



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Ninetieth session

Summary record of the 2131st meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 11 February 2025, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Haidar

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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 fifth to ninth periodic reports of Belize (continued) (CEDAW/C/BLZ/5-9; CEDAW/C/BLZ/Q/5-9; CEDAW/C/BLZ/RQ/5-9)

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

Articles 10–14

2. **A representative of Belize**, resuming his delegation's replies to the questions raised at the previous meeting, said that Belize had taken steps to address the legal and procedural barriers affecting women's access to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly in the case of medical abortion in cases of rape or incest. Chapter 101, section 112, of the Criminal Code specifically outlined the conditions under which abortion was legally permitted. Efforts were made to ensure that the persons concerned, their parents, schools and churches had access to the necessary information, including on access to contraceptive methods.

3. In addition, the Ministry of Health provided the necessary training to healthcare providers on how to handle cases of rape and incest, to collect evidence and to support survivors of sexual violence to seek justice. Training of trainers courses in contraceptive use was also provided. The Government invested more than US\$ 200,000 a year in providing free contraceptives to prevent unintended pregnancies.

4. Mobile health clinics continued to operate in all villages at least five times a year, providing free reproductive health services, including contraceptive counselling, distribution of contraceptive methods and maternal health services. Additional measures were being taken to improve emergency response for survivors of sexual violence. In cases of sexual assault involving girls under 16 years of age, the Department of Human Services coordinated with law enforcement agencies and healthcare providers to facilitate access to necessary medical and legal services.

5. The Government recognized the challenges women faced in gaining access to comprehensive cancer care, particularly with regard to radiotherapy services, which required travel abroad for treatment. However, Belize had made significant strides in early detection, chemotherapy and breast cancer screening. The national health system included oncology treatment centres in the different parts of the country. The Government facilitated referrals for children requiring specialized cancer treatment and financial assistance for radiotherapy treatment abroad. Furthermore, there were ongoing negotiations with neighbouring countries to make radiotherapy services affordable and accessible for Belizean patients.

6. Screening for human papillomavirus (HPV) was provided to women aged 30 to 49 years as part of the national cervical cancer prevention strategy. HPV vaccines were administered to adolescents. Breast cancer screening services included mammograms at Western Regional Hospital.

7. The Government was working with civil society organizations to increase support for older persons, in particular at the Mercy Care Clinic, and had brought forward a bill aimed at improving healthcare services for older persons. It was also seeking to increase non-contributory pension payments and conditional cash transfer support.

8. **A representative of Belize** added that Belize had an estimated 3,700 persons living with HIV, the majority of whom were male. Belize has eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis in 2023, which was a landmark in the history of public health in the country.

9. **Ms. Hacker** said that it was not clear to her which women and girls were entitled to have abortions. She also wondered whether the US\$ 200,000 allocated annually for free contraceptives was sufficient to meet needs. What criteria were used to determine that a person qualified for free contraceptives?

10. **A representative of Belize** said that, under the Criminal Code, medical termination of pregnancy was permitted when the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk to the life of the pregnant woman, or of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman if carrying the pregnancy to term would cause serious harm to the woman's physical or mental well-being; if the pregnancy resulted from sexual violence, including rape or incest; and in cases where there was a substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities that would result in serious disability. Contraceptives were provided free of charge at all facilities and mobile clinics. The Ministry of Health had been responsible for setting the US\$ 200,000 annual budget for free contraceptives, which were provided in both medical institutions and mobile clinics.

11. **Ms. Hacker** said that she wished to know whether the Government was considering amending the current criminal law to decriminalize abortion. She wondered whether there were any educational programmes in schools, including faith-based schools, both for girls and for boys on access to health care services, in accordance with article 12 of the Convention.

12. **A representative of Belize** said that his Government would continue to consider the issue of abortion, which had been raised during the universal periodic review.

13. **Ms. Barriteau** said that the Committee welcomed the State party's consistent efforts to advance women's equality. However, it was concerned about the widening gender inequality gap of 28.9 per cent between 2009 and 2018 and that female-headed households continued to face elevated poverty levels. She would like to know what percentage of Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) funds allocated to micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises had gone to women-owned businesses and whether there was any evaluation of the social and economic benefits derived by the women targeted. She would welcome an update on the implementation of gender-awareness training for loan officers on the IDB project and any impact assessment conducted. She wondered what training had been undertaken to increase women's financial literacy and what social protections existed for self-employed women in micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises?

14. The Belize national sports policy delineated the national benefits of sports without articulating any specific measures to encourage and expand girls' and women's participation in sports. The policy did not include the Ministry of Human Development, Family and Indigenous Peoples Affairs, which had overall responsibility for gender equality. Both the State party's report and the national sport policy were silent on the right of women to participate in sport. She wished to know what measures existed to ensure girls and women in rural and urban areas enjoyed equal opportunities to participate in recreational and professional sports.

