



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Forty-fourth session

Summary record of the 902nd meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 31 July 2009, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gabr

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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 to sixth periodic reports of Liberia (continued) (CEDAW/C/LBR/6; CEDAW/C/LBR/Q/6 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Liberia took places at the Committee table.*

Article 9

2. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** said that it was unclear whether a child born to a Liberian woman outside Liberia could automatically receive Liberian nationality or if the child lost the right to choose his or her mother's nationality.
3. **Ms. Morgan** (Liberia) said that, while the child had the right to choose his mother's nationality, under the existing patriarchal system children automatically took the nationality of their fathers at birth.
4. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** said that such a practice was clearly discriminatory to mothers. Liberia should review its legislation to ensure the right of mothers to pass on their nationality.
5. **Ms. Morgan** (Liberia) said the Government of Liberia understood the Committee's concern and would be reviewing the issue of nationality as part of its law reform.

Article 10

6. **Ms. Bailey** noted that Liberia had made progress in providing for girls' education at the primary level. She furthermore commended the overall increase in secondary school enrolment achieved during the period 2005/06 to 2007/08; it would be interesting to learn what proportion of the 16 per cent increase was female, not least because girls' attendance at the post-primary levels tended to decrease. The reporting State should disaggregate all data and monitor closely the impacts of programmes to increase female participation with a view to providing more specific information on the secondary education gap in its next report. It was furthermore of the utmost importance to understand the scope of and factors contributing to the problem of female dropouts; in that connection, additional information on the timetable for the survey to be

conducted under the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative would be appreciated.

7. The sexual harassment of girls in school continued to be of great concern, particularly as the Government's measures, which focused on the long term, would not curtail the practice immediately. She failed to understand why the Government, which admitted it was aware of the situation, did not take decisive action against the offenders, as the girls involved were clearly either minors or adults engaging in non-consensual relations. By not taking action, the Government was in fact encouraging male teachers to act with impunity. The reporting State should indicate the actions it intended to take to address the sexual harassment of girls in schools.

8. It would be useful to learn whether the scholarships currently available created opportunities for women to study overseas, especially at the tertiary level, and whether any women had benefited thus far. Lastly, she would like to know whether the lack of data on literacy rates in eight of the 15 counties in Liberia meant that no literacy programmes existed in those counties; if such programmes did in fact exist, additional information on their assessment would be appreciated.

9. **Ms. Pimentel** enquired as to the measures taken by the Government to promote gender equality in secondary schools. She also wondered if the Government was considering repealing the discriminatory directive it had issued calling for the expulsion of pregnant girls from mainstream schools.

10. **Mr. Korto** (Liberia) said that while the 2008 data on the educational system used in the periodic report was not comprehensive, progress had been made in the data-collection process and 2009 data would provide a more detailed analysis of some of the issues raised by the Committee. The underperformance of girls in secondary schools was partly because the Government lacked the resources to build secondary schools in each village. There were plans to build hostels as girls' residences in areas with secondary schools to facilitate girls' attendance. Furthermore, additional primary schools had been built in rural areas to accommodate the increased enrolment of girls resulting from the free compulsory primary education programme.

11. The Government took the issue of sexual harassment very seriously: while not many incidences were reported, those that were were investigated and

penalized. A draft code of conduct for teachers was pending approval by the Government; under that code, a teacher's first offence of sexual harassment would result in suspension for five years without pay, while a second offence would result in indefinite expulsion from the profession.

12. There were two types of adult literacy programmes under way. The first was a standard programme conducted by the Ministry of Education in a number of counties. Another programme, specifically targeting women in rural areas, combined skills training and literacy; following completion of the programme, women were granted access to microcredits to start businesses.

13. With regard to the expulsion of pregnant girls from school, it was not the Government's intention for pregnant girls to drop out of school altogether. Rather, it was believed that pregnant girls, were they to remain in school, would experience significant peer pressure and as a result fail to participate fully in their education; it would, moreover, send the wrong message to other girls that becoming pregnant while in school was not a problem. Therefore, the alternative proposed by the Government was for girls to attend night school while pregnant and to return to daytime school after delivery. An awareness-raising programme had also been launched with a view to decreasing the teenage pregnancy rate.

