



Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Distr.: General
10 August 2007

Original: English

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Thirty-ninth session

23 July-10 August 2007

Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Belize

1. The Committee considered the combined third and fourth periodic report of Belize (CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4) at its 793rd and 794th meetings, on 24 July 2007 (CEDAW/C/SR.793 (A) and 794 (A)). The Committee's list of issues and questions is contained in CEDAW/C/BLZ/Q/4, and the responses of Belize are contained in CEDAW/C/BLZ/Q/4/Add.1.

Introduction

2. The Committee expresses its appreciation to the State party for its combined third and fourth periodic report, but regrets that it was overdue and did not provide sufficient sex-disaggregated data. The Committee also expresses its appreciation for the written replies to the list of issues and questions raised by the pre-session working group and for the oral presentation and responses to the questions posed by the Committee.

3. The Committee commends the State party for its delegation, headed by the Minister for Human Development, and for the frank and constructive dialogue held between the delegation and the members of the Committee.

4. The Committee notes with satisfaction that the State party ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention in 2002.

Positive aspects

5. The Committee commends the State party for the institutional arrangements and framework it has put in place for improved implementation of the Convention, including the National Gender Policy, the Women's Agenda 2003-2008 and the appointment of Women Development Officers in each district.

6. The Committee commends the State party for the law reform process it has undertaken to promote women's rights, which has resulted in the amendment to the Constitution to guarantee gender equality, as well as amendments to the Criminal



Code, the Evidence Act, the Wages Council Act, the Married Persons Protection Act, the Supreme Court of Judicature Act and the Administration of Estates Act. It also welcomes the enactment of new legislation, including the Domestic Violence Act of 2007, which will take effect in July 2007, and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act of 2003.

7. The Committee notes with satisfaction the goals set in the Women's Agenda 2003-2008 to increase the number of women in the Cabinet, the Senate and the State Boards to 30 per cent, as well as the objective of the Belize Rural Development Programme to increase the number of women and youth participating in development plans and projects by 30 per cent.

Principal areas of concern and recommendations

8. **While recalling the State party's obligation to implement systematically and continuously all provisions of the Convention, the Committee views the concerns and recommendations identified in the present concluding comments as requiring the State party's priority attention between the present time and the time of submission of the next periodic report. Consequently, the Committee calls upon the State party to focus on those areas in its implementation activities and to report on the action taken and the results achieved in its next periodic report. It calls upon the State party to submit the present concluding comments to all relevant ministries and to its parliament so as to ensure their full implementation.**

9. The Committee regrets that the report does not provide sufficient statistical data, disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and rural and urban areas, on the practical realization of the principle of equality between women and men in all areas covered by the Convention. It is also concerned that the report provides no information on the situation of older and disabled women. The Committee is concerned that the lack of such data is an impediment to evaluating the impact of measures taken by the State party and the results achieved.

10. **The Committee calls upon the State party to put in place a comprehensive system of data collection in all areas covered by the Convention so as to assess the actual situation of women and to track trends over time. It also calls upon the State party to monitor, through measurable indicators, the impact of measures taken and progress achieved towards the realization of women's de facto equality. It invites the State party, when necessary, to seek international technical assistance for the development of such data collection and analysis efforts. The Committee requests the State party to include in its next report statistical data and analysis, disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and rural and urban areas, in regard to the provisions of the Convention, indicating the impact of measures taken and of results achieved in the practical realization of women's de facto equality. The Committee also requests that information on the situation of older and disabled women be included in the next report.**

11. The Committee is concerned that there is inadequate enforcement of laws and insufficient implementation of the provisions of the Convention and policies and programmes for the advancement of women by the State party. The Committee is concerned that the Convention and existing laws, policies and programmes are not sufficiently known in the State party. It is also concerned about the lack of access to justice for women.

12. **The Committee urges the State party to strengthen enforcement of its laws and recommends that the State party elaborate a comprehensive operational plan for the effective implementation of the Convention and of its policies and programmes for the advancement of women. The Committee calls on the State party to intensify its efforts to raise awareness about the Convention and about laws, policies and programmes that are designed to enhance women's enjoyment of their rights. The Committee encourages the State party to eliminate impediments women may face in gaining access to justice and to enhance women's legal literacy, awareness of their rights and capacity to effectively claim them.**

13. The Committee is concerned about the weak institutional capacity of the national machinery for the advancement of women, i.e., the Women's Department in the Ministry of Human Development, which is under-resourced and understaffed and does not have the capacity or authority to work effectively for the full implementation of the Convention and to coordinate the use of the gender mainstreaming strategy across all sectors of Government. The Committee is concerned about the scarcity of personnel at the district level to promote gender equality. It remains concerned about the absence of mechanisms to monitor implementation of the Convention and evaluate the impact of laws, policies and programmes on the achievement of women's equality. The Committee is concerned that, owing to excessive dependence on short-term external funding and development aid, the national machinery for the advancement of women has not achieved a sufficient degree of sustainability and professional efficiency in its work.

