



Convention on the Rights of the Child

Distr.: General
23 May 2024

Original: English

Committee on the Rights of the Child Ninety-sixth session

Summary record of the 2800th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Tuesday, 14 May 2024, at 3 p.m.

Chair: Ms. Skelton

Contents

Consideration of reports of States parties (*continued*)

Combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Bhutan

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of the present record to the Documents Management Section (DMS-DCM@un.org).

Any corrected records of the public meetings of the Committee at this session will be reissued for technical reasons after the end of the session.



The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports of States parties (*continued*)

Combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Bhutan (CRC/C/BTN/6-7; CRC/C/BTN/QPR/6-7)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Bhutan joined the meeting.*
2. **A representative of Bhutan**, introducing her country's combined sixth and seventh periodic reports, said that, in recent years, Bhutan had not only navigated the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic with minimal loss of life, but had achieved significant development gains. In December 2023, it had graduated from the least developed country category, and its literacy rate, average life expectancy and per capita income were all improving. Those achievements stemmed from its unique development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, which emphasized sustainable socioeconomic development, the preservation of the environment and good governance.
3. Bhutan had made considerable progress in safeguarding and ensuring the rights of children. The Parliament had amended several laws pursuant to the recommendations of the National Law Review Task Force. For example, section 182 of the Penal Code, on statutory rape, had been amended so that the offence now carried a penalty of life imprisonment if the perpetrator was in a position of authority or trust or the child was dependent upon or was exploited by the perpetrator. In 2021, a clause had been added to section 183, stipulating that consensual sex between children aged 16 to 18 years would not be considered as rape. In November 2023, Bhutan had established its first forensic science laboratory with the aim of expediting justice, especially in connection with offences against children.
4. Bhutan also strove to promote and safeguard children's rights through regional cooperation. In 2023, the National Commission for Women and Children had led a consultation on a regional action plan for child rights institutions in South Asia. In February 2024, Bhutan had hosted a regional children's consultation on ending violence against children, with a special focus on eradicating child labour. As a result, the Thimphu Children and Youth Declaration had been adopted, leading to the establishment of a regional children's and youth network.
5. Several initiatives had been undertaken to promote children's health. Bhutan had hosted the seventy-fifth session of the Regional Committee for South-East Asia of the World Health Organization, at which the Paro Declaration had been adopted. On 10 October 2022, the nodal agency for mental health, known as the PEMA, had launched a helpline to provide support for individuals with mental health issues. E-counselling services had also been introduced. In 2023, treatment and care services for substance-dependent persons, including children in conflict with the law, had been introduced in hospitals and detention centres. In July 2023, Bhutan had achieved the elimination of rubella. Over 99 per cent of schoolchildren had been screened for refractive error, and those with refractive errors had been provided with glasses. Devices to detect hearing impairment at birth had been made available in regional hospitals. Between 2017 and 2022, institutional delivery rates had risen, and the maternal, child and under-5 mortality rates had all fallen sharply.
6. In 2020, the King had issued a royal decree to transform the education system into one that was rooted in Bhutanese culture and values and yet was progressive in its pursuit of science and technology. Accordingly, the Government had implemented a number of reforms and had revised the curriculum with an emphasis on developing students' competencies. The role of teachers had shifted, so that they now served as resource persons, facilitating creative engagement and continuous learning. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development had launched several science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) initiatives to contribute to producing quality STEM professionals and innovators. In addition, pastoral care had been improved and over 450 sports instructors had been recruited. Moreover, to empower youth and foster resilience and personal attributes and values, a year-long programme of national service, known as Gyalsung, had been announced in 2019. The inaugural cohort of 18-year-olds would commence the programme in September 2024.

7. Mindful of the need to accelerate economic recovery and growth and to avoid the setbacks associated with emerging social challenges, the Government had developed a number of ambitious plans and programmes. Most notably, it was preparing to launch the country's thirteenth Five-Year Plan, for 2024–2029, which would be backed by substantial resources, especially in the area of social development. Bhutan would continue to uphold the obligations set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols, tackling contemporary challenges with resilience and compassion and forging a brighter, fairer future for its children.