14. The scholarship programmes in place were indeed designed to promote and enhance women's participation in education. In addition to the scholarships granted to girls finishing high school to enrol in a local tertiary education institution, other scholarships were available for women who already had a degree and wished to study abroad; the latter type of scholarship was specifically designed to empower young women and help them become more competitive vis-à-vis their male peers. There were no data as yet on the number of women having benefited from the scholarships, nor had any studies been carried out to analyse their impact. A programme had been launched to increase the number of female teachers, who would serve as role models for girls and thereby increase enrolment and retention rates; in addition, women were generally more adept at teaching younger children than men, who did not give children the attention they needed.

15. **Ms. Gayflor** (Liberia) said that, with assistance from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Denmark, there had been progress in reducing illiteracy among women and girls, although solid data on the impact of those efforts were not available. Women sought out literacy courses, as they helped women to vote, to participate in workshops and to open bank accounts in their own names.

Article 11

16. **Mr. Bruun** asked when Liberia would ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value (Convention No. 100), which would enable the country to formally recognize the principle of equal pay for work of equal value in its legislation. Noting that Liberia had ratified the ILO Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Convention No. 182), he asked what the child labour situation was in the country, especially for girls.

17. The informal sector was especially important for women in Liberia, and it would be useful to hear more about what the Government was doing to support women working in that sector. The Committee had heard about a UNIFEM-sponsored employment programme with gender mainstreaming, but so far no results had been announced.

18. The Committee had also received information about poor health and safety conditions for women working in rubber plantations and about the sexual harassment of women in the workplace. There had also been reports of women working in the formal sector not being able to obtain the same allowances and benefits as men. He requested more information about those problems and about Government efforts to improve the situation.

19. **Ms. Patten** noted that the national emergency strategy to stimulate employment seemed to have benefited men much more than women, which suggested the existence of discriminatory employment practices, a problem that would require more work on the part of the Government. Noting that the overall employment situation in the country was grim and especially hard on women, she urged the Government to develop a national labour code to protect women in employment and in the workplace. The legal

protections against sexual harassment in the workplace seemed lacking in force and she urged the Government to develop a strong law on that common form of discrimination.

20. She also urged the Government to ratify ILO Convention No. 100 on equal compensation, as the key concept there was “work of equal value”, not just “equal work”. Careful implementation of that Convention would also require a job classification exercise, another area where the Government needed to take measures so as to be able to protect women. She asked whether any mechanism had been established to enable women working in the informal sector and women entrepreneurs to participate in the formulation of employment policies and regulations.

21. She said that the Committee had received reports of non-compliance with labour regulations, in particular that many private firms managed to escape employment regulations and were able to discriminate against women and deny them benefits or dismiss them when they became pregnant. That situation needed correction. Both public and private employment needed to be monitored and regulated.

22. She asked what measures the Government had taken to protect the employment rights of disadvantaged women, those with disabilities and internally displaced women. She also urged the Government to deal with pervasive occupational segregation and resistance to the advancement of women into decision-making roles.

23. **Ms. Gayflor** (Liberia) said that the points raised by Committee experts were very informative and valuable as action points for her delegation when they returned to Liberia to begin working further with the gender focal points in the Ministries and others to protect the rights of women.

24. Ratification of ILO Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration would certainly be a priority, although she felt that equal remuneration was nearly the norm, especially where the Government could set pay rates. Task forces on employment and gender had been established to monitor the situation in various sectors, as had task forces on child labour, whose main function was to keep children off the street, out of the workforce and in school. The Government had established a new economic empowerment programme that sought, inter alia, to help women move from the informal into the

formal sector. A plan of action was being developed to implement the programme.

