



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
Thirty-ninth session

Summary record of the 794th meeting (Chamber A)

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 24 July 2007, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gaspard

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention *(continued)*

Combined third and fourth periodic reports of Belize (continued) (CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4, CEDAW/C/BLZ/Q/4 and Add.1)

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

2. **The Chairperson** invited the Committee to resume discussion of articles 7 to 9.

Articles 7 to 9 (continued)

3. **Ms. Shin** asked how Belize was planning to attract more young women into politics. Possible strategies included searching for potential candidates in advance of elections and training them in the skills needed to compete, or requiring political parties to devote funds to expanding the participation of women.

4. **Ms. Flores** (Belize), acknowledging that even educated young women who did get involved in political campaigns and fund-raising were reluctant to stand for election, said that the Government had, for 20 years, been trying to encourage them to do so through women's workshops and other means. She believed that those seeds would bear fruit in time.

5. **Ms. Fonseca** (Belize) said that a gender-studies workshop geared to women and to potential women candidates for office had been attended by representatives of all the political parties, and the Mayan community in particular had been very vocal. The National Women's Commission and the Women's Department had both advocated scholarships for women who wanted to attend university in order to work in social fields. A high percentage of women did graduate from university, and a special university programme for single mothers had been established. In addition, the Women's Department regularly held personal development sessions to raise women's self-esteem so that they would become more active in the political arena.

Articles 10 to 14

6. **Ms. Pimentel**, referring to article 10, observed that, given that Belize had the highest per capita rate of HIV/AIDS in Central America and that AIDS was the

leading cause of death among women of childbearing age, HIV/AIDS awareness and adequate access to reproductive health services were crucial. Despite the commendable efforts the Government was making to inform women, set out in the response to question 22 of the list of issues (CEDAW/C/BLZ/Q/4/Add.1), there was, according to the report (CEDAW/C/BLZ/3-4, paras. 119-121), a reluctance on the part of some church-State-managed schools and many rural Mayan communities to discuss AIDS or sex. It was not clear how the Government would ensure AIDS awareness in the face of such resistance, especially the need to use condoms, and how it would enforce the constitutional rights of women to life and health. Also, she wondered if there were plans to amend the law criminalizing abortion (report, para. 185), a step recommended by the Committee in its previous concluding comments.

7. **Ms. Patten**, referring to article 11, noted that discrimination in employment persisted despite the Government action described in the report. She asked what had been done specifically to promote active gender mainstreaming in all Ministry of Labour policies and programmes to eliminate discrimination by employers in the private sector; and to enforce the Labour Act and other legislation combating gender discrimination in employment. She wondered if the Government was envisaging the adoption of an equal opportunity act, and when the proposed amendments to the Labour Act would be enacted, including the extension of maternity leave to 14 weeks. It would be interesting to know more about the number and funding of the labour inspectors who were responsible for enforcing labour legislation; to have statistics on the number of complaints and prosecutions of labour violations; and to have more information about guaranteed equal access for women to job training, counselling and placement, especially in non-traditional fields, and the creation of an effective complaint mechanism to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace, especially in the private sector. The very limited maternity protection, as described in paragraphs 139 to 141 of the report, was disturbing and did not fulfil the provisions of either article 11 or article 4, paragraph 2, on the matter. Pay inequalities persisted despite the ratification of ILO conventions, and she wondered if there were plans to adopt gender-neutral schemes or to revise the wage structures in order to raise the status of women working in female-dominated fields.

8. **Ms. Shin**, addressing article 14, asked if there had been any preliminary assessment of the ambitious 2006 Belize Rural Development Programme funded by the European Union to determine whether it had met its targets and helped to lift rural women out of poverty. Thirty per cent of the funds under that programme had been set aside for women and youth, but it was unclear whose job it was to oversee the fulfilment of that quota. The mobile clinics referred to in paragraph 229 of the report were staffed by men, a disadvantage in rural areas. Also, in view of the fact that some schools chose not to address sex education, she would like to know how the Government was enforcing implementation of its national policy on health and family life education.

9. **Ms. Begum** said that women, and especially Mayan women, suffered disproportionately from poverty in Belize. She wondered if there was any gender-responsive human development programme for all ethnic groups that covered health, education, access to credit and employment, especially for rural women; and how well-funded the planned district-officer scheme would be. She would like further information on any time-bound strategies to reduce poverty in rural areas, on the percentage of girls in higher education, the percentage of female dropouts, and what the Government was doing to encourage young girls to enter non-traditional fields of study; on how the Government ensured access to reproductive health services for rural or disabled girls and women, and how it was helping women to obtain credit and join microcredit schemes.

