

Introductory Statement Aruba

*Consideration of the Fifth Periodic Report
of the Kingdom of the Netherlands under the
Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of
Discrimination Against Women*

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Against Women*

Madame Chair, Distinguished members of the Committee,

It is an honor for me to introduce to you the fifth report of Aruba under the (CEDAW) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against women.

Allow me to introduce myself and my delegation.

Angelique Peterson is Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Council of Ministers. In her previous function s she has represented the Aruban government on many occasions during the consideration of human rights reports

Bernice Schulte is my senior policy adviser for social affairs.

Alice Van Romondt is my Chief of Staff, she is former Permanent Secretary of the Council of Ministers and has been instrumental in the development of Culture and Education in Aruba for over 30 years.

Just three short months ago I became Minister of Economic, Social and Cultural Affairs of Aruba, the smallest legal entity within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It measures no more than 181 km², and lies about 20 minutes flying time from the South American mainland. Apart from our relatively young Constitution (1986), which is based on the principal International Human Rights instruments, the *Convention* and its *Optional Protocol* provide an important legal framework for guaranteeing the rights of the approximately 56,000 women living on our island.

It should also form the basis for the further development of a national gender policy. Let me start by saying that we acknowledge that progress in that area has not been what we hoped for. We informed you in our report that Social Affairs Department would start developing a gender policy. Unfortunately due to a number of factors, the development of a coordinated government policy has been slow.

However, this does not mean that women in Aruba have not made significant progress in many fields over the recent decade. Since the writing of the present report elections have taken place in Aruba and a new Cabinet took office on November 1st, 2009. I am proud to say that women played an important role in the electoral process and its outcome. The number of seats in Parliament held by women is presently 7 out of 21. At the legislative level, senior officials and female managers comprise 40.3 percent of the total

of this group. Also in the area of educational achievement, women are doing better than men.

Notwithstanding the above, we realize and recognize that much still needs to be done and that there are groups that need specific attention when it comes to their empowerment and the protection and promotion of their rights.

One of the first priorities of our new government is to strengthen the position of the most vulnerable groups in our society. We feel that economic development and social policy should go hand in hand, and it was therefore logical that these two areas fall under 1 minister, and I have the good fortune of becoming that minister. Due to a number of socio-economic factors, the real income of many families has dropped substantially in recent years. The result being that Women especially have felt the impact of both the global economic crisis and local repercussions that have had a multiplying negative impact on things such as income and jobs, crime rate, healthcare and education.

New priorities and policy often follow the installation of a new Government; however our focus has and will be on putting ideas into action as quickly as possible. Immediately upon taking office the government started working on new legislation which was introduced on the 1st January 2010.

- As of January 1st 2010 the monthly social assistance payment that the government provides to households in need was increased by 25%.
- Furthermore, as of January 1st 2010 all households receiving social assistance receive an additional monthly payment to cover educational expenses for those families with school-aged children.

These two steps needed to be taken urgently as many families were living under immense financial pressure. These measures have now alleviated some of the financial pressure that those most vulnerable in our community were feeling.

Other measures are in the making and will follow shortly as part of an integrated, structural approach.

For many years, the need for stronger policy development, coordination and mainstreaming in the areas of both women's rights and children's rights has been felt by many working in the government and NGO sectors. The practical implementation of women's rights however cannot be separated

from the specific policies of the relevant ministries. So not only within my own ministry but also together with my colleagues in the Council of Ministers I intend to work on a more integrated and coordinated approach to tackle the problems we face and to ensure equal opportunities for all women (and children) in Aruba. This delegation recognizes that change must start with those that are in the position to make change possible. Your comments and recommendations will be discussed in order to determine to what extent we (re)adjust our policies. Furthermore the sharing of expertise and experiences/ best practices with our partners/sisters in the Kingdom plays an important role in this process.

A good example of the need for this integrated approach at all levels is the urgent action required to combat and prevent domestic violence.

As is mentioned in the report, we have the legal framework in place; there are statutory provisions in the New Aruban Criminal Code specifically criminalizing domestic violence. The New Criminal Code will also provide for pre-trial detention for all forms of domestic violence; this is not the case under the current Code.

It is anticipated that with the introduction of the new Criminal Code, the new information management system, and the partnership with the Victim Support Office, a better strategy to combat violence against women will be facilitated in 2010. But of course what we want foremost is to prevent domestic violence from occurring in the first place. No woman or child should feel unsafe and threatened in their own home. We are presently studying the possibility of introducing a revised bill on temporary domestic exclusion orders, such as was introduced in the Netherlands

We will also continue to support and work with the *Foundation for Women in Distress*. Working closely with Social Affairs department, the Foundation for Women in Distress provides ambulatory and residential care and plays an important role in educating the public and raising awareness regarding violence against women.

Madame Chair, we all know that women are not only subjected to violence within their own homes or the borders of their own country, but increasingly women and young girls are becoming the victims of human trafficking. Modern slavery and its horrendous forms of forced labour and prostitution are worldwide crimes we can only tackle efficiently if we work together.

In 2006 the Aruban Parliament approved amendments bringing the Aruban Criminal Code and other laws in line with international treaties regarding human trafficking and smuggling. The amendments make human smuggling a criminal offence and amplify the scope of the article about human trafficking by incorporating forced labour and organ removal. On a practical level the interdepartmental and interdisciplinary committee which was instituted in 2007 has drawn up a counter-trafficking plan 2008-2010.

The authorities recognize the need to remain very vigilant. We are aware that as tourist destination there are possible risks of human trafficking in the prostitution sector and the service sector. Continued studies are needed to indicate if trafficking in persons does indeed occur in the aforementioned risk sectors and, if so, to what extent.

Ladies and gentlemen, the above mentioned are just a few examples of areas we are working on. Needless to say, the chains of responsibility of all organizations and authorities involved in women's rights, whether they are in the field of social care, health care, justice, education or any other area, in the public or private sector, need to be strengthened to achieve more effective and efficient protection and promotion of the rights of women and children.

The bottlenecks we have encountered and will continue to encounter are to a great extent directly linked with the gender stereotypes imbedded within our culture. Unfortunately, the general perception of the topic of discrimination against women itself creates an attitude of denial both within the male and female population, therefore it often remains a silent battle, one not openly expressed or discussed. Women often feel that if they do not admit that discrimination against women still exists, then it simply goes away. As we all know this is far from reality.

A strong organizational and structural approach must be taken to identify and break-down the traditional stereotypes of male/female roles to eliminate discrimination against women in Aruba. Education and the media must play a bigger role in destroying negative stereotypes and allowing the subject of gender discrimination to be discussed openly and honestly.

There is also the need to provide a vehicle for women seeking information, guidance, support and networking. Currently it is either a "women's social club" or the women's shelter. There is nothing in between that can provide

the fibers of support to women requiring information and guidance on various topics. This is yet another action item that I will work to make a reality in short order.

Madam Chair, compliance with and protection of human rights is a continuous process in which we must overcome many obstacles and in which our government must remain extremely vigilant to ensure the protection of all who fall within our jurisdiction. Specifically when it comes to the realization of women's rights the views and recommendations of the experts on your Committee play a pivotal role.

We hold the work of your Committee in high esteem and look forward to a productive exchange of views. Thank you.