25. With regard to workplace hazards and discriminatory practices in certain industries, the Government was slowly reviewing the plans of operation of such enterprises to assess and correct those problems. In exploring job opportunities for women in public works jobs, such as road construction and street cleaning, Government gender advisers urged community leaders to maintain a gender perspective in submitting projects. A Civil Service Code reform process was under way and the new code would have a chapter on gender issues.

26. **Ms. Morgan** (Liberia) said that a new labour law, entitled the “Decent Work Bill”, was being drafted with ILO support and involved a thorough review of existing laws. It explicitly excluded discrimination against women in working conditions and wages. She expressed the hope that the non-Government sources that had brought workplace problems to the attention of the Committee would also inform Government labour inspectors, who had been posted to all parts of the country.

Article 12

27. **Ms. Zou** Xiaoqiao, noting that health-care services in Liberia were, according to the report, provided mostly by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), asked how the Government ensured that those organizations operated in accordance with Government health policy. Those NGOs were apparently gradually leaving the country, and she asked what measures the Government had planned, so as to ensure continuity in health-care services.

28. Noting that the Government had prepared a plan to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates, she asked what the targets and time frame for the plan were and how the Government planned to ensure sufficient resources and personnel for adequate health care, especially in rural areas, and to monitor progress. It would be useful to have fuller information on the legal criteria for abortion, on the way in which criminal sanctions were applied, on how common illegal abortions were and on how many women had died as the result of such abortions. She wondered whether the Government was considering any changes in the law on abortion. It would also be valuable to hear more about

the availability of contraception and usage rates among males.

29. **Ms. Rasekh** asked what strategies the Government had developed to deal with the many health-care problems facing women in Liberia given the current acute shortages of facilities, personnel, medications, passable roads and other difficulties typical of countries in post-conflict situations. Women especially needed reproductive health services, including maternity and family planning services, and counselling to help them deal with domestic and post-traumatic stress.

30. Another area of concern was the continued prevalence of some harmful traditional practices that particularly impacted women and girls, including son-preference in child nutrition, taboo food rules that deprived expectant mothers of needed nutrients, body beautification using sharp knives that exposed young women to HIV infection, and female genital mutilation. She asked what measures the Government was taking to eliminate such harmful practices and whether the Government could provide statistics on the rate of suicide among women.

31. **Ms. Pimentel** asked why the maternal mortality rate had increased even though, according to the report, almost 85 per cent of women received prenatal care. She would also welcome further comment from the delegation about provision for post-natal health care, especially since the report noted that the situation was particularly hazardous in communities with no skilled birth attendants to address complications or facilities to address mental health issues.

32. Referring to the report's assertion that the reproductive health needs of adolescents were not being met, she stressed that sex education and access to contraception were very important and directly related to the growing number of unsafe abortions. It would be useful to know more about any efforts to increase sex education programmes for adolescents and whether there were any plans to revise the provisions of the Penal Code that criminalized abortion.

33. **Ms. Dahn** (Liberia) said that before 2006 80 per cent of health care in Liberia had been provided by non-governmental organizations. While those organizations were still needed, the Government was working on exit strategies with relief organizations with a view to their being able to leave the country within six months to one year, when either the Government or development-oriented organizations

would take over responsibility when they left. If the economy continued to grow at the current rate, the Government would be able to take full responsibility for the delivery of health care in 10 or 15 years, but the support of international partners was still needed in the meantime to ensure the availability of sustainable health care. The Government currently ran around 100 of the country's 400 health-care facilities.

34. Benchmarks had been set with regard to reducing maternal and infant mortality in the context of Goals 4 and 5 of the Millennium Development Goals. Programmes relating to those benchmarks had been developed and were being implemented. A strategy had also been developed to target all pregnant women with an immunization programme.

35. County health teams coordinated health-care services on a county level, holding quarterly meetings to ensure that the national health policy was being implemented by all partners and conducting an annual review to take stock of achievements and plan for the year ahead.