8. **Ms. Kiladze** (Coordinator, Country Task Force) said that she would be interested to know whether the Government planned to amend the Child Care and Protection Act so as to protect the rights of all children, not only those considered to be in "difficult circumstances", and whether any other legislative amendments had been introduced to bring domestic legislation into line with the Convention. Information might be provided on the allocation of resources for the implementation of the Child Care and Protection Act. She wondered whether the State party had adopted the proposed National Child Policy and its associated action plan.

9. The Committee would be interested to know more about the restructuring of the National Commission for Women and Children, including whether the roles and responsibilities of the Commission and the PEMA secretariat were clearly defined and whether the two bodies received sufficient resources to function effectively. Moreover, she wished to know whether child rights were taken into account in budgeting processes; whether the Government had established specific budget lines for children in vulnerable situations, such as children in monastic schools; how the Government evaluated the distribution of resources for child rights; and whether budgeting processes were transparent and participatory and covered children and civil society organizations.

10. It would be useful to know whether Bhutan had a system for the collection of disaggregated data, and whether the Government published the data it collected. She wondered whether data were collected on vulnerable groups, such as children who were victims of bullying, child labour or trafficking.

11. In respect of access to justice, the Committee would be interested to learn whether Bhutan had put in place child-friendly mechanisms in all relevant settings and whether children had access to legal assistance and representation, age-appropriate counselling, remedies, compensation and rehabilitation. It would be interesting to know whether the authorities had conducted any awareness-raising campaigns on children's right to have access to justice, and whether the State party trained justice professionals in child-friendly justice procedures and children's rights.

12. In the light of reports that civil society organizations operated under certain restrictions, she would be grateful for information on the requirement for them to establish an endowment fund and on any measures taken to ensure and increase funding for civil society organizations that provided child-related services. It would also be interesting to know whether the laws of Bhutan held businesses accountable for their activities and whether companies were required to assess the impact of their activities on child rights.

13. The Committee would appreciate information on children's right to be registered at birth, regardless of their parents' nationality or marital status, and on measures to remove barriers to birth registration and access to nationality for children of foreign or stateless parents. Information might be provided regarding access to birth registration for vulnerable groups, including children of unmarried parents, children with one or two foreign parents and children who were not registered within 12 months of birth. It would also be useful to know whether the Government planned to simplify the documentary requirements for birth registration. She wondered whether there were any inequalities between Bhutanese women and men with foreign spouses when it came to passing on Bhutanese nationality. Did the Government plan to develop any special procedures to prevent statelessness, and did it intend to ratify the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness?

14. She would be interested to know whether the State party had put in place any safeguards to ensure that children born through surrogacy had access to information about

their origin and to prevent the sale of children and related offences. She wondered how the State party guaranteed children's freedom of expression and freedom of religion. She would appreciate information on measures to ensure Internet access, especially for vulnerable children and children from remote and rural areas; measures to protect children from harm on the Internet; and measures to guarantee children's access to information from diverse sources.

15. Furthermore, she would be interested to know what measures had been taken to implement the Domestic Violence Prevention Act and protect children from any form of torture. Had the State party adopted any guidelines or standard operating procedures to ensure the effective management of cases of violence against children? She wished to know whether professionals were trained to efficiently prevent and respond to cases of violence against children, and whether Bhutanese children had access to child-friendly confidential mechanisms for reporting violence.

16. It would be useful to know how the State party combated all forms of violence, including in the contexts of labour and tourism. The delegation might comment on reports of an increase in sexual violence against girls and describe measures to tackle the problem. She would be interested to know whether child victims of violence had access to rehabilitation, counselling and psychosocial support in order to prevent their revictimization. She wondered whether the State party had developed any programmes for children who had committed sexual offences, and whether children could be prosecuted under section 213 of the Penal Code, which penalized "unnatural sex". The Committee would also be grateful for information on violence against children who attended monastic schools and, in particular, on measures to protect them from all forms of violence, including sexual abuse. What had been done to eliminate violence, ensure child-friendly and child-sensitive reporting procedures, and ensure the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators?

17. As she understood that corporal punishment was not prohibited by law in all settings, she wished to know the Government's position on the use of corporal punishment, specifically in schools, and whether the State party might consider amending its legislation in that regard. The Committee would appreciate information on social attitudes towards corporal punishment, on the training of professionals in positive forms of discipline and on the organization of awareness-raising campaigns to promote positive, non-violent and participatory forms of child-rearing.

