

BELARUS

CEDAW A/39/45 (1984)

123. The Committee considered the initial report of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (CEDAW/C/5/Add.5) at its 15th and 21st meetings, held on 4 and 10 August 1983 (CEDAW/C/SR.15 and 21).

124. The report was introduced by the representative of the State party who said, in particular, that the ratification of the Convention by her country had been a normal event and one which reflected the fact that women enjoyed broad rights in all areas of political, economic, social and cultural life, and that concern for improving the status of women was a part of the State's policy. The principle of equality of women was proclaimed and guaranteed, first and foremost, in the Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Republic and was consistently implemented throughout the entire system of current legislation, which, in many respects, went further than the provisions of the Convention.

125. In that connection, the representative dwelled in particular on one of the principal achievements of socialism - the guaranteed right to work, which was in fact a necessary condition for the equality of women in society and the family. Women accounted for 53 per cent of the total number of industrial and office workers in the national economy. Among specialists with higher education, women represented 53.9 per cent and, among those with secondary special education, 64.5 per cent. In the light of the physiological and psychological characteristics of the female organism, Soviet legislation, in accordance with article 160 of the Labour Code, prohibited the employment of women in strenuous jobs, work underground and work involving conditions harmful to them. Maximum norms for the carrying and movement of heavy objects have been established for women in production. The dismissal from work of pregnant women, nursing mothers and women with children of up to one year of age was prohibited. Under the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR, the Minsk City Soviet and the regional soviets of the people's deputies, permanent commissions have been set up to deal with labour questions, social welfare of women and maternal and child welfare.

126. As of 1 January 1983, women represented 53 per cent of the total population of the Republic. The predominance in the number of women over men was one of the remaining tangible consequences of the losses inflicted during the Second World War, in the course of which one out of every four of its inhabitants had perished. The women of the Byelorussian SSR were deeply concerned over the seriously increased threat of a new war and were intensifying their commitment to the struggle for the strengthening of international peace and security. They had taken part in the Stockholm-Moscow-Minsk Peace March in July 1982 and in the preparation and implementation of other mass events for the preservation of an enduring peace on our planet and against the threat of nuclear war. Those initiatives by Byelorussian women were fully consonant with the corresponding provisions of the Convention.

127. The Committee expressed gratitude to the representatives of the State party for her report.

128. A number of Committee members noted the considerable achievements of the Byelorussian SSR in ensuring broad rights for women in all areas of political, economic, social and cultural life.

129. A few members of the Committee remarked that there seemed to exist a relation between that report and that of the USSR. The latter contained statistics which covered those in the former. Although the two reports did not follow the same methodology or structure, they did seem to complement each other, and the experts requested a clarification.

130. Most of the members of the Committee agreed that the report was brief and succinct. They stressed, however, that it should have contained more statistics, that appropriate legislation should have been included, particularly as regards article 16, and that more basic general information regarding the country, its Government and court systems should have been provided to assist the Committee in its consideration. They were interested in actual, factual and comparative data.

131. Some experts were of the opinion that reference to the Convention was not perceptible enough in the report. They asked whether sanctions and remedies were provided by law in case of a violation of constitutional or legislative provisions embodying the principles of equality and discrimination. The experts requested information on any cases brought before the courts.

132. As to women's participation in promoting peace and security, one member asked what had been the role of the Byelorussian SSR women in the Stockholm-Moscow-Minsk Peace March, and another member asked whether women were involved in the industrial production of weapons, in the scientific research of nuclear and similar military applications, and what was the position of women in the armed forces.

133. Regarding participation of women in the political life of the country, experts noted with satisfaction that women had the same political rights as men. However, more information was requested on the number of women in high-level political and administrative bodies; for example, how many were placed in high judicial positions, how many of the 5 million women in the country were members of the Communist Party, how many had the power of decision-making, and what role women played in the State Government. In that connection, it was pointed out that it would be helpful to hear what legislation women representatives had introduced and promoted.

134. Some experts noted the high proportion of women in the national economy and requested additional information in order to compare the situation with regard to men. They felt also that data were needed about those areas where women were predominant.

