



Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women

Distr.
GENERAL

CEDAW/C/SR.171
22 January 1991

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Tenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 171st MEETING

Held at the Vienna International Centre, Vienna,
on Monday, 21 January 1991, at 10.30 a.m.

Temporary Chairperson: Ms. EVATT

Chairperson: Ms. TALLAWY

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The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION (agenda item 1)

1. The TEMPORARY CHAIRPERSON welcomed the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and in particular those of its new members able to attend, namely, Ms. Abaka, Ms. Aouij, Ms. Nikolaeva and Ms. Quintos-Deles, to its tenth session. She expressed the hope that Ms. Bravo Nuñez de Ramsey would still be able to participate, and regretted that Ms. Lin Shangzhen was unable to attend.

STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR, DIVISION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

2. Ms. SELLAMI-MESLEM (Director, Division for the Advancement of Women) declared open the tenth session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The tenth session was the first in the key decade linking the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so described because in 1985, when the Forward-looking Strategies had been adopted by consensus in Nairobi, the year 2000 had been set as the target date for ending discrimination against women. The current session was therefore an anniversary that could be observed by taking stock of past work, assessing the Committee's results and considering how its work could be improved so as to guarantee success. The assessment should first of all focus on the Committee's initial session in October 1982, and in that connection the presence of Ms. Desirée Bernard, Ms. Aida González-Martínez, Ms. Zagorka Ilic and Ms. Edith Oeser as experts was gratifying, and she took pleasure in recalling the work they had done together in launching and establishing the Committee. Now that the Committee had become an authoritative body, member States should bear in mind the importance of their ratification and of the practical measures they had taken to render the Convention effective.

3. The Committee had acquired considerable experience since its first session, for it had examined 58 initial reports and 10 second periodic reports, and had made a large number of general recommendations. The results of its work had been disseminated through the intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations as well as at the national level. Even more important was the fact that the very existence of the Committee and its work had been a source of great hope to many women throughout the world.

4. In that connection the public information activities of non-governmental organizations aimed at making the Convention known, as well as publications such as Women News and Women 2000, distributed by the Division, deserved special mention.

5. The Committee's work over the past decade had been marked by continuity and renewal. Continuity because the Committee was still fortunate in counting as its members those who had helped shape it from the beginning, and renewal because it now enjoyed international recognition on account of the serious nature of its discussions. Each national report was examined to identify its positive aspects and any delays in implementing the Convention. Many new experts had been elected during the past decade and those who were no longer members were to be thanked for the efforts they had made during their terms of office. She also congratulated the six experts who were participating for the first time in the Committee's work. New blood always provided a new impetus and the mixture of continuity and renewal was the very essence of the Committee's vitality.

6. Referring to its analysis of various reports, she observed that, although a number of constant features and common problems were apparent, certain specific characteristics had to be taken into account given the variety of social and

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cultural conditions in the world. The Committee had always paid due attention to those differences, but special skills were increasingly required to define the particular problems that arose in a given country or society. In that connection the close link between the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies and the Convention should be noted. In addition, the effectiveness and relevance of the Committee's work and its action combined with that of the Secretariat and, consequently, with that of the Commission on the Status of Women, were also noteworthy. That concept should be borne in mind in assessing the results of the Committee's work and might be approached under three headings, namely, diagnosis, identification of basic principles and consequential planning and preparation.

7. From the standpoint of diagnosis, it should be borne in mind that the Secretariat had always serviced the Committee exclusively on the basis of the resources available in the Division. Since 1982 there had been virtually no increase either in human or financial resources, and the annual resolutions adopted by the General Assembly to strengthen the means of servicing the Committee always contained the expression "within the existing resources", which meant that there were no additional resources. Yet the Secretariat had endeavoured to service the Committee to the best of its ability, and on several occasions the latter had acknowledged improvements in the services provided by the Secretariat.

8. As the question of resources had been discussed at length, all that needed to be added was that 103 countries had ratified the Convention, with an obvious impact on the Division's workload, yet no new professional officer had been placed at the Division's disposal to cater for these new demands.

9. Within the Division itself, there was a natural symbiosis between the follow-up of strategies, the analysis of reports and the consideration of specific questions raised by the Committee. In the circumstances, therefore, it had appeared appropriate to propose that an item on ways and means of enhancing support for the Committee should be included in the agenda.

10. Although article 17, paragraph 9, of the Convention stated that the United Nations Secretary-General should provide the necessary staff and facilities for the effective performance of the functions of the Committee, it failed to define what was involved in terms of financial and human resources, and consequently needs had been met as and when they had arisen. But the time had now come for the Committee's requirements to be defined so that the Secretariat could programme and plan its services while taking due account of the numerous other tasks performed by the Division.

