



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Summary record of the 2002nd meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 10 October 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)

Tenth periodic report of Bhutan (continued) (CEDAW/C/BTN/10; CEDAW/C/BTN/Q/10; CEDAW/C/BTN/RQ/10)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Bhutan joined the meeting.*

Articles 7–9 (continued)

2. **A representative of Bhutan** said that, in relation with the possible ratification of international instruments on statelessness, the study of international treaties with a view to ratification was an ongoing exercise in Bhutan. The Government took a prioritized approach that considered available resources and institutional readiness to ensure that treaty obligations could be implemented effectively.

Articles 10–14

3. **Ms. Ameline** said that she wished to find out about the impact of the education system on the empowerment of women, particularly their economic empowerment. It would be of interest to know whether the State party had carried out any specific assessments of its impact. She also wondered how the country's education system would adapt to take account of advances in technology and artificial intelligence and how such advances would be integrated into the State party's plans to provide government services using digital means. She would like to know what temporary measures, such as grants, would be taken to address disparities in the way technology had been incorporated into technical and vocational education.

4. It would be useful to the Committee to hear a description of how gender equality was taught in private, public and religious schools and how teachers were trained to teach that subject. She wondered whether the Convention could be incorporated into initial and further training programmes. The Committee would be interested to learn whether the State party intended to make schooling compulsory for all children, what measures could be put in place to prevent children from dropping out of school and how many girls were enrolled in monastic schools. She wished to know whether the State party's strategy to eliminate violence in schools covered online violence and harassment and whether a time frame had been established for extending the pilot sex education programme to all schools, with a view to promoting self-respect and respect for others, and thus respect for girls and their empowerment.

5. **Ms. Akizuki** said that it would be of interest to find out why the employment situation for women had worsened and the employment gap between men and women had widened. She wondered what measures were in place to increase employment for women in the formal sector and in leadership positions, as well as in industry and the information technology sector, with a view to redressing gender segregation in those fields. Did the State party have any programmes that focused on increasing the employment of young women?

6. It would be useful to know whether the State party had evaluated its programmes designed to reduce gender disparities in employment and, if so, what the findings had been and how the impact of those programmes was evaluated. She wondered what measures had been taken to effectively implement the Labour and Employment Act, and she would appreciate further details on the labour inspection mechanisms verifying that employers observed the Act and that employees' rights were thus protected, including those of vulnerable women such as women with disabilities. She would also like to know whether the State party had any data on the gender pay gap and what the State party's plans were for assessing, monitoring and combating harassment and gender-based violence in the workplace.

7. The Committee would like to hear about the concrete measures taken to combat perceived traditional gender norms and stereotypes in the family and in society and to promote women's participation in the labour market. She wondered whether there were

sufficient affordable and accessible childcare facilities to allow women to work. In what ways, and to what extent, had the equal sharing of household responsibilities been promoted thanks to Early Childhood Care and Development facilities? She would appreciate information on the impact of the new policy that increased paid paternity leave from three to six months for civil service employees. Would the policy be extended to cover the private sector?

8. It would be useful for the Committee to receive gender-disaggregated data pertaining to women's participation in the labour force, detailing the employment sectors, wages, benefits and types of work performed, such as home-based, domestic, informal and migrant work.

9. **A representative of Bhutan** said that, over the last decade, the primary and secondary school enrolment rate for girls had increased and the dropout rate had fallen. The number of girls taking up science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at secondary school and university level, especially for ex-country scholarships, had also risen. Information and communications technology (ICT) was now a mandatory subject at all levels of schooling, and the child-friendly programming platform CodeMonkey had been introduced in schools. Older children were also taught to use Scratch and Python.

10. In 2011, the Government had published its Standards for Inclusive Education, which provided schools with guidance in three areas: inclusive policy, inclusive practice and the creation of an enabling environment. There were already 39 schools designated as inclusive, and the Government intended to expand the initiative across the country. All teachers were required to take modules on special education, and special educational needs teachers took part in capacity-development programmes. They also received training in early screening in order to assess the needs of young children enrolled in an inclusive school.

