



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Eighty-fifth session

Summary record of the 1974th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 10 May 2023, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Peláez Narváez

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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 initial and second to fifth periodic reports of Sao Tome and Principe (continued) (CEDAW/C/STP/1-5; CEDAW/C/STP/Q/1-5; CEDAW/C/STP/RQ/1-5)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Sao Tome and Principe joined the meeting.*

2. **The Chair**, welcoming the delegation of Sao Tome and Principe to the meeting, explained that additional members of the delegation would be participating via video link.

Articles 7 and 8 (continued)

3. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that unfortunately the 30 per cent quota for the participation of women in the parliament established in a resolution had not yet been met, despite best efforts to that end, including awareness campaigns and advocacy work with political parties and women themselves. Under the Parity Act adopted in November 2022, the target for women's participation in parliament had been increased to 40 per cent. There were currently eight women members of parliament, including four women ministers who headed the ministries of justice, education, women's rights, and youth and sport. The election of a woman as president of the National Assembly had been a major step forward and would give greater impetus to efforts to achieve the new quota. The National Institute for the Promotion of Gender Equality and Equity was collaborating with partners and the United Nations Development Programme on the implementation of the Parity Act, with a particular focus on electoral lists. The recent establishment of the Ministry of Women's Rights was another important development in that area and would no doubt contribute to achievement of the target for women's participation. The Ministry would also be responsible for ensuring the creation of the committee to monitor implementation of the Parity Act, as required by the Act. Much work remained to be done in encouraging women to participate in political life in order to meet the target by 2026.

Article 9 (continued)

4. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that, as a result of a campaign focused particularly on birth registration in rural areas, approximately 98 per cent of all children were currently registered. There were no plans to ratify the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Children born to parents of Sao Tome and Principe nationality outside the national territory had the right to that nationality. Applications for nationality could be made through consular services abroad.

Article 10

5. **Ms. Xia** said that the State party was to be commended on the measures taken to promote free preschool education and basic education and to develop higher education and technical and vocational training. However, disaggregated data on women's and girls' equal access to education were lacking. She would welcome further information on the progress of the literacy campaign for women, especially among women in rural and remote areas. The State party had provided detailed information on educational indicators in tables 4, 5 and 6 of the report, but it was regrettably not disaggregated by sex. The Committee would therefore appreciate data on enrolment, dropout and graduation rates at all levels of education for boys and girls, also disaggregated by age, urban and rural area, and region. The State party noted in its report that girls accounted for the majority of students enrolled in tertiary education institutions but were relatively underrepresented in vocational training centres. It would be interesting to hear the reasons for that situation, how it had affected women's entry into the labour force and what measures the State party had taken to address it.

Article 11

6. **Ms. González Ferrer** said that, despite the commendable efforts made by the Government in the area of labour rights and the adoption of the new Labour Code in 2019,

the impact of gender stereotypes in the labour market remained evident, giving rise to discrimination in access to employment and to workplace sexual harassment, as well as hindering the enjoyment of economic and social benefits. The statistical data provided by the State party showed women's lack of empowerment, as they had low levels of education, experienced disproportionately high poverty and unemployment rates, and made up the bulk of those working in the informal sector. She would therefore appreciate information on plans in place to combat high unemployment among adult and young women, and on legislative or policy measures taken to counteract gender stereotypes and prejudices and to prevent sexual harassment and discrimination against women in the workplace on the grounds of maternity or marriage. She would be interested to hear about measures to provide entrepreneurship training for young women and about strategies to support the design and implementation of social protection programmes for women working in the informal sector. She would also like to know whether there were any plans to develop a comprehensive and gender-sensitive strategy to raise women's level of educational attainment and enable them to move from informal to formal employment.

7. She would be grateful for information on measures to strengthen childcare policy, programming and infrastructure. It would also be interesting to hear about measures for the effective implementation of the paternity leave policy and for the design of health and social services for girls and boys that removed barriers for women and encouraged male participation. Lastly, the delegation might comment on any plans to design and implement a policy that promoted men's role in caring for their children, with a view to achieving a better balance between work and family life.