14. **The Committee calls on the State party to give priority to the strengthening of the national machinery for the advancement of women and to provide it with the authority, decision-making power and human and financial resources necessary to work effectively for the promotion of women's equality, coordinate the use of the gender mainstreaming strategy across all sectors of Government and ensure that such efforts are results-oriented and sustainable in the long term. The Committee recommends that the national machinery for the advancement of women be strengthened at district levels by forming multidisciplinary teams for implementation of the Convention, including in the area of violence against women. The Committee further recommends that the State party put in place effective mechanisms and systems to monitor implementation of the Convention and evaluate the impact of its laws, policies and programmes in terms of achieving the goal of gender equality, within clear timetables.**

15. The Committee is concerned that the widespread poverty among women — the poverty rate stands at 33.5 per cent — is among the causes of the violation of women's rights and discrimination against them, particularly in the rural areas and among Mayan women. It is concerned that there has been no evaluation of several multimillion-dollar projects designed to combat poverty in the rural areas since 1996. The Committee is concerned at the large number of women who are heads of household and who are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

16. **The Committee urges the State party to make the promotion of gender equality an explicit component of all its national development strategies, policies and programmes, in particular those aimed at poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The Committee also invites the State party to place**

emphasis on the promotion and protection of women's human rights in all development cooperation programmes with international organizations and bilateral donors so as to address the socio-economic causes of discrimination against women. The Committee recommends that the State party put in place evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to assess the impact of its poverty reduction strategies on women, including those in the rural areas, and provide information in its next report. It calls on the State party to pay special attention, and provide targeted support, to women heads of household in all its poverty-eradication efforts, including in the rural areas and among Mayan women.

17. The Committee remains concerned about the low rate of representation of women in public life and in elected bodies. The Committee notes with concern that the Political Reform Commission recommended against the adoption of a quota system for the appointment of women to public bodies in 2000 and that the State party does not support the use of quotas or targets to accelerate the achievement of de facto equality between women and men in all areas of the Convention.

18. The Committee urges the State party to effectively use temporary special measures in accordance with article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention and the Committee's general recommendation 25, in order to accelerate the realization of women's de facto equality with men in all areas. The Committee draws the State party's attention to the fact that a purely formal or programmatic approach is not sufficient to achieve women's de facto equality with men, and that the application of temporary special measures is part of a necessary strategy towards the accelerated achievement of substantive equality for women in all areas covered by the Convention. The Committee encourages the State party to establish a legislative basis for the use of temporary special measures, either in the Constitution or in other appropriate legislation. It urges the State party to establish concrete goals, such as quotas and timetables, to accelerate achievement of substantive equality between women and men for each area of the Convention.

19. While welcoming the new Domestic Violence Act, which takes effect in July 2007, the Committee is concerned about the continued prevalence of violence against women and the lack of social awareness about it in the country. The Committee is concerned that women victims of violence are advised to return to their abusive partners by authority figures, including the police and magistrates. It is concerned about the limited progress made in the State party in preventing and eliminating violence against women, reflected in a lack of prosecutions and convictions and lack of access to justice for women, particularly in the rural areas. The Committee is further concerned that despite the criminalization of marital rape, there are apparently no prosecutions for that crime in the State party. It regrets the lack of information and statistical data on all types of violence against women and of steps taken to assess the effectiveness of measures undertaken to address violence against women.