135. A question was asked as to how the principle of equal pay for equal work was applied; also, regarding labour patterns, since women seemed to be in the majority in certain sectors, comparative figures would be required by sex in all employment indicators. There seemed to be a tendency, noted in other countries as well, to place women in what were called typical female jobs and there seemed to be no information on the Government's policy to correct that pattern or to encourage change. Referring to the provision of paid leave for training purposes, experts asked whether that possibility was also extended to men. Regarding additional maternity leave provided for working mothers, one expert said that in her country certain categories of women did not avail themselves of the possibility in order not to delay their professional careers for too long and asked whether there

were studies on that question in the Byelorussian SSR and what percentage took advantage of such leave. Concerning protective labour legislation, the experts requested details on the reported prohibition of work involving hard or harmful conditions, on the limits set and the areas involved.

136. A clarification was requested on the meaning of the term “spiritual production”, and if there were other occupations besides farmers and workers. There was also no information in the report regarding appeals or recourse procedures for women who felt discriminated against and on the sanctions imposed in such cases. One expert asked what was the relevance of the reduction of the working week to women specifically.

137. The experts were impressed by the realizations of the Byelorussian SSR in the field of education which seemed to be a primary concern of the country. However, more data were required on the position of girls and women in the institutions of learning as students as well as educators. Also, information was requested on access of women to vocational training.

138. The report seemed to indicate that the Government supported a natalist policy by providing awards and benefits to families with large numbers of children. That could be construed as discriminatory to women or families with few or no children at all. It was also queried whether official support for population increase was to compensate for the great losses incurred during the Second World War, in which case it should be assumed that there was no need for it any more. Several members of the Committee noted that the child-care leave was granted only to women, which still reflected the belief and practice that mothers were still primarily involved with the responsibility of caring for children. Information was requested as to whether child-care leave extended to fathers as well.

139. Some experts remarked that no information was given regarding family relations, provisions governing equality between the sexes at home and the responsibilities of fathers in carrying out household work. Furthermore, no mention was made of legal aspects, such as the right of a woman to transmit her family name to her children. Also, it was asked if women could initiate paternity suits. They noted that no information was available regarding rape, prostitution and rehabilitation programmes.

140. In her reply, the representative of the Byelorussian SSR described in detail the prevailing system in her country. The Byelorussian SSR was one of the 15 republics of the Soviet Union; it had its own political and socio-economic structures. However, representatives of the Byelorussian SSR did participate in the higher bodies of the USSR in order to take part in decision-making affecting the country. Women were reported to participate quite actively in political and judicial bodies. In the Supreme Soviet, 37.1 per cent of the deputies were women and in the local political bodies, 49 per cent. Furthermore, women comprised 25 per cent of the judiciary.

141. Regarding the involvement of women in matters relating to peace and in the armed forces, women were involved in peace-related activities such as participation in the Stockholm-Moscow-Minsk Peace March and worked in support of the constructive position of the Government in that area. Women were not subject to compulsory military service, although women with a medical qualification were registered and, whenever necessary, might be employed as medical personnel in the armed forces.

142. Equal pay for equal work was enforced regardless of sex, age, race or nationality and the employment rate for women was high in general. Women were found in all areas of occupation, except for those considered as harmful for future motherhood, such as those which involved carrying heavy loads or working underground in mines or in certain chemical factories. Women occupied high-level posts in various fields, but had a preference for working in the electrical unions, where 46.2 per cent of the leading posts were occupied by women. Retraining was an important component of work-related activities and was considered especially useful for mothers returning to work after periods of maternity leave.

143. The importance of the role of women in non-production areas such as teaching, health, commerce, food, etc., reflected deliberate choice rather than restrictions imposed on women. With regard to the question as to which sectors of industry were dominated by men and women respectively, she specified that in her country industry comprised more than 100 different sectors in which both men and women worked. It was, nevertheless, true that women preferred to work in light industry, the fashion industry, precision engineering, etc. They represented more than half the labour force in mechanical engineering. There were more men in jobs requiring greater physical stamina.

144. Concerning the question of assistance to mothers, the representative of the Byelorussian SSR informed the Committee that additional training and acquisition of additional professions directly at the place of work which is largely practised in the Republic is particularly useful for mothers returning to work after being on a maternity leave and women who, for some other reasons, had to interrupt their professional activities. Motherhood is considered in the Republic to be one of the most important social functions and, by providing different benefits to mothers of large families, the Government pursues an objective of ensuring equal life conditions and improving them for all children from the very first year of their life. The intention, at the same time, is to promote an increase in the birth rate since the rate of natural growth of population in the Republic is less than 1 per cent. Apart from maternity leave, women are entitled to a partially paid one year leave financed from state social funds. Single mothers have the right to maternity grants, as well as the total amount of other state allowances. The question of providing a partially paid paternal leave in each separate case is considered individually. The Presidium of the Byelorussian Trade Union Council is a competent body to resolve the matter positively, allowing for some special circumstances (mother's death at the delivery of child, etc.).

