



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

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## Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Fifty-seventh session

### Summary record of the 1200th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 19 February 2014, at 3 p.m.

*Chairperson:* Ms. Ameline

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*The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.*

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

*Sixth periodic report of Sierra Leone* (continued) (CEDAW/C/SLE/6; CEDAW/C/SLE/Q/6 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Sierra Leone took places at the Committee table.*
2. **Ms. Gbedemah** said that Sierra Leone had a rich history as an education hub in West Africa. She noted with concern that the increase in the length of senior secondary education from three to four years in order to improve academic results had meant that many poorer students who paid their own school fees could not afford to continue their studies. What was the impact of the extra school year on girls' education, and what was being done to introduce scholarships, as provided for in the Agenda for Prosperity? Since school dropout rates among girls increased with each higher level of education, she wondered whether there were any strategies to overcome traditional attitudes that constituted barriers to higher education for girls. Did sex education cover gender issues and pregnancy prevention? How did the national strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy deal with those issues and what measures were being taken to help pregnant girls to return to school after delivery? She also enquired as to whether specific efforts were made to assist girls affected by war to continue their education. What were the outcomes of the girl child education initiative for the Northern and Eastern Provinces referred to in the report? Noting the lack of statistics in the report on girls' educational performance or the courses that they pursued in secondary and tertiary education, she wondered what measures were in place to prevent gender segregation in secondary schools and institutions of higher education, and encourage young women to take up science, technology and vocational subjects. What was being done to end gender-based violence and sexual harassment in schools?
3. Were there data on the number of teachers who had been punished for such offences and what were the penalties? What mechanisms were available to girls to report incidents of sexual harassment and were they confidential? Since teacher quality and teacher-student ratios remained an issue, what measures had been taken to enhance teacher training and increase the number of qualified teachers? Did girls have access to suitable sanitary facilities in school? Lastly, she asked for details of the subjects covered in non-formal education. Did they include post-conflict issues such as peace education and human rights, how did such education address gender stereotypes and was it the same for men and women?
4. **Ms. Patten** asked what was the current status of the pending employment bill and whether there was a time frame for enacting it. Did the bill incorporate the principle of equal pay for work of equal value and set out a definition of sexual harassment in the workplace and provide for its prohibition? She asked how the Ministry of Labour addressed gender pay gaps in the public and private sectors and how it engaged with the private sector in order to increase employment opportunities for women. She also wondered whether there was a mechanism to determine the value of a post in relation to other posts in a gender-sensitive manner. She was pleased to note the efforts made to promote the advancement of women in the informal sector through the establishment of agribusiness centres, most of which were headed by women. However, were there any measures in place to address the high proportion of women working without social or legal protection in the informal sector or to facilitate their entry into the formal labour market? Lastly, were the labour conditions of women and girls engaged in mining, agriculture and domestic work being monitored in order to prevent abuse and exploitation?

5. **Ms. Nwankwo** commended the 2010–2015 strategic health plan and the reproductive, newborn and child health policy. However, World Health Organization (WHO) figures indicated that Sierra Leone had the fourth highest rate of maternal mortality in the world. She wondered what measures were being taken to improve that situation and whether maternal health-care services were distributed fairly among the population. Referring to paragraphs 160 and 162 of the report, she asked how the State party was monitoring the implementation of the strategic health plan in order to ensure that women enjoyed full access to free maternal health care in accordance with international human rights standards. Was the social health insurance scheme operational and achieving its objectives?

6. She asked what was being done to ensure that reproductive health services were fully accessible and addressed the specific needs of women. Were there any targeted measures to remove barriers to the use of contraception? While there were no data on unsafe abortion, it appeared to account for around 13 per cent of maternal mortality. A bill on abortion that allowed for abortion to be performed on a wide range of grounds had been drafted in 2007 but had not yet been submitted to the Cabinet for approval. What was the time frame for submitting the bill to Parliament?

7. Lastly, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation had drawn attention to the links between mental health disorders and post-war trauma and accusations of witchcraft against women. How was the State party addressing the issue of mental health and were there any measures to provide psychosocial support to women affected by conflict and accusations of witchcraft? What was the status of the mental health bill and the physical state of facilities for women with mental health problems?