18. While the Marriage Act prohibited marriages for girls under the age of 18 years, the Committee was concerned that some girls were married at the age of 16 or 17. She wondered how the State party enforced the minimum age for marriage and whether the authorities conducted any awareness-raising or provided training for professionals on child marriage.

19. Lastly, she wished to know whether the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography had been incorporated into national legislation, including by criminalizing all forms of sexual exploitation of children and the production, distribution, sale and possession of child sexual abuse material. How did the authorities identify victims of offences under the Optional Protocol?

20. **Ms. Moulaye** (Country Task Force) said she was concerned that vulnerable children in Bhutan, including transgender children, rural children, children with disabilities and migrant and undocumented children, were exposed to stigmatization and discrimination and their access to basic services was severely limited. She therefore wished to know what steps had been taken to eliminate all forms of discrimination against children. She would be grateful for information on measures to train officials and others responsible for addressing cases of discrimination; on any mechanisms and procedures for dealing with complaints of discrimination; and on steps taken to improve access to basic services for children living in rural areas, children with disabilities and children from low-income families.

21. The Committee would be interested to know how the State party ensured that the principle of the best interests of the child was interpreted and applied consistently in all policies and programmes and in all administrative, judicial and legal procedures concerning children. Information on training and guidance on the determination of the best interests of the child, for professionals working for and with children, would also be welcome.

22. Furthermore, she wished to know what measures were taken to allow children to freely express their views on all issues concerning them. She would be interested to hear about any measures to build the capacity of professionals regarding children's right to be heard, and about measures to promote the participation of different groups of children in the development of local and national policies and programmes.

23. Noting that the duration of maternity and paternity leave had been extended for civil servants, she said that she would be interested to know whether the Government had studied the impact of that measure on the well-being of mothers and children. She wondered what had been done to promote the equitable sharing of parental responsibilities and to improve the work-life balance of parents. Information might also be provided on the implementation of early childhood care and development programmes.

24. The Committee would be interested to know what measures had been taken to prevent family separation and to ensure that children who could not remain with their families were placed in alternative care settings such as foster families. She wondered whether the State party would prohibit the practice of placing vulnerable children in monastic schools or shelters run by civil society organizations. She would like to know whether the authorities considered children's best interests when deciding whether to place them in alternative care; whether the State party had a mechanism for the monitoring and regular review of placements in institutional care that allowed for the detection and reporting of child abuse; what had been done to remedy the lack of social workers and to provide social workers with continuous training; and what measures had been taken to uphold the best interests of the child in adoption proceedings.

The meeting was suspended at 3.40 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.

25. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the National Commission for Women and Children carried out coordination and monitoring activities related to women's and children's rights, including the formulation and review of laws and policies. The Government provided the Commission and its secretariat with infrastructure and human and financial resources, and it received additional assistance from development partners. The Commission had been allocated a budget of about US\$ 1.2 million under the thirteenth Five-Year Plan. In an effort to streamline coordination and enhance policy effectiveness, the Commission's structure and mandate had been reformed, although it maintained its independent status. The Commission's secretariat now operated under the Ministry of Education and Skills Development, while its service components had been transferred to the PEMA secretariat. The restructuring remained under review, and the Government could intervene if it found that the Commission's functions were compromised by the new institutional arrangement.

26. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the National Commission for Women and Children planned to conduct a comprehensive assessment to identify gaps in the implementation of the Child Care and Protection Act and emerging issues or trends that might necessitate the Act's amendment. The Government had agreed to the review of the Act.

27. In the budget for the 2023/24 financial year, the Government had allocated significant resources to health and education, with a focus on early childhood care and development and STEM education. Under the new Five-Year Plan, funds were set aside for social protection, including social security, housing and welfare.

28. The Royal Court of Justice and the Office of the Attorney General provided training for their officials on child-friendly justice procedures and children's rights. The National Commission for Women and Children had adopted and disseminated a revised standard operating procedure for children in conflict with the law. The Commission had delivered child protection and child rights training for the gender and child focal points of 20 districts and four municipalities. In 2022/23, it had provided training on child rights to more than 600 teachers, health workers, community volunteers and others. Awareness-raising on child rights was conducted with relevant agencies, local governments, civil society organizations, schools and youth centres, and among labour inspectors, health workers, police officers, immigration inspectors, nuns and monks and members of the Parliament.

