



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

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

Summary record of the 1707th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 12 July 2019, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Gbedemah

Contents

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

Ninth periodic report of Guyana (continued)

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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)*

Ninth periodic report of Guyana (continued) (CEDAW/C/GUY/9; CEDAW/C/GUY/Q/9 and CEDAW/C/GUY/Q/9/Add.1)

Articles 10 to 14 (continued)

1. **Ms. Reddock** said that, although sexual harassment in the workplace was defined in law as a form of gender-based discrimination, the Committee had received reports indicating that such harassment was widespread in the workplace and in public places. The Committee would appreciate information on the mechanisms in place to address complaints of sexual harassment in the public and private sectors. She asked how many such complaints had been received, how many of those complaints had resulted in legal action and whether the Prevention of Discrimination Act would be amended to cover acts of sexual harassment between persons of the same sex.

2. Given that the Prevention of Discrimination Act provided that women and men should receive equal pay for equal work, it would be interesting to learn why professions mainly associated with women, such as teaching, tended to be poorly paid. In order to address the gender wage gap, which currently stood at 50 per cent, the Government might consider reviewing the status and pay of occupations in which women predominated. It might also consider establishing quotas for the employment of persons with disabilities in the public and private sectors; making it mandatory for employers to carry out any reasonable accommodation that might be required; increasing the availability of childcare facilities, either at places of employment or in the community; and introducing mechanisms to support workers with family responsibilities. The Committee would be interested to learn whether robust mechanisms would be introduced to monitor the implementation of the Prevention of Discrimination Act and the Equal Rights Act. In view of the fact that unemployment disproportionately affected women, particularly indigenous women and women with disabilities, she wished to know whether research into the factors behind women's unemployment would be carried out and whether steps would be taken to reduce the impact of such factors.

3. **Ms. Anna Ally** (Guyana) said that the Government placed significant emphasis on health and education and allocated the largest proportion of its budget to programmes in those areas. Since 2015, the level of support provided to the indigenous communities had increased significantly, including in the area of education. A state-of-the-art school had been constructed for a hinterland community in Potaro-Siparuni. In Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo, over 200 million Guyana dollars had been spent to build the Bina Hill Institute, which contained a wide range of educational facilities. In many cases support was provided to students who could not afford their examination fees or university tuition fees. The Board of Industrial Training provided technical and vocational training through specially equipped schools such as the Port Mourant Training Centre and the Kuru Kuru Training College. Programmes were aimed at providing educational services both for children in school and for adults who had left school.

4. Although the Government believed that every entity, organization and group should be treated equally, no decision had yet been taken to introduce legislation specifically aimed at protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. The country's labour law provided for equal pay for equal work. Therefore, teachers on the same salary grade received the same pay, irrespective of their gender; there was no difference in the types of jobs done by men and women. A national commission on disability had been established, and several programmes were run for the benefit of persons with disabilities; they were not subjected to any discrimination.

5. **Mr. Tanner** (Guyana) said that legal proceedings could be initiated in response to complaints of sexual harassment and could be submitted to the Department of Labour. The mechanism for taking action against sexual harassment was currently insufficient, but there were plans to draw up an anti-harassment policy that would effectively address sexual

harassment both in the workplace and on the street. A national trust fund had been established to provide financial support to persons with disabilities who wished to find employment or start a business.

6. **Ms. Hamilton** (Guyana) said that young persons with disabilities had the opportunity to join a technical and vocational training programme that was run on an annual basis. In accordance with a government initiative, pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers received assistance packages, on condition that they attended clinics where they learned about aspects of childcare, family planning and life skills. Teen mothers had the option of joining an education reintegration programme.

7. **Ms. La Fleur** (Guyana) said that an organization called Woman Across Differences had been working for the past 10 years to prevent teenage pregnancy. Beneficiaries of its work were supported in their efforts to return to school and find jobs and could help their peers, in particular through a group within the organization known as Young Mothers for Change.

8. **Ms. Reddock** said that it was still not clear whether the State party would carry out research to ascertain why predominantly female occupations such as teaching were poorly paid and undervalued. It was also unclear whether the Prevention of Discrimination Act would be amended to cover acts of sexual harassment between persons of the same sex. It would be interesting to learn what kind of accommodation was being made to enable children with disabilities to attend mainstream schools and adults with disabilities to work in the public and private sectors.