8. **Ms. Gbedemah** said that the Committee wished to know what measures were being taken to prevent and combat the worrying phenomenon of opportunistic relationships between teachers or lecturers and students in exchange for good grades, which was apparently not regarded as sexual abuse. She would also be interested to hear about the measures in place to address other harmful practices that had an impact on girls' education, including child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and domestic and sexual violence. Was there any comprehensive behaviour change strategy in place involving professionals and traditional and religious leaders? Lastly, she would like to know what was being done to systematically collect data on transition rates between secondary and tertiary education, disaggregated net enrolment rates, actual school attendance rates, the courses being pursued and the provision of resources to ensure transition.

9. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that basic education was free. Work was under way to ensure access to quality education. The General Inspectorate of Education was responsible for monitoring and imposing administrative sanctions in cases of school violence or abuse committed by teachers against pupils. Violence between pupils was dealt with by the school itself, which administered the appropriate punishment. It was true that there had been cases of teachers exercising an improper influence on students and exchanging good grades for sexual favours; the practice had been condemned and the teachers involved had been duly punished. Teachers involved in inappropriate relationships with students were subject to disciplinary proceedings and could face prosecution if the student was a minor.

10. With regard to the transition from secondary to tertiary education, the Ministry of Education applied strict criteria to ensure that there was no nepotism or favouritism shown to boys over girls in the awarding of scholarships for study in Sao Tome and Principe or abroad. Vulnerable students and students from rural areas who would otherwise face significant difficulties in accessing higher education were given priority in the allocation of scholarships, which were sponsored by government partners, including the National Oil Agency. Scholarships were provided to a large proportion of the students who needed them but, as the country's population increased, not all students were able to obtain them. Disaggregated data on the school dropout rate would be provided in writing.

11. The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with partners and churches, organized awareness-raising campaigns in schools on the ethical and proper behaviour expected of students. Unfortunately, some disrespectful behaviours could arise, often influenced by what students saw online.

12. Replies to the questions on employment would also be provided in writing.

Article 12

13. **Ms. Tisheva** said that she would like to know what the State party was doing to ensure equal access to general and reproductive health services for all women and girls, including those from poor, vulnerable and remote communities, and what human and financial resources were allocated to that end. She would welcome information on the implementation of the reproductive health programme, on the budget line for family planning services and on the accessibility of modern and affordable contraceptives.

14. It would be useful to learn what strategies and investments were in place to curb the high rate of adolescent pregnancy, including through activities to engage boys, address the root causes of adolescent pregnancy, combat sexual violence and ensure access to modern contraceptives. She wondered whether there were any specialized reproductive health services for adolescents, and whether the State party intended to develop a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health policy and educational curriculum for adolescents, with a focus on preventing early pregnancy. She wished to know what policies were in place to protect the rights of pregnant girls, adolescent mothers and their children and to combat discrimination against them. She would be interested to learn what the State party was doing to help pregnant girls and adolescent mothers complete their education and to empower them economically. In addition, she would welcome information on measures to ensure access to menstrual hygiene for school students, including through the provision of gender-separated hygiene facilities, with a view to preventing dropouts and stigmatization.

15. She wished to learn what care services were available for women during the birth and post-birth periods, what guarantees were in place to preserve the dignity of women, and whether health workers received mandatory training on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls. It would be useful to know whether any testing and screening programmes for cervical cancer had been launched and whether the human papillomavirus vaccination was available to all women. Lastly, she wished to hear about policies and services in place to uphold the rights of women with special needs, including elderly women, women with HIV/AIDS, women with disabilities and women with drug dependence.

Article 13

16. **Ms. Bethel** said that, while she welcomed the measures introduced to support the economy during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, she wished to know what was being done to help women return to work in the tourism industry and the informal sector following the pandemic; to support their participation in the formal economy as part of an inclusive recovery; to increase investment in social care services, in order to reduce the unpaid care burden on women; and to promote employment policies that would help improve labour-market conditions and increase access to decent work for women.

17. In the light of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, she wondered whether the post-COVID-19 development plan contained a gender-responsive component that took into account the needs of women, and especially of vulnerable women. She would also like to know what measures were being considered to make social security benefits available to women who worked in the informal economy, and especially to women with disabilities and those living in rural areas. Lastly, she wondered whether the State party had considered adopting transformative fiscal policies and strategies to improve access to good-quality, affordable public services in the areas of health, training, transportation, sanitation, water and housing, and whether any measures were being taken to tackle the structural causes of poverty and gender-based inequality.

18. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that it would be interesting to learn whether women investors in the blue economy and the extractive industries benefited from the provisions in the Investment Code that guaranteed equal and non-discriminatory treatment for foreign and domestic investors. Given that oil drilling activities had begun in the State party's exclusive economic zone in 2022, she wondered to what extent women had been involved in drawing up the legal framework for oil revenue management and whether the Government had assessed the impact of the extractive industries on women.