8. **Ms. Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that family planning was considered to be fundamental in reducing maternal mortality and was being integrated in the strategic health plan. It was also being promoted among adolescents in order to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. Family planning services, including long-term solutions such as contraceptive implants, were being integrated into the free health-care initiative. According to the preliminary results of the national demographic and health survey, a lot of progress had been made in family planning. Use of contraception remained low but had greatly increased.

9. Unsafe abortion was a serious public health problem and a Government priority which was covered under the reproductive, newborn and child health policy and the strategic health plan, which aimed to provide safe and legal abortion services. The bill on abortion had been submitted to the Medical and Dental Council for review and the delay in its enactment was due to the need to present it to other key stakeholders. Once finalized, the draft would be submitted to the Cabinet for approval before being presented to Parliament for enactment. It was important to ensure that only specific, certified health-care providers were authorized to offer abortion services.

10. There was a shortage of data on mental health. However, WHO had reported that while around 715,000 people suffered from mental health disorders in the country, less than 1 per cent received treatment. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation would ensure that mental health-care services were integrated into primary and community health care. A mental health policy and strategic plan had been reviewed and an operational plan had been developed. Guided by a steering committee, the operational plan would include a review of the mental health bill and seek to build capacity among staff and improve infrastructure. A mental health-care task force had also been established for that purpose.

11. Maternal mortality was among the priority items on the Agenda for Prosperity. There were no recent figures available but rates had decreased and would be reduced further. The free health-care initiative had improved the health of pregnant women through

increasing access to health-care facilities during pregnancy and delivery and significantly increasing the rate of antenatal and postnatal visits in both urban and rural areas.

12. **Mr. Kaikai** (Sierra Leone), with regard to employment, said that the Government had held extensive tripartite consultations throughout the country with labour and management in order to draw up a new national employment policy. The policy covered equal pay for work of equal value and sexual harassment in the workplace. Provision had also been made for gender-neutral job evaluations in businesses and social protection for women and the Government had decided to establish a social protection agency within the National Commission for Social Action. Furthermore, women over 62 had been granted a stipend through the Ministry of Labour. A national local content policy also addressed the issue of women in the workplace by promoting employment and job security for qualified local women.

13. **Mr. Vandi** (Sierra Leone) said that the extra year of secondary school was important in preparing both boys and girls for tertiary education. A core objective of the Agenda for Prosperity was to remove economic barriers to education for girls and to keep girls in school, which was why the national strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy had been implemented. The Agenda also included plans for the provision of free tuition to girls. Girls who had been pregnant were permitted to return to school.

14. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs had carried out a study on gender-based violence in schools and measures were being implemented to minimize that problem. For example, toilet blocks were segregated by gender and located in different parts of the school. The Code of Ethics for Teachers provided for penalties for sexual harassment and abuse. In addition, specialized agencies and family support units had been set up to receive complaints of such abuse. As a result, a large number of individuals were being investigated. There were no statistics relating to prosecutions but they could be provided at a later date. The family support unit database indicated that a large number of cases of abuse involved schoolchildren, but there were no current figures disaggregated by gender.

15. Statistics on girls' enrolment at the secondary and tertiary levels could not currently be provided. Schools had been built in rural areas close to homes to ensure that pupils had access to education. Furthermore, non-formal education facilities had been established with a view to reducing the illiteracy rate. The areas covered in the curriculum were the same for men and women and included basic literacy and human rights training.

16. **Ms. Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that the social insurance scheme would be piloted and was expected to be implemented in late 2014.

17. **The Chairperson**, speaking in her capacity as an expert, said that non-formal and distance learning provided the opportunity for training in new technologies, such as solar-powered iPads.

18. **Ms. Gbedemah** asked what the results of the education initiatives had been, whether corporal punishment was prohibited by law and how widespread the practice was.

19. **Mr. Kaikai** (Sierra Leone) said that the education initiatives had been piloted and launched throughout the country.

20. **Mr. Sesay** (Sierra Leone) said that legislation permitting corporal punishment had been repealed in 2007. Teachers and parents were, however, still entitled to use "reasonable" discipline methods. Campaigns were being launched to raise awareness among civil society of the possibility of reporting violence committed by teachers and parents.