11. For example, since 1987, the Secretariat had had to service the annual sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women, a minimum of four experts' meetings or seminars to prepare priority themes and one or two seminars on the Convention, as well as the annual session of the Committee and that of the States parties every two years. The Secretariat had not shrunk from those additional tasks, aware that any improvement in the status of women required continuing commitment. However, the time had come for it to rationalize its working methods to make them more effective.

12. A number of basic principles therefore had to be defined. The Convention was not merely an international human rights instrument but also an authority and a power that strengthened the Strategies. Its articles and mechanisms, notably the

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Committee, were those that had been considered to be the most effective for achieving equality between men and women and the means by which women could participate on an equal footing in all walks of life, development and peace. The servicing of the Committee was therefore an integral part of the United Nations Programme Budget for the Advancement of Women meaning, in administrative terms, that it was part of the United Nations Programme and Medium-Term Plan for that purpose. The Secretariat had therefore prepared document CEDAW/C/CRP.16 which contained suggestions for improving the Committee's work. Each specific task referred to would have to be reflected in the United Nations Programme Budget because the Division could no longer absorb work that was not planned and programmed.

13. Referring to the third heading she had mentioned, namely, consequential planning and preparation, she noted that the annex to document CEDAW/C/CRP.16 contained a list of reports due - 31 initial reports, 51 second periodic reports and 26 third periodic reports - in spite of the Secretariat's many reminders. There were also 10 periodic reports available for consideration, not counting those submitted to the present session. The Working Group had already decided to consider two of the third reports together with the second reports, a decision which might well also be applied to all reports due. The Committee should therefore decide what action should be taken in view of the delays in submitting reports.

14. It was also suggested in document CEDAW/C/CRP.16 that the Committee should specify the kind of analysis it expected of the Secretariat. Those analyses would be presented in the form of pre-session documents for general distribution which would facilitate the Committee's consideration of national reports and also help in the formulation of recommendations. Their general distribution would enhance the awareness of the various non-governmental organizations, governments and research workers, who could also follow the analytical work carried out prior to consideration of the reports.

15. In-depth analysis implied the need for a long-term programme comprising a number of priority themes. That would mean selecting a number of themes for analysis at the next session, as well as others that warranted being studied in greater depth and that would be considered at subsequent sessions. The attendance of experts qualified to deal with specific themes could therefore be programmed. The expert invited to attend the current session was Mr. Eric Tistounet of the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva who would reply to any questions falling within his specialized field.

16. If that long-term programme was to be implemented, the Committee had to equip itself with the means necessary to carry out such analyses. She had already mentioned the amount of work absorbed by the Division and simply wished to add that such long-term planning and clarification of objectives would enable the Committee to apply for the additional resources that could no longer be generated by the Division.

17. Additional staff had already been requested in the next programme budget to meet the Committee's growing needs, but unfortunately the zero growth rule still prevailed and the request for additional resources would probably not be granted.

18. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 45/124, the work of reassessing the Division's resources had already started. The long-term programme of work

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which might be drawn up would constitute an additional document justifying the necessary increase in resources for the Division, on the basis of which Governments could decide whether or not they wished to satisfy the Committee's requirements. Only in that way could the Division put to the test the willingness of Governments to provide the Committee with the resources it needed.

19. The rest of the suggestions contained in document CEDAW/C/CRP.16 could be examined in the course of the session.

20. Speaking both as Director and as a woman from the third world she was well aware of the decisive role played by the Committee, the Convention and the Strategies in improving the status of women. During the past year, in the course of her missions to national bodies in Africa, Asia and even Europe, women had talked about the Convention, the Strategies and the Committee, and it was the latter's responsibility to realize the expectations of all those women and to provide them with documentation and information. She was confident that all concerned would support and assist the Division defining its approach and programme of work so that the goals set for the year 2000 could be attained.

21. The TEMPORARY CHAIRPERSON paid tribute to the Division for its support of the Committee's work and thanked the Director for her suggestions.

22. Ms. SINEGIORGIS requested that the Director's statement should be distributed to the Committee in all working languages as an aid to its discussions.

23. It was so decided.

SOLEMN DECLARATION BY THE NEW MEMBERS AND RE-ELECTED MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

24. The new members, Ms. ABAKA, Ms. AOUIJ, Ms. NIKOLAEVA and Ms. QUINTOS-DELES, as well as the re-elected members, Ms. AKAMATSU, Ms. CORTI, Ms. FORDE, Ms. ILIC, and Ms. TALLAWY made a solemn declaration as provided for in rule 10 of the Committee's rules of procedure (A/38/45, annex III).

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

25. Ms. Tallaway was elected Chairperson, Ms. Alfonsín de Fasan, Ms. Akamatsu and Ms. Illic were elected Vice-Chairpersons and Ms. Laiou-Antoniou was elected Rapporteur, all by acclamation.

26. Ms. Tallaway took the Chair.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

Adoption of the agenda

27. Ms. ILIC suggested that the title of item 9 of the provisional agenda should be amended in the light of the General Assembly's decision to hold a world conference on human rights.