145. Regarding the question as to the meaning of the term "spiritual production", the representative of the State party explained that the term referred to the accumulation of the enormous spiritual resources of the Republic through improvements in education and the raising of the consciousness of the entire population, so that, by coupling the knowledge acquired with active work a new world of socialist relationships might be created.

146. Replying to questions on remedies available to victims of discrimination, she said that the country's legislation protected all citizens against all forms of discrimination and especially discrimination on the basis of sex. Every citizen had the right to initiate proceedings before courts, administrative organs, trade union organizations and other public organizations if their rights were violated.

147. According to available statistics, women accounted for 55 per cent of the student population, 45 per cent of the students in technical and industrial institutions, 36 per cent of the students in agricultural schools, 78 per cent of the students in institutions for economic studies, 71 per cent of the students in teacher-training institutions and 59 per cent of the students in medicine and the humanities. There were also vocational guidance services which directed young women to one of the 223 industrial trade schools at which more than 300 subjects were taught. Women comprised 30 per cent of the students in such institutions.

148. In responding to questions on family and marriage relations, the representative stated that the family was under the protection of the State, with spouses having equal rights to ownership of property and rights and duties as regards children. Either spouse could retain his or her original name at marriage and children could take the name of either parent depending on the agreement of the parents. Adoption was available to all with the exception of those who, for some reasons, were deprived of parental rights. Rape was a criminal offence; cases were considered in closed session of the court and decisions were made public.

149. The representative of the Byelorussian SSR also pointed out that, despite the fact that about 100,000 flats are being built in the Republic annually, the housing problem is not yet fully solved. That was why the Government had adopted a decree on preferential rights of young families to receive housing on a priority basis. The Government is now implementing plans aimed at expanding housing construction for newly married couples and promotion, at the enterprise level, of the practice of giving material grants to young families and partial repayment of their credits for individual and co-operative construction.

150. The representative of the State part assured the members of the Committee that their interesting and varied questions and comments would be brought to the attention of the competent agencies and organizations of the Byelorussian SSR in order that they might be considered in the next report.

151. Some experts recommended drawing the attention of States parties to the desirability of using the positive experiences referred to in the above-mentioned report in order to make further progress in eliminating discrimination against women, not only de jure, but also de facto.

CEDAW A/44/38 (1989)

375. The Committee considered the second periodic report of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (CEDAW/C/13/Add.5 and Amend.1) at its 147th meeting, on 2 March 1989 (CEDAW/C/SR.147).

376. The representative introduced the second periodic report by briefly describing the status of women and the related policy measures that had been taken. She said that, since 1983, the reform of the political system had strengthened democracy in the country and led to better management and to more importance being attached to women's matters. The Government recognized the need to increase the proportion of women in high-level positions and amendments were being made to the Constitution to enable public organizations, such as the women's councils, to encourage a wider representation of women in governmental posts at all levels. She said that in the previous three years, as a result of the current economic reforms, the average wage of industrial and office workers had risen by 18 per cent and of collective farm workers by 24 per cent. More housing had been provided and the consumption of consumer goods had risen, indicating a rise in social standards.

377. The representative responded to the questions posed by the Committee on specific articles of the Convention. She said that women could take cases of infringements of their labor rights, such as unlawful dismissal or reassignment, to the court. Cases of dismissal for refusal to cohabit, or resistance to sexual advances by superiors, had not been brought before the courts. Under the Constitution, every citizen had the right to make proposals to, or to criticize, State authorities who were then obliged to reply to the proposals or criticism and to undertake any measures that were necessary. Persecution for criticism was forbidden.

378. It was not considered necessary to introduce special measures, such as quotas or training programmes, to achieve the advancement of women since training, restraining and redeployment programmes and courses to enhance skills existed. At least half of the participants in them were women.