9. **The Chair** said that she would like to know whether mechanisms would be introduced to monitor the implementation of the Prevention of Discrimination Act and the Equal Rights Act. The Committee wished to know whether parents were offered incentives to encourage them to send their daughters to school and how many women there were among the 2,000 young persons enrolled in the Youth Entrepreneurship and Apprenticeship Programme.

10. **Ms. Song** said that it was still not clear whether women and girls with disabilities had equal access to education in schools. In view of the fact that efforts to ban corporal punishment had stagnated, it would be interesting to learn what steps the Government might consider taking in order to prohibit that practice. She also asked what percentage of university students were indigenous women and what percentage of students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics were women.

11. **Ms. Anna Ally** (Guyana) said that the Government had held consultations with representatives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in relation to the community's treatment within the criminal justice system. The Government opposed the use of corporal punishment. Steps were being taken to encourage members of the indigenous communities to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Persons living in the hinterlands had the same opportunities to study those subjects as persons living on the coast.

12. **Mr. Tanner** (Guyana) said that it would not be possible to state how many women students belonged to indigenous communities. Students were not required to specify their ethnic affiliation when they enrolled at the University of Guyana.

13. **The Chair** said that it would be interesting to know more precisely what subjects students were studying when they undertook technical and vocational training. Experience had shown that girls undergoing such training were often learning subjects such as sewing and cooking, while boys were studying subjects traditionally associated with men. Although the Committee was pleased to note that girls in Guyana were studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics, it wished to know what proportion of the total number of persons studying those subjects was female.

14. **Ms. Al-Rammah** said that, according to the information she had received, although efforts were being made to reduce the prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS among vulnerable groups, insufficient attention had been paid to protecting indigenous women. The Committee wished to know what was being done to provide accessible data on the number of girls and women living with HIV/AIDS in the various regions of the State party. What

new measures were being taken to combat the stigma faced by women living with HIV/AIDS, and what further steps would be taken to ensure that women and girls with HIV/AIDS, including pregnant women, could access health services in the different regions? Given that the suicide rate was relatively high in the State party, particularly among migrants, the Committee would be interested to hear about any measures taken to improve the mental health of women and girls, including those who were migrants. The Committee would welcome further information on the results obtained by the National Suicide Prevention Plan and on the psychological support given to women and girls living with mental health problems in remote areas. Was gender-sensitive training provided to mental health professionals?

15. Maternal morbidity and mortality rates were reportedly linked to a shortage of health-care professionals in remote areas. Would steps be taken to address that shortage? It would be interesting to learn whether any plans were in place to include age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education in the curricula of all schools in order to raise students' awareness of contraception and family planning methods. The Committee wished to know what measures would be taken to reduce teenage pregnancy rates in rural areas and whether the Government would consider enacting a law prohibiting early marriage.

16. **Ms. Acosta Vargas** said that she wished to know what measures were being taken to address the fact that Wapichan women and women belonging to other indigenous communities had difficulty accessing social services, receiving bank loans and obtaining technical support for their businesses because they did not have identity documents. In view of the fact that the petroleum extraction activities that the State party planned to initiate in 2020 would lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions, greater levels of air and sea pollution and the loss of water resources and fish stocks, she asked whether the Government had conducted an assessment of the impact of those activities on the environment and on the lives of women living in the areas concerned. Had women living in coastal regions been informed about the risk that the mangrove swamps on which they depended for their livelihoods could be contaminated by petroleum if left unprotected?

17. Given that the Government's plans to step up petroleum extraction were likely to exacerbate gender inequality by bringing greater benefits to men than to women, she asked whether women, especially those living below sea level, were able to participate in decision-making processes relating to the local environment. The Committee would welcome information on any mechanisms established to canvass women for their views on the proposed petroleum extraction activities and would like to know whether consideration had been given to ways of ensuring that women benefited from such activities.