11. The draft national education policy guaranteed an inclusive approach in terms of learning methodologies, materials and assessment. The thirteenth five-year plan aimed to ensure that all schools were inclusive and to improve their accessibility. In 2023, an anti-bullying programme had been rolled out in an effort to combat online violence and harassment. Ongoing awareness-raising programmes were aimed at informing children, teachers and parents about cyberbullying and cyberharassment.

12. **A representative of Bhutan** said that girls' lower performance in mathematics was a key obstacle to meeting the entry requirements for engineering and ICT courses in higher education. An indicator to monitor the number of students scoring above 70 per cent in STEM subjects had been added to the education sector plan. STEM outreach programmes mainly targeted schools in remote areas and had three objectives: to provide young people in rural areas with access to STEM learning tools; to empower girls by prioritizing equal participation; and to bridge the digital urban-rural divide among young people by creating STEM learning platforms. The impact and potential expansion of outreach work on young people's attitudes towards STEM subjects would be analysed based on students' responses prior to and after engaging with outreach programmes.

13. The Government was formulating a technical and vocational education strategy aimed at establishing an inclusive system that revolved around three strategic areas: creating a positive perception; developing gender-responsive infrastructure and facilities; and promoting equal gender participation. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development aimed to increase the proportion of the workforce certified in vocational and technical skills to 80 per cent by 2029. To increase female participation in technical and vocational education courses, female-friendly courses in subjects such as photography, digital marketing and cloud computing were being developed. There was also a growing number of volunteers who coordinated STEM camps and hackathons and attended STEM festivals in order to encourage girls' participation. A new technical training institute with disability-friendly infrastructure was currently being built in Thimphu.

14. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had caused the tourism and entertainment sectors to close, as well as many small informal businesses, which had negatively impacted the employment of women and girls. In response, the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources and non-formal education community centres had launched skilling programmes, which had a high female participation rate. Registered

members of farm groups and cooperatives could partake in capacity-building programmes to enhance their business and marketing skills. Civil society organizations also offered microcredit, free bilateral loans, capacity-building programmes and mentoring to help grow small businesses. Barriers facing women entrepreneurs had been reduced by the State strategy to prioritize innovation over regulation and to streamline the process of setting up a business. New capital business investments of under 200,000 ngultrum would be allowed to commence operations without a business licence. Banks were also providing greater priority-sector lending, particularly to small-scale agribusinesses.

15. **Ms. Deki** (Bhutan) said that there was a total of 1,250 girls in monastic education at 28 nunneries in Bhutan.

16. **A representative of Bhutan** said that an assessment of women's needs in the private sector, carried out in 2021, had shown that the provision of maternity and paternity leave was inadequate. The Government was therefore in discussions with the private sector regarding the study's recommendation to extend maternity leave to at least four or five months and to grant paid paternity leave.

17. **A representative of Bhutan** said that all kinds of discrimination were subject to criminal sanctions under the Penal Code. Sanctions for gender-based discrimination in the workplace ranged from a fine to a prison sentence, depending on the nature of the discriminatory act.

18. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the education programme under the thirteenth five-year plan aimed to achieve a 100 per cent enrolment rate within the next 8 to 10 years. Bhutan already had over 400 Early Childhood Care and Development centres, which allowed mothers valuable time to pursue other endeavours. The equal division of household work was promoted through teaching in schools on each family member's responsibilities and on citizens' fundamental rights and responsibilities. Comprehensive sexuality education, covering topics such as sexual responsibilities, relationships and reproductive health, was being implemented across all grades.

19. **Ms. Ameline** asked if the delegation could provide a more specific response regarding child labour, including for children of non-Bhutanese nationality.

20. **Ms. Akizuki** asked for details on monitoring mechanisms designed to ensure that the equal pay for equal work policy was effective.

21. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the national legislation prohibited child labour and that when cases of child labour were detected the Government took steps to ensure that the child was cared for, protected and returned to school.

22. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the Labour and Employment Act provided for monitoring of implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work. Criminal sanctions up to imprisonment could be imposed for violations of the law.

23. **Ms. Haidar** said that she would like to find out whether the State party intended to decriminalize the termination of pregnancy, which was currently permitted only in very limited circumstances. That restrictive policy was responsible for high numbers of illegal abortions and for underage girls carrying pregnancies to term. She also wondered if the State party had taken additional steps to provide free, confidential and high-quality family planning services and to raise awareness about responsible sexual behaviour and the prevention of early and unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. She would welcome information on whether such steps included the teaching of sexual and reproductive health in schools and programmes targeting patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes.

24. The Committee would like to know what measures the State party was taking to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS and whether such measures provided universal access to sexual and reproductive health care. It would welcome more recent data on the rate of female contraceptive use, as the currently available statistics dated from 2012. Did interventions to increase contraceptive use sufficiently target rural women, and had they had a positive effect?

25. It would be of interest to find out if the State party had succeeded in reducing suicide rates, what measures were in place to reduce them further and whether future measures were planned. She wondered whether the Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan addressed the

situation of women and girls in rural areas. Did the State party plan to adopt new mental health action plans after 2023, and if so, what was their content? The Committee would also welcome information on whether existing mental health programmes had had a positive effect on the mental health of Bhutanese women and girls.

26. She asked if there were any economic and social protection measures, beyond those targeting hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic, that addressed the economic barriers that harmed the mental health of women.

27. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that she would like to know if the State party, when drafting its national action plan on women and peace and security, would consider the status of Bhutanese women refugees in Nepalese refugee camps who were victims of sexual violence. How would United Nations Security Council resolutions on conflict-related sexual violence be reflected in the plan, and how was the State party ensuring that all women, including ethnic minorities, were involved in the plan's drafting process?

28. She asked whether the pillar of the gross national happiness index on cultural preservation applied a pluralist notion of culture, given the broad ethnic diversity in Bhutan. She would also welcome information on how women were being given access to the digital economy through financial benefits and credits. The Committee would be interested to find out whether women of Nepali ethnic origin had the same access to State benefits as the rest of the population.

29. She wondered if the State party would monitor the respect of women's rights when it deployed the new digitized identity system. She also wondered to what extent women were involved in sports, particularly archery and the national sport of *khuru* (a form of darts), both of which had been traditionally male-dominated. What steps had been taken to involve civil society and the non-governmental organization community as partners to advance the human rights-based approach to gender equality in Bhutan?

30. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the Penal Code allowed for termination of pregnancies when there was a risk to the mother's life, when a pregnancy resulted from incest or rape, or if the mother was of unsound mental health. The Ministry of Health had guidelines for health workers for the management of complications after abortion.

31. To reduce the prevalence of early and unwanted pregnancies, family planning services were available in all health facilities nationwide, including in rural areas. Outreach clinics and village health workers helped to ensure services were available in rural areas.

32. Since 2021 the Government had removed a 30 per cent customs duty and a 5 per cent sales tax on women's sanitary products. Adult and family health-care services had been scaled up fivefold across the country. The Bhutan Newborn Action Plan laid out specific measures to prevent teenage pregnancy through enhanced counselling services for women and girls.

33. Bhutan still had a low prevalence of HIV/AIDS, at 0.1 per cent. However, an increase in risk behaviours presented a danger. The cumulative number of cases supported from 1993 to 2022 had been 874, of which 418 were for female patients. An average of nearly 88,000 HIV tests had been conducted annually between 2018 and 2022, with an average number of around 50 cases identified. The Ministry of Health had introduced HIV self-testing kits, provider-initiated HIV counselling and testing services through health-care providers, enabling the detection of many HIV cases.

34. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the country now had a nodal agency for mental health that took on a multisectoral, people-centred approach to mental health care and services. It focused not just on dealing with mental health crises, but also on investing in mental health, raising awareness of its importance and providing appropriate high-quality services. The five-year suicide prevention plan concluding in 2023 was being replaced by a national mental health strategy plan which would also include suicide prevention. For people who had attempted suicide, psychosocial services were provided, and the Pema Centre had introduced postvention services, while clinical interventions were provided by the Department of Psychiatry. Although no data were currently available to confirm a reduction in the suicide rate, an incidence-based registry had been developed. It also recorded attempts at self-harm, in order to provide more comprehensive data.

35. The State party had initiated a mental health and well-being system to tackle the problems of suicide and substance abuse. It had also created prototype screening tools, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. Around 1,300 students, of whom 43 per cent were female, had completed a digital assessment form, and brief interventions and referral services were provided to people who were subsequently identified as requiring them. The State party had launched an approach that viewed substance abuse as a disease, with substance abuse treatment and care services integrated into hospital care. Four such services had been set up, and there were plans to expand them.

36. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the State party was implementing strategies in schools aimed at improving resilience in children in order to reduce mental health issues and suicide. It had initiated a mentor-mentee programme that focused on sexual health, mental health and suicide, while one male and one female teacher in each school had been allocated the role of well-being focal point teachers. Counsellors and district education officers were receiving training relating to those subjects. Some 80 per cent of districts were now covered, with the remainder to receive coverage within the following two months. The long-term aim was to enhance the capacity of teachers in managing mental health issues and problems related to suicide. There were also outreach measures to educate parents on those subjects.

37. **Ms. Deki** (Bhutan) said that women were now taking part in increasing numbers in both archery and *khuru*. Civil society organizations could be established by means of a simple procedure. However, the Government wanted to limit their number, and it worked with a few selected civil society organizations to implement some services in priority areas. It provided funding support to such organizations and seconded professionals to them when necessary.

38. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the subject of women and sport was a priority under the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality. It included a campaign, organized in collaboration with the Bhutan Olympic Committee, that focused on archery and *khuru* and had coincided with International Women's Day in 2021. Since 2008 the International Olympic Committee had been conducting capacity-building for coaches and leaders of the Bhutan Olympic Committee on gender responsive initiatives to encourage women to participate in sports, with technical support from the National Commission for Women and Children.

39. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the Constitution recognized culture as evolving and dynamic and sought to strengthen and facilitate the evolution of traditional values and institutions that were sustainable in a progressive society. The National Digital Identity Act of 2023 did not infringe on women's privacy, and it was aligned with other legislation to ensure that privacy was respected. The Act created decentralized public infrastructure which addressed only questions related to digital data.

40. **A representative of Bhutan** said that contraceptive prevalence rate had been 65.5 per cent in 2021. The Ministry of Health was currently reviewing national health survey data, and a more up-to-date figure would be available by the end of 2023.

41. **Ms. Xia** said that she would like to know if the State party, while implementing the National Financial Inclusion Strategy, had successfully helped rural women to access formal financial services using digital technologies, and if so, how effective that had been. Were there plans for a new round of the strategy, and if so, in which areas would it be improved? She would also welcome information explaining why there was a greater proportion of women than men who were classified as poor by the National Poverty Index, whether the COVID-19 pandemic had pushed rural women back into poverty and what measures had been taken to combat poverty among that group.

42. Concerning initiatives aimed at promoting women's participation in agriculture and in planning for rural development, the Committee would be grateful for detailed data on women's participation in local *Chiwog Zomdues* meetings. What measures had been taken to ensure equality in decision-making regarding water resource management and its effect on women? She asked whether the essential health service delivery plan package had effectively improved access to reproductive health services for rural women and girls and how well the package had been received in rural areas. The Committee would like to find out how many central schools had been established by the State party and whether they were the same as boarding schools. It would also be useful to learn how many rural women had gained access

to entrepreneurial or employment opportunities thanks to government-provided training programmes.