15. **Ms. De Silva de Alves** said that, although Belize contributed less than 0.01 per cent of the global share of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, it had made a commitment to reducing cumulative emissions by 2030 and was a model of the blue economy. It would be interesting to learn about the role women played in promoting the sustainable use of oceans.

16. The pervasive presence and stockpiling of illicit small arms and ammunition was a daily threat to the health, safety and security of women. She would like to know whether the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) model law on the Arms Trade Treaty had been incorporated into national law in Belize, given that the illicit arms trade was a root cause of gender-based violence and gang warfare had affected many women in the country. She also wished to know whether female victims of such violence were provided with free legal and psychological services. The World Bank estimated that some 70 per cent of Belizeans in rural areas experienced some form of intimate partner violence. She wondered how the laws and programmes on gender-based violence took account of the specific situation of rural women.

17. In the light of the concessions granted to oil, logging and energy companies, she wondered how the Government ensured that Maya women's constitutional right to the protection of the law was upheld. She wondered whether Maya women's consent was required for companies to operate on ancestral lands and what efforts had been made by the State party to secure Maya women's land rights and to mitigate the environmental harm caused by the private sector in logging and energy.

18. The female population at Belize Central Prison had increased steadily over the previous five years, with approximately 60 per cent of the inmates being incarcerated for immigration-related offences. Given that the Immigration Act prohibited the immigration of prostitutes and homosexuals, she wished to know how many sex workers were incarcerated and whether the State party would consider decriminalizing prostitution.

19. **A representative of Belize** said that the Belize Investment and Business Climate Action Plan outlined several policy and regulatory measures aimed at addressing systematic barriers to financial access for women entrepreneurs, particularly those in rural areas. Given that women-owned micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises faced greater difficulties in accessing credit, the Action Plan integrated targeted support mechanisms to ensure that women entrepreneurs could effectively utilize financial resources for long-term business growth and sustainability, including mentoring programmes that connected women business owners with experienced professionals, capacity-building initiatives and financial literacy training. Furthermore, the plan required that 50 per cent of the training budgets of the Small Business Development Centre and the Belize Training and Employment Centre be allocated to women entrepreneurs. Those measures aimed to level the playing field, thereby enabling women, especially those in rural communities, to access and maximize financial credit and resources for sustainable business success.

20. **A representative of Belize** said that his delegation would provide the Committee with information on the percentage of the IDB funds allocated to women-owned businesses in writing. The promotion of financial literacy was a part of the financial inclusion strategy. There was a need to broaden the Belize national sports policy to include gender equity, greater investment in women's sports infrastructure, the prevention of gender-based violence in sports and community engagement to increase girls' participation in sport and ensure safe spaces for girls to play. With regard to the blue economy, women demonstrated their leadership roles at the Women in Fisheries Forums, where the issue of gender and climate change had been addressed. More work needed to be done on the relationship between the illicit arms trade in arms and gender-based violence. While some progress had been made on collecting information on the gendered nature of gun violence, there was room to improve the collection of the appropriate disaggregated data. There were ongoing efforts to collect such data on intimate partner violence under the Spotlight Initiative and the indicators that had been developed had been used by the National Crime Observatory. Lastly, part of the work of the Ministry of Human Development, Families and Indigenous People's Affairs was to ensure that the rights of the Maya Peoples in southern Belize, including the requirement of the free, prior and informed consent, were upheld.

21. **Ms. Barriteau** said that she would like to know how many persons had received training under the IDB project and whether an evaluation of the training had been made. She wondered whether there was a national insurance scheme for self-employed women or women who owned their own businesses to fund their retirement. She suggested that the Ministry of Human Development, Families and Indigenous People's Affairs should be identified in the national sports policy. There was a need to promote women's professional teams in the Caribbean so that women could make a living in sports but also live healthier lives.

22. **Ms. De Silva de Alves** said that she would still appreciate a reply to her question concerning the ways in which the law on immigration, which designated prostitutes and homosexuals as migrants in an irregular situation, affected the female prison population. She wondered whether the State party would consider amending the outdated, discriminatory language in that law, which prohibited the immigration of "any idiot or any person who is insane or mentally deficient or any person who is deaf and dumb or deaf and blind, or dumb and blind". Given that 34 per cent of older persons in Belize lived in poverty, she wondered whether there was a time frame for the adoption of the older persons bill and signing of the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons.

23. **A representative of Belize** said that he trusted that the discriminatory provisions of the Immigration Act would be addressed as part of the comprehensive legislative review that his Government was conducting. Belize had acceded to the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons and the families bill currently pending adoption had a particular focus on older persons, drawing on the parts of the older persons

bill that had been finalized. Efforts were being made to ensure that self-employed workers, including those in the informal economy, were brought into the formal economy and covered by benefits for older persons under the social protection policy.

24. **A representative of Belize** said that the domestic violence units had been renamed gender-based violence response and investigation units. In addition to a variety of police operations to tackle drug trafficking and gun violence, the Government was also striving to dissuade young people in vulnerable communities from joining gangs, working with non-governmental organizations to provide gang members with alternative ways of life and mediating between rival gangs to reduce tensions.