18. The delegation might provide information on any measures taken to ensure that all women qualified for a pension, including those who had worked only in the informal sector or in low-paid positions or unpaid work. It would be interesting to learn whether older persons with disabilities had access to social protection programmes and whether any change had been made to the rule stipulating that families had to have at least three children in order to qualify for social housing. Noting that women generally had less free time than men, she asked whether the Government had conducted any studies of the ways in which men and women spent their time, whether kindergartens and other facilities would be established to enable women to have more free time and whether fathers made use of parental leave in order to contribute to childcare.

19. **Ms. Amna Ally** (Guyana) said that women played an active role in matters related to the environment. Citizens could express their views on planned extractive activities through consultation mechanisms established for that purpose.

20. **Ms. Hamilton** (Guyana) said that the Government had maintained its efforts to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic even as the rate of infection had started falling and the number of survivors of mother-to-child transmission had increased. The Ministry of Public Health and local care and treatment centres had intensified their work with survivors of mother-to-child transmission. Efforts made by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to educate the population had resulted in a reduction of the stigma and discrimination faced by persons living with HIV/AIDS. Groups such as Artiste in Direct Support travelled around the country to conduct awareness-raising sessions on HIV/AIDS at the community level.

21. The Ministry of Public Health was preparing a report on progress made towards the eradication of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS, and the Government was working directly with groups established to support mothers living with HIV/AIDS in the hinterland regions. In 2017, the Government had subscribed to a loan from the Inter-American Development Bank that would be used to support initiatives aimed at protecting maternal and neonatal health. The Maternal and Child Health Programme, which was highly decentralized, enabled pregnant women to be tested for HIV/AIDS around the country. Efforts were being made to provide appropriate treatment to every mother who had tested positive for HIV/AIDS. In order to train more obstetricians and gynaecologists, partnerships had been established with universities in the United States of America. Once more health-care professionals had completed their training it would be possible to offer outreach services in the hinterland regions that currently lacked sufficient health-care staff.

22. As part of its efforts to reduce the suicide rate, the Government had established a new mental health unit within the Ministry of Public Health. In recent years, the number of staff employed by the unit had increased, thus making it possible to provide outreach support to persons living in the most remote regions. The Government was working with its partners to develop a mental health programme specifically aimed at migrants, who had started to enter the country in significant numbers in 2018. Interpretation and translation services were being provided by the International Organization for Migration and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

23. School health clubs, which among other things trained students to become peer educators, had been re-established in 2016. The clubs were active in 6 of the country's 10 regions. In addition, the authorities had partnered with the Guyana Responsible Parenthood Association, an NGO, for the provision of comprehensive sex education at certain schools. The incidence of teenage pregnancy had fallen in recent years, in large part thanks to outreach efforts in the schools. Volunteers from the United States Peace Corps, for example, were frequently assigned to schools to work with adolescents. Reducing teenage pregnancy was the primary aim of a 2018 memorandum of understanding signed by the Ministry of Public Health and the schools. Guyana had secured a loan from the High Commission of India in Georgetown to fund efforts to combat teenage pregnancy in Barima-Waini and Upper Demerara-Berbice, the two regions with the country's highest rates of teenage pregnancy. Adolescents were not the only group targeted by efforts to lower teenage pregnancy rates – those efforts also were addressed to parents and entire communities. The Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy, approved by the Cabinet in 2019, would guide the authorities' approach to the provision of services in that area.

24. **Mr. Tanner** (Guyana) said that all Guyanese citizens aged 65 or older automatically qualified for old-age pensions. Palms Geriatric Home accommodated older persons with disabilities or with no one to care for them. There were no policies specifically benefiting women who were caring for children or older persons. The requirement for a yearly re-evaluation of the disability status of children who had been born affected by microcephaly as a result of the Zika virus had been waived in late 2018.

25. **Ms. Acosta Vargas** said that she would welcome information on the results of programmes to reduce poverty among women. Information on the means whereby indigenous women and women without identification documents gained access to credit would also be welcome.

26. **Ms. Reddock** said that she would like to know whether the recent growth of the State party's petroleum industry had been accompanied by mechanisms for the mitigation of climate change, which affected women in specific ways.