21. **Ms. Nwankwo** said that measures to outlaw female genital mutilation, which would contribute to reducing obstetric fistula, remained insufficient and data on the issue was absent from the report. What was the State party doing to address the problem?
22. **Ms. Kamara** (Sierra Leone) said that the issue of obstetric fistula was a matter of great concern and was central to national strategic gender plan and national reproductive health policy. A specific strategy had also been formulated to reduce the incidence of fistula with a focus on teenage pregnancy. Two centres for the free treatment of fistula had been established in the country, one of which also provided assistance and capacity-building for the social reintegration of women affected by fistula. In addition, there was a shelter for fistula patients and a helpline to provide information on services and facilities.
23. **Ms. Fofanah** (Sierra Leone) said that the Government was cooperating with traditional birth attendants to reduce the maternal mortality rate. Many efforts were being made to reduce and prohibit female genital mutilation. She asked what data the Committee could provide on the link between certain types of female genital mutilation and obstetric fistula.
24. **Ms. Haidar** was concerned that over 80 per cent of women worked in the informal sector. The law governing social and economic benefits still granted benefits to a widow until she remarried, but no equivalent provision for a widower. How would the State party address that discrepancy? She expressed concern about collateral needed to apply for bank loans and high interest rates and therefore requested sex-disaggregated data and details of women's property rights and measures to ensure women's access to bank loans and landownership.
25. **Ms. Jahan** said she was concerned about the feminization of poverty and internally displaced women as a result of the civil war. What proportion of the national budget was allocated to rural and agricultural development and what measures had been adopted under the Agenda on Prosperity for the protection and empowerment of rural women? Despite certain legal provisions on land rights, rural women continued to be marginalized and disempowered because much of the population adhered to customary law. How was gender mainstreaming incorporated into the land policy currently under review, how would women's land rights be protected and when would it be adopted? She firmly hoped that section 27, subsection 4 (d) of the Constitution would be repealed. In light of the land grabbing in the country that threatened women's landownership and livelihoods, she asked whether there were legal safeguards to provide women with alternative land and to prevent the forced eviction and displacement of women. She also asked whether there were measures to ensure women's participation in decision-making processes in such matters. What provisions were in place for war widows and how were the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in that area being implemented? What was being done to rehabilitate women former combatants with disabilities and to provide social security benefits to the elderly?
26. **Mr. Kaikai** (Sierra Leone) said that there were no displaced persons in Sierra Leone except for Liberians who did not wish to be repatriated. Women were the main beneficiaries of the Government's microfinance scheme, and many women with disabilities and or widowed women following the war received microgrants and educational support.
27. **Mr. Vandi** (Sierra Leone) said that the budget of the ministry responsible for agriculture was 10 per cent of the national budget. The problem of the feminization of poverty was taken into account in the Agenda for Prosperity, which included a section on employment in both the formal and informal economies, and specific funds that focused on rural women had been set up. The Barefoot Women Solar College trained women in using solar energy and other facilities in rural areas such as police stations and hospitals had begun to use solar power. Before it was presented to Cabinet, the land policy had been

reviewed to ensure that a gender perspective had been adopted. The current status of the policy was reflected in the Agenda for Prosperity, which enhanced women's access to and control of land resources.

28. **Ms. Fofanah** (Sierra Leone) said the women from the rural areas in Sierra Leone included professional women who contributed to the country's development. The President regularly involved those women in dialogue to ensure that their needs were met in public policymaking. Programmes to assist all women in accessing credit and setting up a business were in place at the community level. The Barefoot Women, a group of 12 non-formally educated women, had received training in solar engineering in India and were to pass on their newly acquired knowledge to rural women in other countries in Africa. It was expected that the strategies under the Agenda for Prosperity would bear more fruit in the next reporting period.

29. **Mr. Sesay** (Sierra Leone) said that the Constitutional Review Committee would ensure that section 27, subsection 4 (d), of the Constitution, concerning discriminatory provisions with respect to adoption, marriage and other interests of personal law, was repealed.

