

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
Thirty-first session
6 to 23 July 2004**

**Closing comments by
Ms. Feride Acar, Chairperson of the Committee**

Dear colleagues,

We have thus completed the work of the thirty-first session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

I will refer to the major areas of work completed by the Committee at this session.

Let me begin with one of the major responsibilities of this Committee, that is the consideration of progress in States parties in the implementation of the Convention. We have considered three initial reports, those of Angola, Latvia and Malta. All three of these reports were significantly delayed, with one outstanding since 1987, another one since 1993, and the third one since 1992. These delays notwithstanding, the Committee was gratified to hold very productive and informative dialogues with the reporting States. We hope that the Committee's recommendations will give further momentum to the work, and commitment, of all actors involved in the practical realization of the Convention: first and foremost the State and all its agents, but also parliamentarians, civil society and women's groups, and the international community.

The Committee was also pleased to consider the periodic reports of Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, and Spain – these three States presented their fifth periodic reports – and Equatorial Guinea, which presented its combined second and third, and fourth and fifth periodic reports. I would like to express my particular appreciation to Argentina, which presented a follow-up report, at the request of the Committee, to its fourth and fifth periodic reports which we had considered in 2002. At the time, the Committee was dissatisfied with the information provided about the impact of the economic crisis on the situation of women. I wish to congratulate Argentina once again for its excellent and timely cooperation with the Committee. As the Committee's request for this type of a report was without precedence, the State party's willingness to respond to this new approach was a much welcome expression of support to the international human rights treaty system. By adhering to the Committee's request and engaging in a constructive dialogue, the State party has not only faithfully adhered to its international obligations under the Convention but also, in a principled manner, strengthened the international monitoring mechanisms as such. For this, we congratulate and thank the Government of Argentina.

The Committee was once again pleased that the political leadership of several delegations was complemented by high-quality technical expertise. This allowed for an in-depth discussion of the situation of women in the fields of employment, health, and education, and for a careful review of the legislative framework for women's equality and non-discrimination in civil and criminal law, nationality, and personal and family laws. I would like to thank all States parties for their useful and productive participation in this reporting exercise.

We have requested all reporting States to widely disseminate the concluding comments that they will receive shortly, among public officials and society at large. We expect that these concluding comments will now be the basis for specific follow-up action. The Committee also has emphasized the important role of parliamentarians as well as of civil society and in particular of women's NGOs, in the protection and promotion of women's human rights. We have also emphasized that States adherence to all of the seven core international human rights instruments enhances women's enjoyment of their human rights, and have invited States to ratify those to which they are not yet party.

While the status of the implementation of the Convention is specific to each reporting State, several commonalities have once again emerged. I would like to highlight that at this session, in four of the States considered by the Committee (Angola, Argentina, Dominican Republic and Equatorial Guinea), particular socio-economic circumstances also had a particularly salient impact on the situation of women, and in fact were among the causes of the violations of women's human rights and discrimination against women. In four cases did the Committee emphasize that, as these countries tackled economic crises, or emerged from conflict to proceed on a path of development, gender equality must not be relegated to the backburner. In fact, the Committee asked these States parties to make the promotion of gender equality an explicit component of their national development plans and policies, in particular those aimed at poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The Committee called on these States to place emphasis on women's human rights in all development cooperation programmes with multilateral and bilateral donors so as to address the causes of discrimination against women, and to ensure the practical realization of women's rights. The Committee made it clear that realization of de facto equality of women is not only an obligation of these States that they have accepted voluntarily with ratification of the Convention, but equality of women and men is also a critical means if these States are to make progress in their sustainable development.

We have also found, as in the past, that social and cultural patterns of conduct, and the persistence of prejudices and customary and other practices, or stereotyped roles of women and men continue to be a challenge to the achievement of gender equality. The actual forms of such stereotypes vary from country to country. Their disastrous consequences for women are the same and are visible in women's limited access to decision-making positions, less access to and fewer opportunities in education and work, and greater poverty, to name but a few. States parties have an obligation to act forcefully and creatively to eliminate such discrimination de jure as well as de facto.

We have commenced work on a new general recommendation, which will be on article 2 of the Convention. I would like to thank all those who contributed to our half-day of general discussion on the scope, content and approach of this recommendation.

The Committee focused its attention, once again, on the situation of women in Iraq. We have called on the Interim Government to do its utmost to ensure the equal participation of women in the reconstruction process. As elections are being prepared, the Committee placed particular emphasis on the need fully to adhere to article 7 of the Convention so that women can fully exercise their right to vote and to stand for election, on a basis of equality with men. Furthermore, the Committee also emphasized that the entire legal framework of the country, including its personal and family laws, must be in conformity with the Convention.

At this session, we have also adopted significant changes to our working methods. The 'Utrecht Agreements' as I am sure they will be called in the annals of the Committee cover several areas, and I will single out the following: we agreed to request the General Assembly to authorize additional meeting time for the Committee so as to enable it to implement all its responsibilities in an effective and timely manner. This request includes an additional week for the July session of 2005, and for the two sessions of 2006. As of 2007, we are requesting the Assembly to authorize three annual sessions. I will not reiterate the many reasons for this request, but suffice it to say that the large number of reports that at present await consideration would keep the Committee occupied until the summer of 2007 – not counting any of the reports that we will be receiving between now and then. We have also agreed to consider initial reports in the same format as periodic reports, that is in two meetings, in a direct dialogue, and supported by a list of issues and questions that will be prepared in advance. We have also strengthened the role of the country rapporteur, and further streamlined our methodology for preparing and adopting concluding comments. These and other agreements were completed in three days of intensive discussions in Utrecht, hosted by the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights and its Director and Committee member, Mr. Flinterman, and with the financial support of the Government of the Netherlands. May I reiterate the Committee's appreciation to Mr. Flinterman and through him, the Netherlands Government, for making this meeting possible.