27. **Mr. Tanner** (Guyana) said that the major challenge in ensuring that indigenous and other women in the hinterland had access to credit was not, as a rule, their lack of documentation, but the absence of banks. Compounding the problem, banks on the coast were reluctant to lend to people living elsewhere. The Sustainable Livelihood Entrepreneurial Development initiative had been undertaken in part to solve the problems caused by the absence of credit facilities in the interior. Women and women's groups had been involved in the formulation of the State party's Green State Development Strategy, which was aimed at ensuring sustainable development and environmental protection.

28. **Ms. La Fleur** (Guyana) said that more information on the involvement of women in efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change would be provided in writing within 48 hours.

29. **Ms. Toé-Bouda** said that she wished to know whether the State party intended to take any measures to ensure that indigenous women living in the interior, including Wapishana women, could overcome the persistent obstacles to the enjoyment of their rights and participate in the formulation of policies that affected them. In view of the challenges to the delivery of health services in the hinterland posed by the transient culture of indigenous peoples and the shortage of skilled health workers there, she asked whether the State party was considering providing basic health training to indigenous persons living in remote areas.

30. Was the Government taking steps to improve education in the hinterland and, if so, were women and girls benefiting from those improvements? She would like to know when the Amerindian Act of 2006 and other laws would be amended to give effect to recommendations made by a number of United Nations treaty bodies and to ensure that the State party's legal system was compatible with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Articles 15 and 16

31. **Ms. Peláez Narváez** said that she wished to know whether any measures had been taken to facilitate access to justice for women living in remote areas, and specifically for indigenous women, poor women, lesbian women, women with disabilities and girls. She asked what steps were being taken to tackle the problems of teenage pregnancy and child marriage, the rates of which were considerably higher in Guyana than in the other countries of the region. She also asked whether the State party had data on forced marriages and whether a strategy had been developed to combat that practice. She expressed surprise at the assertion in the replies to the list of issues (CEDAW/C/GUY/Q/9/Add.1, para. 129) that responsibility for preventing child marriage lay not only with the Childcare and Protection Agency, but also with churches, the police and the community. Lastly, she wished to know whether consideration was being given to legalizing same-sex unions.

32. **Ms. Amna Ally** (Guyana) said that women were as involved in decision-making in the interior as they were in coastal areas. In fact, a fairly large number of interior villages were headed by female *Toshaos* (indigenous community leaders). As she had noted earlier, the Government had improved access to judicial services since 2015. Courts had recently begun holding daily hearings in Lethem, for example, a town in the country's largest hinterland region. Judicial services were not available in every such region, as it was a logistical challenge to provide them, but every effort was being made to address the issue. It would take time, and it might even take setting up mobile courts that would travel to the hinterland regions by boat.

33. **Ms. La Fleur** (Guyana) said that forced marriage and child marriage were long-standing problems and that the authorities had made considerable efforts, primarily involving education, to address them. They had also enlisted the help of religious organizations and community-based advocates. An organization that worked with teenage mothers had collected stories from girls who had been impregnated by their stepfathers or even their fathers. Many reacted with anger and had to be dissuaded from taking the law into their own hands.

34. **Mr. Tanner** (Guyana) said that no one under the age of 16 could marry in Guyana. Births to girls aged 16 and under were reported immediately to the Childcare and Protection Agency, which interviewed the mother in an attempt to determine whether legal action should be taken against the father of her child. Although the Agency's slogan was that child protection was everybody's business, in the final analysis, responsibility for protecting children and prosecuting those who victimized them lay with the country's child protection and law enforcement agencies. The child protection authorities worked with schools to pass the message on to girls that they had alternatives to giving in to forced marriage. A child protection hotline was accessible 24 hours a day, for example, and the Childcare and

Protection Agency investigated any reports of girls who were being forced into relationships.

35. **Ms. Jerome-Reece** (Guyana) said that officials from the Ministry of Social Protection visited indigenous communities and conducted awareness programmes for the prevention of suicide and teenage pregnancy. The programmes would be expanded in the coming years. They were aimed at combating harmful practices that, in some indigenous communities, were seen as norms.