28. Ms. SINEGIORGIS proposed that the title of item 9 should be amended to read "Discussion on the forthcoming world conference on human rights".

29. It was so agreed.

30. The provisional agenda (CEDAW/C/20), as amended, was adopted.

Organization of work

31. Ms. SELLAMI-MESLEM (Director, Division for the Advancement of Women), explaining an announcement by the Secretary of the Committee that the Government of Burkina Faso had requested that consideration of its report should be rescheduled, urged the Committee to make allowance for the financial and other difficulties which often made it difficult for developing countries to arrange for a representative to attend Committee sessions to present their reports on the appointed date.

32. In response to a proposal by Ms. SINEGIORGIS to postpone consideration of the report of Burkina Faso until Wednesday, 23 January, the CHAIRPERSON said that the previous afternoon seemed preferable so as to give the government representative time to prepare a reply for Thursday, 24 January, but agreed that flexibility was necessary in the event that the introduction was delayed.

33. Ms. SINEGIORGIS said that no provision had apparently been made in the timetable for the preparation by the Secretariat of the Committee's report, which should be adopted before the end of the session.

34. Ms. CREYDT (Secretary of the Committee) said that the programme of work did allow some time for the preparation of the report - the afternoon of Thursday, 31 January having been set aside for its finalization for example. Naturally, however, the Secretariat would make good use of any spare time that became available.

35. Ms. BERNARD suggested that the reports of both Working Groups could be considered on Wednesday, 30 January, which would leave the next day free for the preparation of the Committee's report or any other urgent business.

36. Ms. SINEGIORGIS was of the view that the Committee should keep to its original timetable for the time being, and that the Bureau and the Secretariat should determine whether more time could be made available for the preparation of the report towards the end of the session.

37. The CHAIRPERSON said that the Committee would try to leave as much time free at the end of the session as possible. However, the important thing was to be completely flexible.

38. Ms. CORTI appealed to the Working Groups to work efficiently so that they could complete their reports on time.

39. The CHAIRPERSON suggested that the composition of the Working Groups should remain the same as at the previous session.

40. Ms. FORDE proposed that, as certain members might wish to change from one Working Group to the other, both should be completely reconstituted.

41. The CHAIRPERSON suggested that, to save time, members should simply attend the first meeting of whichever Working Group they preferred, and that the co-ordinator of each Group should announce the revised list of its members at a later date.

42. It was so decided.

43. Ms. EVATT said that she wished to submit to one of the Groups a number of proposals on the Committee's working methods. In her view, the Committee should prepare its recommendations more thoroughly and, in particular, each recommendation should be accompanied by an interpretation of the relevant articles of the Convention - a process which would call for careful forward planning.

44. The CHAIRPERSON said that a number of issues would have to be allocated to one Working Group or the other; they included Ms. Sellami-Meslem's proposals and the forthcoming world conference on human rights. It was essential that those issues should be fully discussed by a Working Group so as to avoid a lengthy general debate in plenary. Working Group II still had to consider three draft general recommendations carried over from the previous session concerning unpaid women workers in family enterprises, recognition of the unremunerated contribution of women to the gross national product, and women workers in enterprises.

45. Ms. BERNARD requested the Chairperson to recall the terms of reference of the Working Groups for the benefit of new members of the Committee.

46. The CHAIRPERSON said that Working Group I had been set up to suggest ways and means of expediting the work of the Committee, and that it was the function of Working Group II to consider ways and means of implementing article 21 of the Convention, as well as to discuss the three draft general recommendations she had mentioned. She asked the Secretariat to circulate a document describing the mandates of the two Working Groups to all members of the Committee.

47. She suggested that the Committee should meet every day from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and again from 2.30 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. If she saw no objection, she would take it that the Committee wished to adopt the programme of work and the proposed working hours.

48. It was so decided.

49. Ms. CREYDT (Secretary of the Committee) said that two members, namely, Ms. González-Martínez and Ms. Schöpp-Schilling, had been unable to attend the beginning of the session, but would arrive later. She had not heard from Ms. Bravo Nuñez de Ramsay, Ms. Ukeje or Ms. Walla-Tchangai. Ms. Lin Shangzhen was ill and would be unable to participate in the session.

50. In reply to a question from Ms. BERNARD, the CHAIRPERSON said that the current co-ordinator of Working Group I was Ms. Bernard and the co-ordinator of Working Group II was Ms. Schöpp-Schilling.

51. Ms. CORTI asked whether the Working Groups would keep the same co-ordinator even if their membership changed.

52. The CHAIRPERSON said that any queries could be addressed to the present co-ordinators until new co-ordinators were elected.

53. Ms. SINEGIORGIS suggested that two of the Vice-Chairpersons might act as co-ordinators of the working groups.

54. The CHAIRPERSON said that the co-ordinators of the working groups were usually not members of the Bureau, precisely because the Committee wished to involve as many members as possible in the organization of its work.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.