Let me now turn to the results achieved in the second major area of responsibility of the Committee, those under the Optional Protocol to the Convention. The Committee, upon recommendation of its Working Group on Communications under the Optional Protocol, has taken action on its first communication. I would like to thank the Working Group, and especially its Chairperson, Ms. Schöpp-Schilling, for the dedicated efforts they have invested in shaping the modalities for handling communications and for setting the standard for our future work under this procedure.

I am also in the position to announce that the Committee has completed, at this session, its first inquiry under article 8 of the Optional Protocol. A summary of the activities will be included in our report. Again, my particular thanks go to those experts

who have carried the greatest burden to bring this inquiry to a conclusion, for their dedication, professionalism and commitment to the human rights of women.

Dear colleagues,

On a personal note, as we end this session and as all of us may not be here in the Committee in January, let me express my gratitude to all my fellow CEDAW members for having entrusted me with the responsibility and honour to chair this Committee in the past two years. I have cherished the opportunity and will always be very proud to have had this honour. As we come to the end of this session, admittedly I, like all of you, feel the fatigue and exhaustion of the very full agenda we had in the past three weeks and the very heavy workload we carried in these halls and beyond. Yet, let me also tell you that I have had the sweet sensation of accomplishment which one gets when one can see the fruits of one's labour. I believe all of us have that feeling now that we have successfully completed not only a session but a very important and historic session. The thirty-first session of CEDAW was marked with some very salient 'firsts' in this Committee's history. We have completed the consideration of the first communication under the Optional Protocol; we have finished the first inquiry under the Optional Protocol; we have taken the first step to draft a brand new general recommendation to article 2; and we have adopted new working methods to be implemented as of January 2005. And while doing all this, we still managed to survive our differences and maybe even had a few laughs along the way. I think we should congratulate ourselves.

I am grateful to all of you - members - for having given me the opportunity to chair this important Committee at this juncture in its history. I have learned a whole lot from this experience and enjoyed it thoroughly. I just hope that I have also lived up to your expectations and been worthy of your confidence and trust.

Dear colleagues, as we say our goodbyes this time, we are also aware that, in January 2005, there will be a new Committee with some new, and perhaps some old members. As I wish all those current members who are up for re-election good luck and success in the election of 5 August, let me say that I wish so not because you are all my friends, but because I believe your experience, your expertise and your commitment will be much needed for the smooth and effective functioning of this Committee in the near future.

Let me also take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to the members of the Bureau for their cooperation, constructive views and readiness to tackle difficult issues and help forge consensus in the Committee.

Two of our highly esteemed and most experienced members Ms. Aída Gonzales Martinez, a former Chairperson of the Committee, and Ms. Yolanda Ferrer Gomez, a current Vice-Chairperson, are unfortunately leaving the Committee at the end of the year on their own accord. This Committee will not only miss them but will also often remember them because both have left deep marks in the annals of this body.

Ms. Aída Gonzalez Martinez, is a founding member of the Committee who after an absence of several years in the 1990s, returned and served the Committee again with distinction. She was often our institutional memory. She knew and reminded us of well-established practices, and her involvement in the women's movement in the United Nations going back to the Mexico Conference has been a source of inspiration to many of us. As a former Chairperson of this Committee she was knowledgeable, disciplined but also very conciliatory, supportive, warm and friendly. I learned a lot from her and have always cherished her presence.

Ms. Ferrer Gomez, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee and I came here at the same time from far away parts of the world, and with very different experiences and languages. Over the years, as many others did, I came to admire Ms. Ferrer's incisiveness and steadfastness, as well as enjoy her warm personality very much. She has rightfully acquired an impeccable reputation in the Committee as a dedicated and highly competent expert. I know this Committee will always be grateful to her for her professionalism and thoroughness, particularly as she carried out ground-breaking pieces of work for the Committee.

Distinguished audience,

It is always a pleasure to thank Ms. Hannan for the support the Division under her leadership and particularly the Women's Rights Section under Ms. Christine Brautigam, have provided for the Committee during this session. But let me add a special note to that this time around. The exceptional commitment and competence of Ms. Christine Brautigam and her able staff, particularly Ms. Eleanor Solo and Ms. Emanuela Calabrini, have been central in making it possible for the Committee to achieve all the firsts of the thirty-first session. An incredible amount of behind-the-counter labour of this distinguished staff has gone into the preparation and carrying out of the very heavy load of the thirty-first session. I know they are worked to the bone but I want them to know that we are cognizant of their contribution and so very proud to be working with them. I also extend our thanks to the Committee's Secretary, Ms. Philomena Kintu, and the others colleagues in the Section.

My sincere appreciation also goes to the interpreters and the conference servicing staff for their hard work during these three weeks.

Thank you all very much.