379. Sociological studies had been conducted on stereotyped roles of behavior and their recommendations had been used in developing the necessary legislation. The studies showed that women still spent two or three times as much time on housework as men. Efforts had been made to develop and improve social support services, to introduce more labor-saving appliances and to make all members of the family aware of the problems experienced by women in the household. The campaign had been conducted through the mass media in the form of newspaper columns, publications, and radio and television programmes.

380. The representative reported that prostitution did not exist as a social problem although individual cases of it occurred. She considered them to be a manifestation of the moral neglect of individual young people and appropriate measures were taken in each instance.

381. In response to a question posed on the political participation of women, the representative gave some statistics. She said that 64 per cent of the members of bureaucratic organizations, such as co-operative and social organizations, were women, who served as managers of enterprises, judges,

procurators, chairmen of collectives and state farms, and heads of schools and higher educational establishments. Women held the posts of Deputy Chairman and Secretary of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and of Deputy President of the Council of Ministers. They also held 180 (37.1 per cent) of the deputy positions in the Supreme Soviet. Thirty per cent of the Communist Party of the Republic were women, which was the same proportion of women as that elected to the leading organs of the Party. Women represented 36.3 per cent of the national judges and 57.2 per cent of the State representatives. Three of the 25 judges of the Supreme Court were women, who had power within their spheres of competence. There were no women in the Politburo.

382. Regarding the question about the term “house committees”, the representative explained that they were public associations elected by the occupants of residential houses or streets. They managed utilities and services, the planting, and care of trees and grass, the maintenance of children’s play areas, and holiday activities and facilities for invalids, the elderly and persons living on their own. The women’s councils collaborated with the house committees.

383. An increase in the number of women scientific workers had been observed and, currently, women represented 40 per cent of the total. The representative reported that 118 doctors of science, 80 academicians, members of the academy, or full professors and over 40 per cent of the students in technical colleges were women. Basic measures for education were expanded in 1988 to increase the training opportunities, facilities and scope of occupations for women. There were 670,000 children in pre-school establishments. The number of available places was still insufficient but measures had been included in the current five-year plan to increase them, particularly in the rural areas. All students at higher education and technical colleges were given special privileges with regard to securing places in pre-school establishments for their children.

384. The representative said that statistics were not available on the proportion of women in male-dominated areas of employment. The proportion of women attending the 253 vocational technical training schools was 60 per cent. The curricula consisted of training and skill enhancement programmes conducted at the work place or at the schools. Mothers with children below the age of eight were released from work so that they could upgrade their qualifications while continuing to receive full pay. According to the law, fathers could also take parental leave for the care of sick children but the provision for prolonged child-care leave applied only to the mother, which could create obstacles to the promotion of her career and skills.

385. Regarding the policy of equal pay for work of equal value in female-dominated sectors of the economy, the representative stated that the policy was being applied in all sectors, irrespective of the dominant sex. Sometimes women were not able to maintain or upgrade their qualifications, owing to career breaks, a fact that was reflected in their earnings. The problem was currently under discussion.

386. The indicators used to study the general level of health of the community were the rates for births and deaths and infant mortality. Forty per cent of the state budget for the provision of medical care was spent on obstetric and pediatric services. In 1988, the birth rate was 16.2 per thousand and the death rate 10.1 per thousand persons. In 1987 the corresponding figures were 16.1 per thousand and 9.9 per thousand persons, respectively. There had been little change in the infant mortality rate, which was reported as being 13.4 per thousand infants in 1987 and 13.2 per thousand infants in

1988. Those figures were considered high and reflected a shortcoming in the preventive medical-care services. The demographic policies of the State were to provide housing and assistance to young families so as to encourage an increase in the birth rate, which had been static for several years. The Government felt that the measures taken under the demographic policy did not contradict the right of spouses to decide how to plan the spacing of their children. In order to encourage larger families, benefits were given and special privileges accorded with regard to school places, travel opportunities and participation in pioneer camps. The State and employers made monthly cash payments to the parents of larger families. The areas of employment considered harmful to the health of women were classified as work underground and work involving high temperatures, excessive vibration, welding, toxic substances, heavy loads, heavy goods vehicles and machinery.

387. In response to another question, the representative stated that 35 per cent of the total population lived rural areas. Women represented a lower proportion of the rural working force than the urban one owing to the larger urban population and the seasonal nature of work in the rural areas. There was only a slight variation in the average level of remuneration between rural and urban areas.