20. The Committee urges the State party to place high priority on implementing a comprehensive approach to addressing all forms of violence against women, including through the effective enforcement and monitoring of the Domestic Violence Act. It also urges the State party to raise public awareness, through media and educational programmes, that all forms of

violence against women, including domestic violence and marital rape, are unacceptable and prohibited by law. The Committee calls upon the State party to provide training on the new Act to the judiciary, law enforcement officials, legal professionals, social workers and health providers and to fully sensitize them to all forms of violence against women so as to ensure that the perpetrators of violence are effectively prosecuted and punished with the required seriousness and speed. The Committee further recommends that the State party seek to increase the number of female judges and law enforcement officials as a means to encourage women to report cases of violence. It calls on the State party to establish support measures for victims of domestic violence, including increasing the number of shelters and legal, medical and psychological support. The Committee encourages the State party to make full use of the Committee's general recommendation 19 in its efforts to address violence against women. The Committee urges the State party to establish a centralized system to gather data on the prevalence and incidence of violence against women and to include such data, as well as information about the impact of measures taken, in its next periodic report.

21. While the Committee notes the enactment of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Act in 2003, the Committee is concerned that Belize is becoming a destination country for trafficked women from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. The Committee is also concerned about the lack of information regarding the extent of trafficking and exploitation of prostitution in the country, and the potential negative impact that increased tourism could have on the incidence of prostitution and trafficking.

22. **The Committee calls upon the State party to ensure that legislation on trafficking is fully enforced. It recommends that the State party address the root cause of trafficking and exploitation of prostitution by increasing its efforts to improve the economic situation of women, thereby eliminating their vulnerability to exploitation and traffickers, and take measures for the rehabilitation and social integration of women and girls who are victims of trafficking and exploitation of prostitution. It recommends that the State party further strengthen bilateral, subregional and multilateral cooperation to combat trafficking. The Committee recommends that the State party closely monitor the impact of increased tourism on prostitution and enhance related prevention measures.**

23. The Committee is concerned about the persistence of social barriers that impede women's education and are reflected in the early dropout rate of girls from school and the lack of measures to ensure that teenage mothers stay in or return to school. The Committee reiterates its concern about the influence of the church on girls' and young women's right to education. In that regard, the Committee repeats its concern that schools remain free to expel girls because of pregnancy, that only a few secondary schools allow girls to continue their education after pregnancy and that schools are allowed to dismiss unwed teachers who become pregnant. It is also concerned that insufficient efforts are being made to encourage girls and young women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields of study.

24. **The Committee recommends that the State party implement measures to ensure equal rights of girls and young women to all levels of education, to retain girls in school and to put in place monitoring mechanisms to track girls'**

access to and achievement levels in education. The Committee recommends that the State party put in place measures, including monitoring mechanisms and sanctions, to ensure that pregnant students stay in school during pregnancy and return after childbirth. The Committee calls on the State party to formulate the necessary legislative and policy measures to ensure de facto adherence to article 10 of the Convention throughout the entire educational system. It also encourages the State party to actively promote the diversification of educational and professional choices for women and men and offer incentives for young women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields of study.

25. The Committee expresses concern about the situation of women in the labour market, which is characterized by levels of female unemployment at twice the rate of men, inadequate employment opportunities for women, the concentration of women in low-paid sectors of public employment and the consistent wage gap between women and men. It is concerned about the lack of enforcement of labour laws regarding discrimination in the private sector. The Committee notes with concern the absence of a system of maternity leave with pay or with comparable social benefits for all women as required by article 11, paragraph 2 (b), of the Convention. The Committee is further concerned that, while legislation governing sexual harassment is in place, women do not utilize the law to address incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace.

26. The Committee urges the State party to fully implement article 11 of the Convention. It encourages the State party to implement measures to encourage and support women's entrepreneurship, including by raising awareness and providing access to credit. The Committee recommends that efforts be strengthened to eliminate occupational segregation, both horizontal and vertical, and to adopt measures to narrow and close the wage gap between women and men by applying job-evaluation schemes in the public sector connected with a wage increase in female-dominated sectors. The Committee urges the State party to take further appropriate measures to introduce maternity leave with pay or with comparable social benefits for all women, in line with article 11, paragraph 2 (b), of the Convention. It encourages the State party to ensure full compliance with its labour laws, including by the private sector. It also urges the State party to implement its laws on sexual harassment, raise awareness for women and men workers and ensure that women take advantage of the laws' protective provisions. The Committee invites the State party to monitor the impact of measures taken and trends over time.

27. The Committee expresses its concern about the inadequate recognition and protection of the reproductive health and rights of women in Belize. The Committee is concerned about the high maternal mortality rates. It is further concerned about the number of deaths resulting from induced abortions. The Committee further reiterates its concern about the high rate of teenage pregnancies, which present a significant obstacle to girls' educational opportunities and economic empowerment. The Committee expresses its concern about the high rates of HIV/AIDS among women and girls, and notes that HIV/AIDS-related illnesses are the leading cause of death among women between the ages of 15 and 49.