36. Turning to the question of abortion, she noted that a 1998 study in the Monrovia area had shown that abortions had contributed to around 35 per cent of maternal deaths. In an effort to reduce the prevalence of abortions, free family planning services had been expanded, the Ministry of Education had assisted in the production of publications and the issue had been integrated into school curricula. The Ministry of Youth and Sports was involved in training educators and providing youth-friendly services, while the ongoing encouragement for girls to enrol in schools would also help. With regard to contraception, there was a programme to promote the use of either male or female condoms, though male condoms were more widely available and more frequently used. Surgical methods of contraception were also available, though not widely used by men.

37. On the question of limited access to reproductive health services, she said that around 60 per cent of the basic package of health services was dedicated to services for women and children, and the implementation of county plans was being closely monitored. A recent study had shown that access to health facilities had risen to around 66 per cent.

38. The international community provided Liberia with a great deal of support, including free family planning services and funding to pay health workers so

that they could go where they were most needed. The basic package was designed to meet health needs in the short term while the National Health Strategic Plan dealt with issues up to 2012. The basic package would continue to grow as circumstances improved.

39. Many educational activities were being organized in communities to raise awareness about harmful traditional practices, and those efforts would continue.

40. The Ministry of Health had recently drawn up a mental health policy and was developing a plan of action. Mental health care was included in the basic package but not very fully, since the Ministry had never had a mental health programme before. The new plan would address broad mental health issues, including those particular to women. Suicide was not common in Liberia, since the social structure was traditionally very supportive.

41. Explaining the apparent contradiction between the level of prenatal care and the high rate of maternal mortality, she said that women in Liberia took advantage of prenatal care services but continued to believe that their babies should be delivered within the community. Efforts were under way to change that attitude and traditional birth attendants were being trained in life-saving skills and the use of referrals, which had been quite successful. Facilities for postnatal care had been improved and were being monitored.

42. Efforts were being made to raise awareness of adolescent health issues, for example in school clubs and youth-friendly centres, but much more needed to be done.

43. **Ms. Gayflor** (Liberia) said that the Ministry of Youth and Sports was collaborating in a programme for the economic empowerment and employment of youth to address Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals. The possibility of providing reproductive health programmes for adolescent girls staying in hostels would also be examined.

44. **Ms. Morgan** (Liberia) said that abortion was only legal in cases where it was necessary to protect the life or health of the mother, and practitioners who performed abortions for no valid reason were criminalized. The formation of a law commission and a constitutional task force would lead to an examination of any Liberian laws that were contrary to the country's organic laws and discriminated against women. The

matter was already being discussed, and women's groups would hopefully raise issues with the Government so that any laws that were contradictory or discriminated against women could be brought before the law commission when it was established.

Article 13

45. **Ms. Murillo de la Vega** said that, since Liberia had elected the first woman President in Africa, the eyes of the world were upon it as it entered a new phase in which women's issues would receive increasing attention. There were, however, other problems to address also, in particular relating to reconciliation and the aftermath of the war.

46. The country had two systems of marriage and the traditional form still considered women as property, which meant that if their husbands died they could not return to their homes. It was good to see that efforts were being made to improve widows' rights and inheritance laws under both systems of marriage, but more information would be appreciated about the new land law and whether, for example, it included specific measures for women's right to land ownership.

47. The vast majority of agricultural workers in Liberia were women, yet no reference was made to women on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture. There was no reference either to credit availability in the informal sector or to what reforms would be undertaken to enable loans to be accessed by those working in that sector.

48. It was of concern that female genital mutilation had not been criminalized, and continued to be practised in Liberia. The issue must be taken very seriously, and women could play an important role in that regard.

49. **Ms. Gayflor** (Liberia) said that the legal reform of land ownership was the key to progress. It was expected that a task force would examine gender and inheritance issues and that the Government would work with lawyers on the matter. The constitutional review process would also highlight which areas needed attention. However, the question of land ownership was very volatile and not solely of concern to women.