43. **Ms. Tisheva** said that she would like to know how the State party ensured that the specialized courts for women and children had adequate human and financial resources. She asked whether the legal aid initiatives for women and children, such as the Human Dignity Clinic, were supported by the State party and had nationwide coverage. How did the State party measure women's awareness of and access to such initiatives?

44. She would appreciate information on the status of the review of the Marriage Act and on the timeline for the adoption of non-discriminatory provisions in family law. It would be necessary to exclude mandatory mediation in cases of domestic violence, to raise the age of marriage for girls from 16 to 18 and to exclude HIV/AIDS status as grounds for depriving a mother of custody of children. It would also be necessary to take account of any history of domestic violence in decisions on child custody and visitation rights. The Committee would appreciate it if the delegation would describe the policies and measures in place or envisaged to ensure single mothers' economic independence after divorce or separation.

45. She asked whether the State party would consider decriminalizing adultery, repealing the legal provisions regarding payment of compensation (*gao*) in cases of adultery and rape and addressing the customary practice of polygamy and polyandry. It would be of interest to learn whether, in practice, the spouse's consent was still required in order for a married woman to obtain a legal termination of pregnancy. She asked the delegation to comment on reports that penalties were applied to persons who married non-Bhutanese nationals.

46. **Ms. Deki** (Bhutan) said that she wished to make it clear that there was no penalty for marrying a non-Bhutanese citizen. There was a procedure to be followed, which applied to both men and women, in order to obtain a marriage certificate or naturalization for the spouse.

47. **A representative of Bhutan** said that support for rural women took various forms. A gender diagnostic study of the informal sector, including farming communities, had been carried out by the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, and had produced recommendations. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock had, on that basis, launched initiatives to encourage peer-to-peer training and capacity building within farm groups and cooperatives. In addition, civil society enabled rural women to access microcredit and mentoring programmes, while the Central Bank and the Bhutan Development Bank had started lending schemes in support of small-scale farmers. The Government supported the formation of rural self-help groups in the dairy sector, herb cultivation and weaving.

48. The Government's climate adaptation policy was updated every five years. The two studies that had informed the policy had been conducted by the National Commission for Women and Children and development partners and had looked into the differentiated impact of climate change in the key sectors of agriculture, energy and water.

49. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the term "central schools" referred to boarding schools. There were now 182 such institutions, and over 30 per cent of students resided in boarding schools. More large boarding primary schools would be created in rural areas under the thirteenth five-year plan. In addition, strategically located model schools with boarding facilities were to be created in all districts with a view to enhancing the enrolment and retention of girls.

50. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the new Family and Child Bench in Thimphu had now dealt with more than 3,000 cases, in close coordination with the National Commission for Women and Children and several other agencies, hospitals and civil society organizations such as Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW). The aim was to provide speedy justice in order to protect women's and children's rights; all cases were decided within a year. There was no special budget for the Thimphu bench, but thanks to support from all stakeholders it had steadily dealt with the increasing number of cases, despite budgetary constraints.

51. The Thimphu Family and Child Bench catered specifically to women's and children's needs in a friendly atmosphere. Staffed mainly by women and very sensitive to the needs of litigants, it excluded the press and rarely publicized the names of the parties to a dispute.

52. Other such benches would be established in future, depending on caseloads. Where no such bench yet existed, courts provided special facilities for women and children.

53. More than half the recipients of legal aid services were women. The e-litigation platform established in 2021 was an innovative and transformational initiative launched to mitigate disruption in the delivery of justice during the COVID-19 pandemic and was now available to 33 benches. The system had been perceived by users to be excessively formal. The resumption of in-person court proceedings, coupled with a malware attack on the electronic platform, had prompted the adoption of other social media applications, which had been of benefit to women in rural areas in particular. It was hoped that the e-litigation platform would again be operational by the end of 2023. Meanwhile, district community centres were working with the courts in order to enhance justice for women.