19. Noting that the State party had signed the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area, she wondered what opportunities were available to enable

women-run small and medium-sized enterprises to expand into markets across the continent and to access credit. She hoped that the State party would consider acceding to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants and the Minamata Convention on Mercury, in order to address the structural challenges faced in the extractive industries.

20. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that abortion was legal within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, provided the woman gave her free and spontaneous consent. The Government did not currently have any statistics on the number of miscarriages.

21. Since 2021, the Government had allocated a budget line of 300 million dobras for investment in reproductive health services for women and adolescents. It received funding from partners for such activities, including specialized agencies of the United Nations system and bilateral donors. That budget was just a forecast, however, as the necessary funds were not always available.

22. Health workers did not receive compulsory training on sexual and reproductive health. The central monitoring team could identify areas where training was required, however, and request support in that regard from the State party's international partners. Doctors received basic training on treating victims of domestic violence, but the Government was aware that more specialized training was required. It was currently working with the Portuguese Government to develop solutions.

23. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe) said that responses to the remaining questions would be provided in writing.

Articles 14

24. **Ms. Bonifaz Alfonzo** said that she would welcome information on the current literacy rate among women in rural areas and on the family planning services available there. She wondered whether women in rural areas were guaranteed the right to land and water and what percentage of them held land titles. She wished to know what steps the State party was taking to support women in rural areas in carrying out productive projects, such as cooperatives, and what the State party was doing to improve basic infrastructure, such as roads, schools and hospitals, in rural areas.

25. She wished to know whether due consideration was given to the role of women in combating climate change and guaranteeing food security and nutrition. Lastly, she would welcome information on the measures taken to ensure that women with disabilities had access to education and health care.

26. **Ms. Gbedemah** asked whether the act of accusing an older woman of witchcraft was criminalized under the law, what punishments were applicable and how many perpetrators had been convicted.

Articles 15 and 16

27. **Ms. Hacker** said that she would like to know whether pregnant, post-partum or breastfeeding women were prohibited from working in certain areas and whether they received compensation in such cases. She wondered whether victims of gender-based discrimination received legal aid from the State and, if not, whether the State party planned to support non-governmental organizations in the provision of such aid. In addition, she wished to know how the State party guaranteed the rights of women during mediation in domestic violence cases and whether effective emergency legal measures, such as restraining orders, could be applied. Lastly, she asked under what circumstances citizens with disabilities were barred from exercising their right to vote.

28. **Ms. Reddock** said that the adoption of the updated Family Code was commendable. Nonetheless, she wished to know what mechanisms were in place to implement the Code and, in particular, to ensure that spouses shared the burden of housework, childcare and financial support on an equal basis. In that connection, she wished to know what measures were in place to ensure that fathers paid child support and, in particular, whether there were any family courts capable of ordering salary deductions or State monitoring to that end.

29. It would be interesting to know what the State party was doing to prevent child marriage and whether it intended to amend the law to prohibit the de facto union of girls under the age of 18 years and to recognize only unions that commenced when both parties were at least 18 years of age. She wondered whether the State party had considered introducing programmes of gender sensitization, child sexual abuse prevention, family planning and childcare support with a view to preventing de facto unions involving girls under 18 years of age, especially in the districts of Água Grande, Mé-Zóchi, the North-West region, the South-East region and the Autonomous Region of Principe.

30. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the Government was deeply concerned about the situation of rural women. The Ministry of Women's Rights had taken action on behalf of rural women in cooperation with the National Institute for the Promotion of Gender Equality and Equity. In addition, projects and programmes aimed at training and empowering rural women had been implemented in cooperation with international and national bodies. Although rural women were provided with basic services, the lack of decent roads in many communities impeded their ability to move freely and to convey products to local markets. The Government therefore planned to create the infrastructure required to facilitate freedom of movement.

31. The Government had conducted awareness-raising campaigns on family planning and other issues in rural areas, and rural women benefited from a wide range of public services. The Ministry of Women's Rights planned to train more than 70 women at central level and subsequently to extend training to districts. When drawing up the State budget, the Government had investigated existing concerns in rural communities, particularly among women. Rural women currently lacked access to credit but had already benefited from some credit systems established by local banks. Repayment of loans sometimes proved difficult, but the Government would continue to promote microcredits for women. The literacy programme of the Ministry of Education had been suspended but would resume shortly, as part of the education plan. There was no discrimination against women in terms of access to water, although the necessary infrastructure was lacking in some areas. Through gender-sensitive budgeting, the Government was taking the necessary steps to ensure that women's water-related and sanitation requirements were met.