30. **Ms. Hayashi** asked whether the minimum age for women jurors at the High Court would be brought into line with that for men, whether the matrimonial causes bill provided unified, non-discriminatory conditions for all forms of marriage and divorce, and whether any branches of the judiciary accepted cases relating to family matters brought by women. She urged Sierra Leone to accelerate the constitutional review process and repeal section 27, subsection 4 (d), of the Constitution, while requesting confirmation that the section did not prevent the Government from enacting family law that respected gender equality. She wished to know how the State party had identified any shortcomings in the matrimonial causes bill and whether it planned to draft a more comprehensive bill to fully reform family law.

31. She requested statistics on the number of women in polygamous marriages and information on the share of their husband's property that they inherited on his death according to when they entered into the marriage. She sought clarification on the status of polygamous marriages concluded prior to the entry into force of the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act. Lastly, she asked what measures the Government had adopted to raise awareness of the need to amend legislation which provided that a woman could only inherit her deceased husband's property if she had had a child with him or remarried one of his male relatives.

32. **Mr. Sesay** (Sierra Leone) said that the requirements for becoming a juror would be the same for men and women under the new criminal procedure bill. Even before the adoption of the Devolution of Estates Act, women had been able to bring custody claims; traditional practice granted custody to the mother, especially if she had young children, and husbands were obliged to pay maintenance costs during temporary separations. In civil marriages, disputes were taken to the High Court, which always considered the best interests of the child. The committee examining the matrimonial causes bill had found that it did not adequately provide for customary marriage and had commissioned further research, which had not yet been carried out because of insufficient funding.

33. The Law Reform Commission reviewed all legislation and recommended amendments, while ministries and civil society could also help to bring about legal reform, which took place on an almost daily basis.

34. Training on the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act for the relevant bodies would be provided and marriage registration fees standardized. Registration was not a legal requirement and did not affect the validity of a marriage; the data collected from the registration process was used for administrative purposes only. While polygamous

marriages were widespread in Sierra Leone, no specific data was currently available on the number and nature of such marriages taking place; however a census planned later in the year would cover polygamous marriages.

35. **Ms. Haidar** asked whether the Law Reform Commission examined all discriminatory provisions in current legislation.

36. **Ms. Jahan** said that the role of rural women as advocates of change and the President's willingness to take their concerns on board were commendable and would seem to lead to de facto land and property rights for women.

37. **Mr. Kaikai** (Sierra Leone) said that a report identifying discriminatory areas of the Constitution had been submitted to the Constitutional Review Committee, and the women on that committee would take gender issues into consideration during consultations across the country.

38. Before signing agreements with investors who wished to exploit the country's resources, the Government first required them to obtain the approval of local people. Large polygamous families living in areas where natural resources were exploited were disproportionately affected by such foreign ventures because they often received the same amount of compensation as smaller families. Efforts were being made to resolve conflicts between local chiefs and landowning families over land.

39. **Mr. Sesay** (Sierra Leone) said that two laws governed companies that had acquired land for mining purpose: one for the Western Area and one for the provinces where most mining took place. Initial land leases in those provinces were limited to 50 years, with subsequent leases of 25 years. Furthermore, numerous conditions to protect landowners' interests must be met, including a review carried out by a local government representative.

40. **Mr. Momoh** (Sierra Leone) said that as discrimination and violence against women were usually caused by men, men themselves should lead the campaign for women's rights. For that reason, he had been chosen to represent Parliament before the Committee. Priority would continue to be given to any bill relating to women's issues that was before Parliament.

41. **Mr. Sesay** (Sierra Leone) said that the Committee had helped to guide his Government's gender equality policies and thanked it for its role in assisting the Government in its duties.

42. **Ms. Stevens** (Sierra Leone) said that she was proud of the progress made by Sierra Leone. The will to make further progress existed and it was important to understand the situation in the country to achieve the desired results.

43. **Mr. Kaikai** (Sierra Leone) said that all issues raised during the dialogue would be addressed. He thanked UN-Women, which had made it possible for the delegation and civil society to attend the meeting.

44. **The Chairperson** said that the Committee had acquired a better understanding of the situation of women in Sierra Leone and hoped that the Government would continue to adopt a comprehensive range of measures to promote their rights.

*The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 5 p.m.*