54. Under the Marriage Act, the age of marriage for girls was 16 and for boys it was 18. However, the Child Care and Protection Act and the Penal Code, both of which post-dated the Act, clearly defined a child as anyone below the age of 18. For the purposes of implementation, the Bhutanese courts had always taken 18 as the age of marriage for girls. The Act established the level of child support at 20 per cent of the father's or the mother's income for each child. In principle the mother was awarded custody of any child below the age of 9, but in taking decisions on placement, the courts now assessed both parents' capabilities.

55. **A representative of Bhutan** said that a thorough analysis of the Marriage Act had been carried out, an exercise that had involved not only legal experts but also persons working in the area of gender and child protection. The findings had been validated by the secretariats of the National Assembly and the National Council, representatives of the Prime Minister's Office and the Office of the Attorney General and civil society associations. A legislative proposal for amendment was now before the Cabinet.

56. Rules of procedure for legislative impact assessments had been adopted by the Parliament in 2020.

57. There was very limited data on the prevalence of polygamy and polyandry. However, the practices were regulated under the Marriage Act, which required the current spouse's written consent to any further marriage. Adultery was a civil, not a criminal, offence.

58. **A representative of Bhutan** said that telemedicine services, and particularly mobile cardiotocography (iCTG) services, had been well received by women, especially in rural areas. As of August 2023, over 9,600 women had used those services.

59. **A representative of Bhutan** said that, between 2015 and 2021, some 21 community engagement projects had been launched in six areas. In rural areas experiencing rapid social and demographic change, such as men's migration to towns and cities to find work, such programmes had enabled women to take more responsibility for household, agricultural and community duties. The small scale and informality of community engagement programmes had encouraged women to express themselves more freely, reinforced social cohesion and women's own self-confidence and empowered them through exposure to the outside world. By 2021, the success of the community engagement programmes had prompted their expansion to another three districts, which would further boost women's empowerment in decision-making at the local level.

60. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that the Committee was still concerned about the law governing marriage. Marital rape incurred a potential prison sentence of 1 year and was thus treated differently from rape outside marriage, for which the sentence was 3 to 5 years, and mediation was still an option made available under the Domestic Violence Protection Act. The Convention called for the removal of discriminatory provisions without delay.

61. **Ms. Deki** (Bhutan) said that, during the dialogue, her delegation had noted a misperception regarding discrimination against a certain ethnicity, which she wished to strongly refute as untrue. All persons in Bhutan enjoyed equal rights under the Constitution and the law, regardless of ethnicity. Her delegation was not able to respond to questions relating to certain ethnic groups that were beyond the State's territorial jurisdiction.

62. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the Domestic Violence Protection Act identified four types of abuse, including forms of economic abuse, which were generally approached from a civil law perspective. The intention behind allowing the police to seek mutual settlements where certain compoundable offences were concerned was to ensure the preservation of the family unit. In all such settlements, the informed consent of the victim was an integral component of any decisions taken. Moreover, the police were required to take into account factors such as recidivism, the frequency and severity of the abuse, the survivor's best interests and safety and the voluntary nature of the consent.

63. In practice, cases were referred by the police to specialized service providers, who were trained in investigation methods and avoidance of re-victimization and victim blaming. They also received training on the Standard Operating Procedure on Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response.

64. **Ms. Deki** (Bhutan) said that she was grateful to the Committee for the frank exchange of views. The core of her country's Constitution was the commitment to foster conditions conducive to gross national happiness, a vision that could not be achieved unless women were equipped not only to access resources and opportunities, but also to be the authors of their own stories and the architects of progress.

65. **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 and encouraged it to take all necessary measures to give effect to the recommendations that the Committee would make in its concluding observations.

The meeting rose at 4.55 p.m.