28. The Committee urges the State party to take concrete measures to enhance women's access to health care, in particular to sexual and reproductive health services, in accordance with article 12 of the Convention and the

Committee's general recommendation 24, on women and health, and to ensure a reduction in the maternal mortality rate. The Committee recommends that the State party consider reviewing the laws relating to abortion with a view to removing punitive provisions imposed on women who have abortions and providing them with access to quality services for the management of complications arising from unsafe abortions, in accordance with the Committee's general recommendation 24 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and to reducing the number of deaths resulting from induced abortions. It also recommends that the State party enhance sex education and availability of contraceptives so as to prevent women from having to resort to unsafe abortions. The Committee recommends that the State party give priority attention to the situation of adolescents and that it provide sex education, targeted at girls and boys, with special attention to the prevention of early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. The Committee recommends that the State party step up its efforts to prevent and combat HIV/AIDS and improve the dissemination of information about the risks and ways of transmission. It also recommends that the State party include a gender perspective in its policies and programmes on HIV/AIDS.

29. The Committee is especially concerned about the precarious situation of women in rural areas, who are disproportionately affected by poverty, who have limited access to adequate health services, education, clean water and credit facilities, and who also lack access to justice. The Committee notes with concern that women living in rural areas may not benefit fully and equally from the State party's legislative and policy framework for the promotion of gender equality and that the majority of support systems are located in the cities. It is also concerned about the lack of adequate sex-disaggregated data, which continues to be a major obstacle in determining the overall position of rural women.

30. The Committee urges the State party to give full attention to the needs of rural women and to ensure that all policies and programmes aimed at promoting gender equality, including those relating to health, education, clean water and access to justice and to credit reach the rural areas and are fully implemented at the district level. It recommends that clear benchmarks and timetables be set and that implementation of the measures targeting rural women be effectively monitored. The Committee requests the State party to provide in its next report information on the measures undertaken to empower and improve the situation of rural women.

31. The Committee is concerned that, with the consent of the parents, the legal age of marriage is 16 years. The Committee also notes with concern that a man who has sexual relations with a girl under the age of 16 can, with the consent of her parents, marry her without being prosecuted for carnal knowledge.

32. The Committee calls upon the State party to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 years, in accordance with article 16, paragraph 2, of the Convention, general recommendation 21 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

33. The Committee notes with concern the large number of children, especially girl children, who do not have birth registration documents and who consequently cannot claim nationality and social benefits in the State party.

34. The Committee calls upon the State party to expedite and facilitate the process of registration of children without documentation and issue them with birth certificates and identity documents.

35. The Committee encourages the State party to remove its declaration under article 10, paragraph 1, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention regarding the competence of the Committee under articles 8 and 9, and to accept, as soon as possible, the amendment to article 20, paragraph 1, of the Convention concerning the meeting time of the Committee.

36. The Committee urges the State party to utilize fully, in its implementation of its obligations under the Convention, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which reinforce the provisions of the Convention, and requests the State party to include information thereon in its next periodic report.

37. The Committee emphasizes that full and effective implementation of the Convention is indispensable for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It calls for the integration of a gender perspective and for the explicit reflection of the provisions of the Convention in all efforts aimed at the achievement of the Goals, and requests the State party to include information thereon in its next periodic report.

38. The Committee notes that adherence by States to the seven major international human rights instruments¹ enhances the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms in all aspects of life. Therefore, the Committee encourages the Government of Belize to consider ratifying the treaty to which it is not yet a party, namely the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

39. The Committee requests the wide dissemination in Belize of the present concluding comments in order to make the people, including Government officials, politicians, parliamentarians and women's and human rights organizations, aware of the steps that have been taken to ensure de jure and de facto equality of women and of the further steps that are required in that regard. The Committee requests the State party to continue to disseminate widely, in particular to women's and human rights organizations, the Convention, its Optional Protocol, the Committee's general recommendations, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century".

40. The Committee requests the State party to respond to the concerns expressed in the present concluding comments in its next periodic report under article 18 of the Convention. The Committee invites the State party to submit its fifth periodic report, which was due in June 2007, and its sixth periodic report, due in June 2011, in a combined report in 2011.

¹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.