36. **Ms. Hamilton** (Guyana) said that the Government remained committed to ensuring universal access to health care. The Ministry of Public Health had in 2018 embarked on an initiative to provide health training to persons living in the hinterland. In 2019, other groups of hinterland residents, each in its local region, were being trained as community health workers. A number of maternity waiting homes, in which pregnant women who lived in remote areas without maternity clinics could stay until they gave birth or whenever they needed maternal health services unavailable in their home regions, had also opened in 2018, with services provided in all the country's indigenous regions and in the relevant coastal regions. A loan from the Inter-American Development Bank had enabled the refurbishment of two maternity waiting homes, one for women who needed specialized care, in Georgetown, and the other in Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo, a region in the hinterland with many indigenous inhabitants. Work on the waiting home in Barima-Waini, another region with a population that was largely indigenous, was set to begin in late 2019. The Government's goal of ensuring that access to similar levels of health services was available to everyone in the country was clearly outlined in a policy document entitled Health Vision 2020.

37. **Mr. Deep Ford** (Guyana) said that the Green State Development Strategy adopted by Guyana was one of the few such national strategies adopted in the world. Likewise, Guyana was one of only 13 countries in the Partnership for Action on Green Economy, which had been set up to ensure that commitments made as part of the Paris Agreement on climate change would be honoured. Guyana was at the intersection of a green economy and what could be termed a brown economy. Trade-offs had to be managed. Public institutions, including the Ministry of Natural Resources, operated within a policy framework that bound them to the Green State Development Strategy. Any budgets submitted for approval to the Ministry of Finance were required to pass a "green test" developed as part of the Strategy to ensure environmental protection. The authorities, in short, were well aware of the risks posed by the brown economy and the disproportionate impact of climate change on women. The Government worked with regional and international organizations to adapt to changing situations and to protect the environment. The country was genuinely committed to implementation of the Paris Agreement. The Guyanese authorities ensured that policies related to natural resources and energy were formulated with input from all sectors.

38. **The Chair** asked whether the State party had considered using technology to help overcome the refusal of coastal banks to lend to prospective borrowers in the hinterland. She welcomed the idea of mobile courts plying the country's rivers. Riverboats were a lifeline – some were even floating bookstores – in riverine areas of her country, Ghana. She wished to know whether the State party had any data on child marriage and forced marriage. It would be interesting to learn, for instance, how many people had been prosecuted and convicted in connection with such practices. A comment on the contents of the sex education provided in the State party would also be welcome. How early, for example, was it offered? How effective had it been in addressing the problem of teenage pregnancy?

Articles 15 and 16

39. **Ms. Reddock** asked whether it was true that a clause in the Sexual Offences Act of 2010 allowed a child under the age of 15 to be married if a parent asked a court for consent. Child sexual abuse was a challenge throughout the region, including in Guyana, and a regional campaign to combat such abuse was being carried out with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Was Guyana taking part in that campaign? The opening of the country's maternity waiting homes was a commendable initiative.

40. **Ms. La Fleur** (Guyana) said, although the marriage of a 14-year-old girl was never legally recognized, girls of that age did marry in some cultural contexts. The people in communities where such marriages occurred were ordinarily very discreet about it, so those marriages were rarely reported. The girls themselves were dependent on their husbands and generally did not denounce the practice. Sometimes, however, married girls grew close to facilitators and opened up. The situation was challenging. Constant work on the ground was needed.

41. **Mr. Tanner** (Guyana) said that community action groups had been set up to report any incidents of suspected child abuse. None of the laws that touched on marriage in Guyana referred to the marriage of children under the age of 15. Information technology hubs were being set up in rural communities, which should ultimately facilitate the extension of loans by the country's banks and other lending institutions in those areas.

42. **Ms. Ameline** said that the State party was to be commended on its international commitments in respect of the environment. What mattered under the Convention was not merely that women, including women who lived by ancient custom, should benefit from the State party's strategies for the development of a new green economy, but also that they should help build that new economy.

43. **Ms. Amna Ally** (Guyana) said that replies to pending questions would be provided in writing.

44. **The Chair**, thanking the delegation for its contributions to the constructive dialogue, said that she wished to encourage the State party to accept the amendment to article 20 (1) of the Convention.

The meeting rose at 4.55 p.m.