388. The Family Code strived to create a family situation that was representative of the conjugal relationship between the partners, to protect the mother and her child and to allow children to grow up within the family and society. Hierarchical attitudes still prevailed with regard to household management, decisions and the sharing of the workload within the home. Studies of the distribution of family and household duties had been undertaken in colleges, the women's councils and by women themselves, and the recommendations had been forwarded to public organizations. All women's studies were financed by the State and trade unions. Voluntary social studies were undertaken by the women's councils.

389. In reply to further questions posed by the Committee, the representative said that women actively supported the peace movement in general and the nuclear disarmament movement in particular, at all levels. Women members of the trade union commissions at the regional, municipal and republican levels were concerned with improving the conditions of work for women and of services for working women with children. Measures to retain women after career breaks were carried out in special schools and courses.

CEDAW A/55/38 (2000)

334. The Committee considered the third periodic report of Belarus (CEDAW/C/BLR/3) at its 460th and 461st meetings, on 28 January 2000 (see CEDAW/C/SR.460 and 461).

Introduction by the State party

335. The representative of Belarus noted that since the submission of the second periodic report in 1992, significant changes had occurred for women in Belarus in the context of economic and social transition. She emphasized the positive impact in Belarus of the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women and her country's elaboration and implementation of a national action plan for the period 1996-2000. She also noted the importance of implementing the Convention and other international documents and addressing issues of equality between women and men and indicated that the Government intended to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention. Particular attention had been given to the areas of labour, decision-making, family and social protection, health, education, prevailing gender stereotypes and violence against women. Nonetheless, many obstacles related to the transition, and the insufficient understanding of gender issues by society had hampered efforts to achieve full equality between women and men and the implementation of the Convention.

336. Many legislative and policy changes had occurred and new alliances had been forged or strengthened between the Government, local authorities, the Parliament, women's groups, civil society and international organizations. Centres offering training and curricula in gender and women's studies had been created. The collection of gender-sensitive information and data had improved and numerous publications, awareness-raising campaigns and seminars had contributed to greater visibility and better understanding of gender equality issues by the public.

337. Violence against women had been recognized as a social problem. The 1997 Penal Code addressed violence against women in all its forms and included provisions relating to the protection of victims, witnesses and their families. In 1998, the first women's crisis centre had been established and awareness-raising campaigns, the provision of information and the publication of studies had been initiated. A forthcoming criminal code would strengthen regulations and penalties in cases of trafficking in persons, violations of equal rights of citizens and all forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and direct and indirect violence.

338. The representative stated that women's political participation at the highest decision-making levels remained low, with 4.5 per cent women in the national Parliament, only one woman cabinet minister and two women ambassadors, despite the attention given to the issue by policy makers. She noted that women's participation at the higher levels of administration, management, the judiciary and in local parliaments had increased, with the number of women reaching 37 per cent on average.

339. The representative noted that the difficulties of transition, including declining living standards and increasing daily workloads, as well as the aftermath of the disaster in Chernobyl, had had a negative impact on the health status of women and children. However, health care and medical institutions in all areas had been strengthened, with particular attention being given to prenatal, childbirth and childcare-related services and the provision of medication. Advice to mothers,

including awareness campaigns to promote breastfeeding, was also provided. A national plan focusing on reproductive health, including family planning, was being developed. Special legal regulations, policies and programmes had been instituted to provide assistance to the victims of the Chernobyl disaster, including medical advice to pregnant women and mothers.

340. The restructuring of the economy, changes in the labour market and budgetary cuts in the social sphere, combined with the prevailing unequal distribution of domestic tasks between women and men, had been having a negative impact on women, who were among the most vulnerable social groups. There were cases when women were the first to be fired and the last to be hired in the changing labour market. Living standards, in particular for single mothers, women in low-income families, women with disabilities and elderly women, had decreased. Training courses in non-traditional areas such as management, marketing and auditing had been introduced to redress these factors and women also received financial and in-kind assistance. Newly created jobs often included quotas for women and vulnerable groups and women occupied more than half of the 20,000 work places created in 1999. Special protective provisions were in place for pregnant women workers, women with children below 3 years of age and single mothers with children between the ages of 3 and 14. Cases of discrimination against female workers and of non-compliance with labour regulations by employers had been addressed through conciliatory means, or — in one third of the cases — in the courts.