29. **A representative of Bhutan** said that data on cases of violence against children were currently recorded through the case management information system developed by the

National Commission for Women and Children. The PEMA secretariat was currently in the process of consolidating various data collection systems with a view to introducing a single centralized system.

30. **A representative of Bhutan** said that, in 2018, the National Law Review Task Force had reported its findings to the Parliament and other stakeholders. The Task Force had recommended that section 154 of the Penal Code should be amended to bring the offence of trafficking in persons into line with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and that sections 203 and 204 should be amended to increase the penalty for the offence of child molestation.

31. In terms of access to justice, section 180 of the Child Care and Protection Act stated that if the parent or guardian of the child was an indigent person, the State must provide legal assistance to the child during the proceedings where the interests of justice so required. The Act also contained provisions on the duration of investigations against children in conflict with the law, and on the rights of detained children to have access to legal and other appropriate assistance, to challenge the legality of their arrest and detention, and to testify as a witness on their own behalf. Section 103 of the Act stated that children in custody must receive care, protection and basic assistance. The revised standard operating procedure for children in conflict with the law provided for various alternatives to detention that could be adopted at different stages of proceedings.

32. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the Government was committed to increasing the civic space in Bhutan and appreciated the contribution made by civil society organizations. In the previous two decades, the number of registered civil society organizations in the country had risen to 53. However, the Government was mindful of the risk posed by civil society organizations that did not have the required structure or the necessary funds to sustain their operations, and which were of no benefit to society. It would not permit a proliferation of “briefcase NGOs”. It had therefore introduced the endowment fund requirement of approximately US\$ 37,000, which was both minimal and affordable.

33. **A representative of Bhutan** said that all births were registered in Bhutan, including those of children born to one Bhutanese and one foreign parent. Each child was issued with a health card, which was a prerequisite for obtaining a birth certificate. Procedures for obtaining citizenship were based on clear criteria and did not discriminate on the grounds of ethnicity, sex or religion. Children had the same opportunities for naturalization regardless of their parents’ nationality. Children of foreign parents were granted a residence permit and could apply to acquire citizenship through naturalization once they had reached the age of 15 years. Since the adoption of the Constitution in 2008, the procedure for the transmission of nationality was the same regardless of the gender of the Bhutanese parent. Birth and death registration through the Integrated Citizen Services system had so far been introduced in 5 of the 20 districts. There were 230 birth registration points throughout the country, including in community centres and census offices. Births could also be registered online. To cater for rural communities, village representatives could provide parents with a birth form, which they could fill out and take to a hospital. Every year, between November and January, civil registry officials would visit all villages within their jurisdiction to allow residents to register births and deaths. Thanks to such efforts, the birth registration rate had increased.

34. In keeping with its commitment to the international rule of law, Bhutan had recently ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Regarding the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, the Government’s position was that it was necessary to build the legal, political and social institutions necessary for the fulfilment of international treaty obligations before assuming them.

35. **A representative of Bhutan** said that, in 2022/23, the Government had provided approximately US\$ 9.5 million in subsidies to civil society organizations operating services such as shelters for women and children who were survivors of violence. The Government facilitated platforms for civil society organizations to network, enhance capacities, disseminate knowledge and strengthen monitoring and reporting.

36. The Government consulted children on decisions affecting their lives and fostered their involvement in shaping their own future. Standards and guidelines contained in the Child Care and Protection Act, and various standard operating procedures, ensured children's participation. The Government also organized capacity-building initiatives designed to empower children and enable their participation in the development of policies and programmes affecting them. Children had been consulted during the review process of the draft National Child Policy.

37. The principle of the best interests of the child was paramount in ensuring that children's welfare was taken into account in all decisions affecting them. The Child Care and Protection Act took the best interests of the child as a guiding principle and incorporated it in various provisions, including those on arrest and detention, separation from parents, bail, judicial proceedings and media reporting. To further reinforce the application of the principle, child-friendly initiatives, including the creation of supportive and child-friendly settings, had been introduced in all courts.