32. Many women worked in cooperatives, for instance in order to process agricultural produce. The National Institute for the Promotion of Gender Equality and Equity supported such activities, with a view empowering women in both rural and urban areas. The Institute had held a training course the previous week for about 80 women in rural and urban areas of the Caué district, in cooperation with an association related to the Ministry of Women's Rights. Similar training courses would be provided in all other districts. A training forum on agroecology for rural women in Central Africa had been held in Sao Tome and Principe in March 2023. It had been attended by about 70 women, including 30 from other countries.

33. Action was being taken to address the issue of witchcraft, which was not widespread but was a source of great concern, particularly when older women were subjected to abuse. When the authorities received complaints of such abuse, the requisite action was taken forthwith. For example, the neighbour of an older woman who had been abused by her children had reported the case to the municipality, which had immediately found a place of refuge for the woman.

34. **A representative of Sao Tome and Principe** said that the Government was currently ratifying two protocols to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, namely the Protocol on the Rights of Citizens to Social Protection and Social Security and the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons, which prohibited harmful practices, including witchcraft.

35. With regard to paternal responsibility for education, when the Prosecution Service was notified of cases related to child support, it took steps to ascertain the scale of the father's income and the corresponding requirement of child support in financial terms. As it frequently proved difficult to secure the necessary payment, the funds were withheld at source. The provisions of the Family Code and the Criminal Code attributed the same rights and responsibilities to both parents. However, the recent increase in women's employment had led to a change of circumstances, and men and women were no longer equally involved in children's upbringing.

36. There were no separate juvenile courts, but such cases were dealt with by a special section on families and minors in first instance courts.

37. De facto unions and early marriages were a source of concern and needed to be addressed. The law prohibited marriage for persons under 18 years of age and de facto unions were not legally recognized. Priests had in some cases performed wedding ceremonies involving children. Accordingly, there was a plan to engage in discussions of the issue with representatives of all religions and to alert young people to the adverse effects of such de facto unions.

38. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe) said that the Government was concerned about a number of abandoned plots of land that women wished to cultivate. It planned to review cases of abandoned land with a view to its redistribution, giving priority to women in rural areas.

39. There was no obstacle to the employment of pregnant women. They received maternity leave for one month prior to childbirth and for two months thereafter, and there was no difference in salary during maternity leave.

40. The Government was implementing projects, in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, aimed at raising awareness among both rural and urban women of the importance for families of sound nutrition and the need to reduce the rate of chronic malnutrition.

41. Victims of gender-based violence were referred to the Domestic Violence Advisory Centre, where they received urgent attention and follow-up support. Some cases were referred to the police and some victims were referred to a hospital for assessment, following which legal proceedings might be instituted. Support was also provided by governmental and non-governmental organizations, and a women's helpline had been established.

42. No restrictions were imposed on the right to vote. For instance, persons with disabilities and older persons confined to their homes were entitled to vote.

43. **Ms. Reddock** said that she had not received an answer to her question regarding measures to develop equal responsibility for family and care work, for instance through training workshops for women and men, and promotion of a possible change in the division of labour. Training on sound nutrition, for example, should be provided for both men and women in rural and urban areas. It was important to invest in supportive relationships between parents that were conducive to the sharing of household responsibilities.

44. Her question regarding de facto unions had related solely to persons under 18 years of age. She actually welcomed the legal recognition of de facto unions of persons over 18 years of age.

45. **Ms. Gbedemah** said that the best practice for maternity leave was to leave the choice to women, who should not be compelled to remain at home if they were fit to work. She therefore urged the State party to enable such decisions to be taken by a woman and her employer and, if need be, by a health care provider.

46. **Ms. Delgado** (Sao Tome and Principe) said that responses to the remaining questions raised by the Committee would be provided in writing within 24 hours. The Government and people of Sao Tome and Principe would continue to work together towards their shared goals.

47. **The Chair** invited the State party to accept, as soon as possible, the amendment to article 20 (1) of the Convention concerning the Committee's meeting time.

The meeting rose at 4.55 p.m.