10. **Ms. Simms** said that, given the precarious situation in rural areas with regard to water, housing and infrastructure generally, the Government's challenge was to improve rural conditions to keep the population from drifting to urban areas, which was not the solution. Women in Belize were still heavily involved in local agriculture and in agro-processing, but it was important for the Government to monitor their hiring and treatment, especially by large outside agencies and firms, which, though important to the economy of the whole region, often had a chauvinistic attitude towards women. Also, she wondered if the Women's Department was making a critical analysis of the impact of all development programmes on the status of rural women.

11. **Ms. Zetina** (Belize) said that the Government had used resources from The Global Fund to inform

women in general, and women in rural areas in particular, on HIV/AIDS and the use of male and female condoms; it was also seeking to establish health centres and develop infrastructure in rural areas.

12. **Ms. Fonseca** (Belize), referring to the Belize Rural Development Programme, said that service providers had been hired in each district to monitor and assess the projects, and a district committee comprising key stakeholders decided who received funding. Women Development Officers, together with the service providers, could decide who received mini-grants of up to US\$ 1,000. Implementing the programme had been a challenge because women's groups had often had difficulties defining their needs and drawing up proposals.

13. Since 2006, the Ministry of Labour had been strengthening its cooperation with the Women's Department and currently sent the Department weekly lists of job vacancies in the public and private sectors. As for the legislation on maternity leave, the law had in fact been changed, and the amendment was no longer in process as stated in the report.

14. **Ms. Zetina** (Belize) said that the Ministry of Labour was participating in gender integration and equality training workshops aimed at ensuring that gender issues were adequately addressed in labour legislation. With regard to non-traditional training, Women's Development Officers were working with the Institutes for Technical Vocational Education and Training to encourage girls to participate in their non-traditional education programmes.

15. Thanks to the Government's public awareness efforts, more members of the traditionally closed Mennonite community were coming forward and seeking support in regard to social issues such as child abuse and domestic violence. The Government had also organized education campaigns and programmes and published brochures on sexual harassment. Some private-sector companies had implemented their own policies on the subject. Women were still not making use of the mechanisms available to them, however. Only a few cases had been handled, and those had been settled out of court.

16. **Ms. Pimentel** asked for clarification on how the challenges posed by the relationship between the Church and State in Belize were being handled, and whether the issue of abortion was being examined, as recommended by the Committee. She requested

information on women's access to justice and legal assistance and specifically asked for data on the number of complaints women had filed, the number of complaints that had been solved by due process, and the number of men convicted and sentenced for violence against women and specifically for domestic violence.

17. **Ms. Patten** requested information on the informal labour market and on Government assistance to the sector. She asked whether the Labour Act specifically considered termination of employment due to pregnancy to be discriminatory, and if not, whether it would be amended. She also enquired about the time frame for the implementation of the 2005 Cabinet decision to amend the legislation on maternity protection for public officials.

18. **Ms. Zetina** (Belize) replied that the Labour Act had been amended in July 2005 to include provision for maternity protection. The dismissal of an unwed pregnant teacher had been a test case in which the Education Act, the Labour Act and the Convention had been cited to determine that such dismissal was an incident of discrimination.

19. **Ms. Begum** requested information on the services and policies available to rural women and on programmes to alleviate poverty among the Mayan community.

20. **Ms. Zetina** (Belize) replied that Belize did not have a specific poverty reduction strategy for the Mayan community, but that recent poverty mapping work had identified the areas most in need of support. No statistics on the informal labour market were currently available.

21. **Ms. Flores** (Belize) said that given the nature of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the State, which meant that any discussion of sex and sexuality was taboo, the Government had never discussed the issue of abortion. It was, however, trying to educate people about HIV/AIDS through the Belize Family Life Association. The latter's activities targeted tertiary-level students; in her view, sexual and reproductive health education should start much earlier in primary and secondary school. The Government was also working with the Roman Catholic Church schools.

22. **Ms. Fonseca** (Belize), referring to questions put by Ms. Pimentel, said that access to justice for women was the goal pursued by the National Gender-based

Violence Committee, which included members of the police department, various Ministries, NGOs and magistrates. Legal aid offices had been set up in the capital and in each district. Sex-disaggregated data was still somewhat sparse, but the national gender-based violence registration forms were proving to be a key tool for obtaining data on victims of violence. Those forms had to be filled out by the police and other agencies and sent to the Ministry of Health, which was responsible for compiling the data and distributing it monthly to all Government bodies. The Women's Department kept statistics on the number of women it assisted, as did other agencies, and part of the national plan of action to address gender-based violence was to integrate the data generated by all Government bodies.