38. **A representative of Bhutan** said that all citizens, including children, enjoyed freedom of speech and expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The Government was fully committed to promoting and protecting fundamental rights and freedoms. Article 7 (15) of the Constitution stated that all persons were equal before the law and must not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status. Article 7 (3) provided that Bhutanese citizens had the right to information.

39. **A representative of Bhutan** said that Bhutan had taken several measures to ensure the accessibility and affordability of digital services. Internet connectivity had been extended to all parts of the country, and all rural and remote schools in Bhutan were equipped with computers so that pupils could have access to online resources and could learn digital skills. Tablets had been distributed to schools and institutions that provided education for students with special needs, including students with visual impairments. The Government had developed an inclusive information and communications technology curriculum for children with special educational needs and had supplied assistive devices and devices with built-in accessibility features to children with disabilities.

40. Digital literacy, or even coding, was an integral part of the curricula in the country's schools. As part of their in-service training, teachers, too, were made familiar with the latest digital education developments and best practices. Teachers also worked with parents and guardians to help ensure that schoolchildren used digital tools safely and ethically. Other measures that had been taken to ensure that children were protected online included the establishment of a computer incident response team, the drafting of relevant protection guidelines and the distribution of posters illustrating cybersecurity rules of behaviour to schools around the country.

41. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the provisions of the Penal Code under which "unnatural sex" was made a criminal offence applied to adults, who could not be prosecuted for consensual homosexual activity. Illicit sexual intercourse involving children would fall under the provisions on statutory rape or the rape of a child over the age of 12.

42. Children were protected from torture under the country's Constitution and its laws, including section 73 of the Child Care and Protection Act, which stated that no child in conflict with the law was to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Determinations of the degree of severity of an offence of torture were made in accordance with the relevant laws. All forms of domestic violence, including emotional and economic abuse, were prohibited under the Domestic Violence Prevention Act.

43. **A representative of Bhutan** said that if it became necessary to draft legislation on surrogacy, of which there had been no cases in Bhutan, consideration might be given to doing so.

44. **A representative of Bhutan** said that a special service had been established to respond to cases of violence against children. All service providers had access to the national child helpline, which operated around the clock. Child protection officers, who had adopted international case-management standards, responded in the event of emergencies and were responsible for assessments and referrals. A children's psychiatric clinic had been set up in

2023, and efforts were under way to ensure that children in need of immediate protection, in particular those with mental health conditions, had access to shelters or other forms of accommodation.

45. The National Commission for Women and Children had developed and was implementing a strategy, “Communication for Development”, to promote child well-being. Community engagement to protect children from violence, abuse and exploitation was one aspect of the strategy, which also focused on positive development practices and social norms that undermined the rights of women and children. A campaign to raise awareness of violence against children had been launched in three districts in 2022, and in 2023 a pilot project on parenting without violence had been rolled out in 34 schools. Guidelines on combating bullying had been followed in all educational institutions since February 2023, and the members of the staff and faculty of hundreds of schools had attended training sessions to familiarize them with the guidelines and help them create environments free from bullying.

46. Children could report violence in any number of ways. In addition to the child helpline, for example, they could turn to the committees for women and children that had been set up in a number of districts and municipalities. Efforts were being made to build the capacity of the police, teachers, local leaders, volunteers, counsellors, health workers, labour officials and parents to help promote and protect the rights of the child. More than 550 stakeholders had received copies of the revised standard operating procedures for children in conflict with the law. Diversion guidelines had also been developed. The response to trafficking in persons was multisectoral.

47. Despite resource constraints, many private employers had sought to increase the period of maternity leave from two months to three. Thirty workplace childcare centres had been created to ease the burden on working parents, particularly mothers.

48. **A representative of Bhutan** said that children subjected to violence could also report it online or at school. Health centres and the police also handled reports of violence from children. The responding services managed all cases involving violence against children comprehensively. The legal and other proceedings that were required in those cases were adapted to cater for survivors and witnesses of violence. All relevant front-line workers were given the training they needed to provide psychological first aid to children during investigations and other proceedings. Training, including of school officials, was a significant component of efforts to combat bullying and ensure that people working with and for children were aware of their obligation to report any suspected abuse.