50. With regard to women in agriculture, she assured the Committee that provision was being made for women. A project was being run with the generous support of the Danish Government to tackle the matter

of food security and nutrition, and rural women were being given support in the form of tools, seeds and storage facilities. Part of that project focused on increasing women's access to the market to increase their capital. A mission from the African Development Bank was travelling around the country to implement that market access programme and a mission from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) had also been examining how gender could be mainstreamed into the Fund's programmes.

51. The economic empowerment programme would examine the issue of women working in the informal sector as part of its current workplan. Liberia was working in collaboration with the World Food Programme to establish an agriculture business unit to provide training for rural women. The forthcoming harvest season would provide a good opportunity to see what progress had been made. The food security programme would also examine rural women's access to funding. A number of ministries were involved in ensuring gender equality and the empowerment of women and progress would be tracked.

52. Turning to the matter of criminalizing female genital mutilation, she said that of course women should be able to achieve their full potential without hindrance and efforts would be made in that regard. It was good to see representatives of non-governmental organizations present at the meeting; they could hopefully advocate for women and lobby lawmakers with a view to ensuring that women's progress was not undermined by harmful practices.

Article 14

53. **Ms. Ara Begum** wondered what proportion of women received the loans, seed money and training provided for rural areas. The Government must communicate market information to ensure that women received fair prices for their produce. Information was needed on any measures taken to provide safe drinking water and sanitation services in rural areas. The Committee was also interested in health care for elderly and disabled women in those areas, given the poor access to services in the countryside.

54. She asked about Government policies to reduce the school drop-out rate in rural areas in the light of early and forced marriage and requested information on such problems as the expulsion of pregnant students.

55. **Ms. Gayflor** (Liberia) explained how the country's community-based structure reached women at all levels and how local needs for seeds and implements were identified in the communities themselves. Work to rehabilitate the water and sanitation system was being discussed with the African Development Bank. Day-care centres in rural areas existed to look after the children of rape victims during the daytime when the latter were working in the fields.

56. **Ms. Dahn** (Liberia) described the basic package of health services as cost-effective and successful in reducing morbidity and mortality, including among the elderly and disabled.

57. **Mr. Korto** (Liberia) said that most of the literacy programmes implemented by the Ministry of Education and its partners were in rural areas. Available data showed that more women than men attended those programmes. Government policy was concentrating on ways of helping attendees make up for lost educational opportunities, as most women failed to finish their schooling due to early marriage.

58. Day-care centres for the children of mothers who worked selling their produce in markets existed in rural areas and were managed by NGOs. The Government was subsidizing pilot schools for the blind and other disabled persons.

Articles 15 and 16

59. **Ms. Hayashi** wondered whether discriminatory legislation on family life had been superseded and asked what importance was given to family law because there was no mention of it in the recommendations the country had included in its report. The Government should provide statistics on the proportion of women in customary marriages, on women married without their consent, on under-age marriage and on the links between early marriage and maternal mortality. She asked if Liberians had been made aware of the definition of rape contained in the 2003 law and of the fact that non-consensual relations within marriage could be legally determined to be rape.

60. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** requested information on property rights after the dissolution of a marriage and wondered what the grounds for divorce were in Liberia.

61. **Ms. Halperin-Kaddari** asked for specific information on divorce under customary law, in the

light of reports from alternative sources that husbands were entitled to refuse to divorce.

62. **Ms. Morgan** (Liberia) stated that the Domestic Relations Act covered marriage, adoption, custody, divorce and alimony. Legal remedy could be sought when husbands refused to divorce. Girls and boys had inheritance rights and child support was mandatory. Grounds for divorce included incompatibility, abandonment and adultery.

63. **Ms. Gayflor** (Liberia) said that the Government could not provide data on the relationship between early marriage and maternal mortality. There was a need for surveys at the local level to gather information on the matter, as well as on the incidence of female genital mutilation.

64. **The Chairperson** concluded by expressing confidence in Liberia's ability to address women's issues now that its civil crisis was over. She highlighted the importance of the actual implementation of laws and conventions. The Committee was interested in information on Liberia's success in combating stereotypes and eliminating harmful customary practices through the media and education.

The meeting rose at 5.10 p.m.