Articles 15 and 16

23. **Ms. Maiolo** asked whether family and domestic violence might be one reason that so few women felt free to enter politics.

24. **Ms. Flores** (Belize) said that perhaps there was some correlation between women's involvement in political life and family violence, but that no studies had been done on the subject.

25. **Ms. Simms**, referring to paragraph 240 of the report, asked how many cases of marital rape had been brought to court and how they had been resolved. She noted with concern that, although Belize had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO Convention, both of which established the age of majority to be 18, the marriage age in Belize had been set at 14 to accommodate Mayan tradition. That was unacceptable; traditional practices that violated the rights of women must be criminalized by all Governments. She also asked whether the legislation that permitted a man to marry a girl he had raped, if her parents agreed, was still in force.

26. **The Chairperson**, speaking as a member of the Committee, asked whether it was true that a number of people in Belize had not been registered. Failure to register a child at birth could lead to problems later on in life regarding nationality and access to benefits.

27. **Ms. Zetina** (Belize) said that in one district, in particular, people had been finding it difficult to go in to register their children's birth. It was a problem of infrastructure that was being dealt with. As regards marital rape, it was categorized as a criminal offence, but she was not aware that any such cases had been

brought to court. The age of marriage with parental consent had been raised from 14 to 16 in July 2005.

28. **Ms. Fonseca** (Belize) said that it was difficult to find ways to interest girls and women in politics because of the diversity within society that called for approaches tailored to each community. The Ministry had established several parenting education programmes that had had an impact, but more work was needed, especially in rural areas. The primary objective of the gender awareness safe school programme was to empower girls from an early age to continue their education.

29. **Ms. Pimentel** asked how cases of incest were dealt with.

30. **Ms. Patten**, referring to article 16, said that the guidelines for distribution of marital property were commendable, but the absence of regulations and procedures resulting in a lack of enforcement was a matter of serious concern. She asked for more information on women's access to justice and legal aid, especially in cases of separation or divorce. She was surprised to see, from paragraph 242 of the report, that it was left to the discretion of the magistrate to establish the level of child support or alimony, and wondered whether any criteria relating to financial need or means were applied. Finally, she asked what action was taken when support orders were not complied with.

31. **Ms. Shin** asked if there were any plans to reinstate the Eligibility Committee, which had been set up to deal with refugees and asylum-seekers, and how many women applicants there were.

32. **Ms. Neubauer** enquired whether there was a single standard applied regarding the expulsion of pregnant girls from school.

33. **Ms. Simms** pointed out that Belize, as a secular State, had a responsibility to educate girls who were expelled from school because of pregnancy. She asked whether there were any alternative programmes for girls in such circumstances.

34. **Ms. Flores** (Belize) replied that, some 20 years earlier, a Roman Catholic nun had established a school that accepted pregnant girls. Further dialogue was needed on that subject.

35. **Ms. Zetina** (Belize), replying to Ms. Pimentel, said all reports of child abuse, including incest, were

investigated, and a special hotline was available for such reports. A child could be removed from the home and placed either in institutional or foster care, or alternatively the abuser could be removed.

36. Turning to the question put by Ms. Shin, she said that the Eligibility Committee had been established in the 1980s in response to the influx of persons fleeing violence in Central America during that period. The influx had now slowed to the point where the Committee was currently inactive, but the Government continued to work with non-governmental organizations and the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as necessary. Persons seeking asylum were interviewed by the Department of Immigration to determine their eligibility for asylum.

37. **Ms. Fonseca** (Belize), replying to Ms. Patten, said that there was a legal aid office available to women to offer advice and support as well as legal representation. The Ministry of Education had developed a programme where scholarship students in law schools served as interns in legal aid offices, which had proven to be very useful for both students and clients.

38. The National Gender-Based Violence Committee took the issue of enforcement of support orders very seriously. The police tracked down spouses who had failed to pay child support.

39. **Ms. Flores** (Belize) said that her delegation appreciated the dialogue with the Committee and supported its views on the reservations to the Optional Protocol. It took note of the suggestions regarding the need to strengthen monitoring and evaluation.

40. **The Chairperson** asked the delegation to ensure that the Committee's concluding comments were disseminated widely in Belize.

The meeting rose at 5 p.m.