49. **A representative of Bhutan** said that, although there was no explicit prohibition of corporal punishment, all forms of violence against children were prohibited by law. A number of initiatives designed to prevent corporal punishment in the country’s schools had drawn on that prohibition. In 2019, for instance, all teachers had undergone skills development training that emphasized positive forms of discipline, and in 2023 discipline policy guidelines for schools had been revised to include a similar emphasis. The code of conduct followed by teachers explicitly prohibited corporal punishment in schools.

50. In monastic institutions, such punishment had become less common since 2009, after the chief abbot of the central monastic body had denounced it. A care and protection office established by the central monastic body advocated alternative means of discipline in monasteries. In 2019, the chief abbot had issued a decree focusing on the well-being of children and on their protection from violence and exploitation.

51. **A representative of Bhutan** said that persons responsible for subjecting children to corporal punishment had been successfully prosecuted under the Penal Code and the Child Care and Protection Act. In one recent case, for example, a hostel warden at a school had been charged with battery under section 158 of the Penal Code and given a 3-month prison sentence. In another case, an English teacher had been charged with battering a child under section 215 of the Child Care and Protection Act. He, too, had been given a 3-month sentence. In both cases, the victims had been entitled to compensation. Under the Civil Liability Act, moreover, institutions could be held liable for the abuse to which children in their care or under their supervision were subjected.

52. The Marriage Act had been amended to raise the minimum age for marriage to 18 years; the amendment, however, had been published only in Dzongkha, the country's national language, not in English. The Royal Courts of Justice ensured that applicants for marriage certificates were of age.

53. Section 154 of the Penal Code had been amended to bring it into line with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Under section 9 of the Labour and Employment Act, the recruitment of children for use in armed conflict and practices such as the sale of children had been made felonies of the third degree.

54. **A representative of Bhutan** said that legal frameworks were in place to ensure that no one was subjected to discrimination. The policy of the State was to create a society free from oppression, discrimination and violence. Complaints of discrimination could be lodged with the PEMA.

55. Every effort was made to ensure that the best interests of the child were a primary consideration in adoption proceedings, which had been simplified. Adoption assessment and verification processes were activated within an hour of the receipt of applications. Consideration was given to the child's opinion in both adoption and parental separation or custody proceedings.

56. **A representative of Bhutan** said that the Government had organized a number of initiatives in connection with article 12 of the Convention, on the right of the child to express his or her views. Children were consulted on the development of policies and action plans on youth issues.

57. The Labour and Employment Act, under which the private and corporate sectors were regulated, contained provisions intended to prevent child labour, including its worst forms, and exploitation. Inspectors made regular visits, unannounced, to places of employment, including in the tourism and education sectors. A focal point for children's issues at the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry ensured that a child rights perspective informed the development of plans and programmes.

58. **Ms. Kiladze** asked whether the Government had made plans to further strengthen the National Commission for Women and Children. She would welcome a clear indication of whether the many legal provisions mentioned by the delegation were simply drafts or actually had the force of law.

59. **Ms. Aho** said that she wished to know whether all the State party's children had birth certificates and whether a parent or other person had to produce a health card to register the birth of a child. She wondered, too, what was done if, for example, a single mother refused to divulge all the information ordinarily required by the registrars.

60. She also wished to learn how much the Government set aside to meet the needs of the children living in monasteries, whether such children were subjected to violence and, if so, whether they had access, including from within the monasteries, to complaints mechanisms such as the child helpline. Similarly, she would like to know at what age children entered monasteries, whether they were obliged to do so and whether there was a relevant oversight body.

61. **Mr. Van Keirsbilck** said that he wondered whether a lawyer would be appointed for a child who needed independent legal advice rather than, for example, advice from a lawyer retained by his or her parents. He wondered, too, whether every child who was a party to judicial proceedings was represented by a lawyer and whether children who, for example, had a problem at school had access to non-judicial remedies.

62. **Ms. Beloff** said that she wished to know whether a minor accused of a crime might have to stand trial without the assistance of counsel. She, too, would welcome a clearer indication of the legal provisions that were merely drafts and those that were in force, in particular in relation to juvenile justice.

