistics should be provided in future reports.

The meeting rose at 5.15 p.m.