25. **A representative of Belize** said that, while a quota of at least 30 per cent for women had been established in a political party's constitution, it was now up to the Government to enact the relevant laws and introduce such quotas. The number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools was approximately the same as the number of boys; however, nearly 600 male students were enrolled in technical and vocational education and training compared with fewer than 200 female students. Over 85 per cent of teachers were trained. While sex-disaggregated data on the correlation between gun violence, trafficking in persons and gender-based violence were available, further analysis of them was needed.

26. **Ms. Reddock** said that she wished to know whether the State party recognized the special needs of women in detention in respect of children, childbirth and pregnancy. She also wondered whether the Government had considered the implementation of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules).

27. **Ms. de Silva de Alwis** said that she wished to know what accounted for the lengthy periods of pretrial detention in the State party, in particular for female remand prisoners involved in gang violence. In addition, she would be interested to know whether the Government had considered introducing more inclusive language in the Constitution, as part of its comprehensive legislative review.

28. **A representative of Belize** said that it was to be hoped that the Kolbe Foundation, which ran the country's only prison, would apply the Bangkok Rules in its treatment of inmates. The committee tasked with constitutional reform had a diverse membership and engaged with a wide variety of stakeholders to ensure inclusivity.

Articles 15 and 16

29. **Ms. González Ferrer** said that she would be grateful for information about the most significant proposals contained in the families bill that would enable women and children to enjoy their rights within the family more fully. She would also like to know how the State party ensured that a gender perspective was integrated into the courts' consideration of the best interests of the child, particularly in cases of domestic violence. In addition, she would be interested to learn what legal consequences perpetrators of domestic violence faced in relation to the determination of custody and contact.

30. Given that, in Belizean law, women had the same rights to inherit property from their parents as men, she wondered whether the same was true for land. She would also like to know whether there were any limits on a woman caregiver's inheritance of land from her deceased spouse.

31. She wished to know what steps were being taken to tackle early marriages and unions in Belize, whose prevalence was due to social and cultural expectations of women and girls that limited their educational and employment opportunities. She would also like to know whether there were any plans to prohibit marriage under the age of 18 without exception. She was especially interested in any initiatives conducted with Maya, Garifuna and Mestizo communities and in rural areas. In addition, it would be useful to know whether the practices of the parallel traditional legal system that reportedly existed within Maya communities differed from those of the national system.

32. While she acknowledged the progress made in Belize in respect of the rights of lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women, she wished to know whether the State party planned to recognize same-sex marriages and unions.

33. **A representative of Belize** said that, in 2024, the Marriage Act had been amended to increase the age of marriage to 18, with no exceptions. The ongoing implementation of the road map to end child marriage and early unions in Belize was therefore focused on early unions and, in particular, ensuring access to education and health information for adolescents and young people.

34. The courts took into account issues such as gender-based violence, the involvement of both parents and potential harm to children in their decisions on custody and visitation rights, in accordance with the best interests of the child. The Government was considering the possibility of recognizing same-sex marriages.

35. **Ms. González Ferrer**, welcoming the State party's prohibition of child marriages, said that she would appreciate further information on the steps being taken to stamp out early unions because a *de jure* prohibition would not necessarily prevent *de facto* unions. She would especially welcome details of any work that the State party was doing with mothers and fathers, who often consented to, or even encouraged, their daughters' involvement in such unions. She wished to know what steps the State party was taking to discourage men's involvement in early unions, for instance by criminalizing it.

36. **A representative of Belize** said that, under the road map to end child marriage and early unions in Belize, her Government worked with young people to inform them of the implications of early unions and of the types of support that were available to them, in particular in respect of gender-based violence and early pregnancy. The Government organized community discussions, involving women and men, girls and boys, during which the prohibition of child marriages was discussed, along with changes in culture, behaviour and attitudes. In addition, it conducted media campaigns, involving social media, mass media, posters and billboards.

37. **A representative of Belize** said that the road map's focus was on enabling the Government to understand the cultural and societal issues that drove early unions. Given the importance of parenting, his Government had developed a national parenting strategy and a parenting manual, with a view to ensuring that the information provided on the subject was both standardized and sufficiently comprehensive. They were complemented with comprehensive sexuality education, including on HIV/AIDS.

38. **Ms. Reddock**, noting the endemic poverty that often drove girls to enter into early unions, said that she would like to know whether the State party's parenting programmes were gender-informed.

39. **A representative of Belize** said that his Government had been assessing the existing parenting programmes to ensure that they were gender-informed.

40. **A representative of Belize**, expressing her Government's appreciation for the constructive dialogue, said that the Committee's insights and recommendations reaffirmed the shared commitment to advancing gender equality and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and girls. In spite of the challenges, in particular gender-based violence, systemic inequality and the disproportionate impact of climate change on women, the Government remained committed to achieving those goals.

The meeting rose at 4.20 p.m.