63. **Ms. Al Barwani** (Country Task Force) said that she wished to know why the State party had made reservations – four in all – to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which it had ratified in March 2024, and what efforts it was making to address

the discrimination and stigmatization faced by children with disabilities. She wished to know, too, whether the Government intended to identify how many children with disabilities lived with their families and how many in residential facilities and, if so, when that information would be made available. It would also be helpful to learn what institution was responsible for coordinating the measures taken to include children with disabilities in the community, whether a body had been designated specifically to oversee the implementation of the action plan for persons with disabilities, whether the resources for the infrastructure and equipment needed by children with disabilities had been set aside, what early intervention programmes were in place and how much was being done to educate the public about disability and combat the bullying and stigmatization of children with disabilities. An indication of what the Government was doing to ensure that such children had access to health services and therapy and whether it provided families with the support that would enable those children to be raised at home would likewise be welcome.

64. As neonatal mortality accounted for more than half of under-5 mortality, she wondered what the Government was doing to ensure that health-care services, especially for newborn babies, were widely available and that health resources were equitably distributed. She wondered, too, whether the electronic patient information system was operational and whether the deployment of mobile medical camps had led to significantly increased access to health services. In addition, she wondered what programmes were in place to improve access to sanitation for children from disadvantaged families.

65. She wished to know how the State party was addressing malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, stunting and obesity, what measures had been taken to promote exclusive breastfeeding and whether consideration was being given to developing a nutritional programme more comprehensive and more effective than the school meals programme that was currently in place. It would be helpful to learn, too, what was being done to respond to an emerging environmental health issue, namely, high blood lead levels in children and pregnant women. The delegation might comment on the measures that had been taken in the area of mental health, in particular to prevent suicide, and describe the plans that had been made to ensure – by setting aside additional resources, for example – that mental health services were widely available.

66. It would be interesting to know what programmes had been launched to lower the rates of teenage pregnancy, how accessible contraceptives were, whether school programmes addressed the harmful effects of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases and, since abortion was legal in but limited circumstances, what happened to teenage girls with unwanted pregnancies who could not have a legal abortion. In that connection, she wondered whether such girls received any support, whether they had access to any abortion services and, if not, whether any consideration was being given to making legal abortion services more widely available.

67. Substance abuse was another persistent problem. She would welcome a comment on the programmes that had been developed to prevent it and to treat the children affected.

68. She wondered whether it was true that there had been a cut of 3 per cent to the 2022/23 education budget and how the Government intended to fund the revolutionary educational programmes it was introducing. She also wondered what was being done to ensure that all children could exercise their right to education, whether education was compulsory and how the Government had responded to figures showing that more than 10 per cent of children of school age – the majority of them girls – were not in school, training or employment. In addition, she wished to know whether the Government was considering relaxing the requirements for the opening of early childhood education centres, what plans had been made to increase primary education rates, in particular in rural areas, what measures were being taken to ensure that the central schools that drew students from remote areas had adequate facilities and what was being done to modernize school programmes, not least in monastic schools, and to discourage students, boys in particular, from dropping out. It would be helpful to learn, too, how well equipped the inclusive schools for children with disabilities were and what happened to teachers who, like the English teacher mentioned by the delegation, were sent to prison for battering children. Did they simply return to the classroom after serving their sentences?

69. **Mr. Jaffé** (Country Task Force) said that he wondered whether fighting poverty was a priority for the Government and what was being done to ensure access to adequate housing, water and sanitation. He also wondered what the Government intended to do to put in place an inclusive social programme, coordinated by a single entity, to address the issues faced by disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

70. The State party, the world's only carbon-negative State, was a leader on environmental issues. It would nonetheless be interesting to know why more was not being done to involve its children in formulating its response to climate change, whether they learned about climate change in school and whether teacher training, too, covered the topic.

71. He wondered why nothing had been done to address the situation of the 800 or so Lhotshampa families who had sought refuge in neighbouring Nepal. More generally, he wondered how well integrated minority communities were in Bhutan.

72. He wished to know whether any employers had been fined or otherwise penalized for violations of the laws on child labour and how child labour in family environments, the setting for much such labour, was addressed. He also wished to know how many children in conflict with the law had benefited from diversion programmes, how successful the programmes were and whether they were run in cooperation with civil society. In addition, it would be helpful to learn how many children were living with their imprisoned mothers, up to what age such children could remain together with their mothers and what services they had access to. Lastly, he would welcome confirmation that no one under the age of 18 was accepted into the national service training programme known as Gyalsung.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.