341. The economic and social transition had been particularly difficult for rural women, whose living conditions, in general, were more difficult than those of women living in urban areas. Rural women's share of unremunerated work at home and on the farm was higher. Despite efforts to modernize agriculture and village infrastructures and to ensure proper educational, health and social services to women, progress remained insufficient.

342. Increased attention had been paid to women's roles as mothers and to the family and its needs, so as to increase its protection. Changes in legislation had brought assistance to families, in particular to single mothers with children. These included: additional financial resources for single mothers with a child below 18 months of age or a disabled child below 16 years; and assistance in kind to families with children with special needs, families with numerous children and children with HIV/AIDS. In view of the high rate of divorce affecting one family in two, the diminishing number of marriages and high number of orphans, legislative and policy measures had also addressed the needs of young families, education for family life, reconciliation of work and family life, social support services, human rights, including women's and children's rights, and the situation of orphans. Family-oriented policies, however, had been criticized by some feminist groups on the grounds that they overemphasized women's traditional roles in the family and weakened their position in the labour market, rather than supporting equal division of responsibilities between women and men in all spheres of life.

343. The representative informed the Committee that the creation of national machinery for the advancement of women had been recognized as a critical element for the implementation of gender and women-specific programmes and for meeting international commitments. The representative acknowledged that while Belarus still lacked sufficient financial resources, skills and public awareness to create fully functioning machinery, elements were currently in place in various sectors of the Government and in Parliament. They were responsible for data collection, development of

indicators, monitoring the implementation of governmental policies and the elaboration of measures of assistance for women and children.

344. Among the practical steps taken by the Government to improve the situation of women were special programmes for gender education, practical activities for the elimination of violence against women, as well as close cooperation with UNDP, UNICEF and non-governmental organizations in the field of gender issues.

Concluding comments of the Committee

Introduction

345. The Committee expresses its appreciation to the Government of Belarus for submitting its third periodic report, which follows the Committee's guidelines and provided data disaggregated by sex. It notes the Government's efforts to provide written replies to the Committee's questions, which provided additional information on the current situation of women in Belarus and the status of implementation of the Convention and of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

346. The Committee commends the Government of Belarus for having sent a delegation headed by the Deputy Minister of Justice and including officials from the national machinery for the advancement of women. The Committee welcomes the open and constructive dialogue established between the State party and the Committee, which enabled the Committee to obtain a better understanding of the present situation of women in Belarus.

Positive aspects

347. The Committee commends the Government for the adoption, in 1996, of a national plan of action to improve the situation of women for the period 1996-2000 and of a national programme entitled "Women of the Republic of Belarus".

348. The Committee welcomes the efforts made to establish a national machinery for the advancement of women and to achieve equality between women and men. It appreciates the work undertaken by the Administration of Family and Gender Issues Section of the Ministry of Social Welfare and by the Centre for Gender Information and Policy, which has been created within the framework of a project on women in the development process.

349. The Committee commends the Government for recognizing violence against women as a societal problem and for initiating legislation, establishing a crisis centre for victims of sexual and domestic violence and starting awareness-raising activities. It also commends the Government for recognizing trafficking in women as an emerging problem, requiring sustained attention.

350. The Committee notes that human rights education has been introduced into curricula, including teaching on the human rights of women. It also notes that gender education is being introduced at tertiary educational institutions.

351. The Committee commends the Government for recognizing the difficult economic situation

women face in Belarus, in particular with regard to women's employment and the incidence of poverty among women. It also commends the efforts undertaken by the Government to alleviate the situation.

352. The Committee notes the Government's attempts to deal with the health impact of the Chernobyl disaster.

353. The Committee welcomes the Government's intention to sign, at an early date, the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

Factors and difficulties affecting the implementation of the Convention

354. The Committee considers that the negative effects of the ongoing transition of the country to a market-based economy and the resulting levels of women's unemployment and poverty are major impediments to the full implementation of the Convention.

Principal areas of concern and recommendations

355. The Committee is concerned that the absence of an enabling environment in the country prevents women from fully participating in all aspects of public life in accordance with articles 3, 7 and 8 of the Convention. The Committee is in particular concerned at the small number of women holding political and decision-making positions.

356. The Committee recommends that the Government take all necessary steps to ensure an open and enabling environment where women have equal opportunity to express their opinions and to participate equally in all aspects of the political process and in civil society organizations. The Committee notes that such an environment is necessary for the advancement of women and the full implementation of the Convention.

357. The Committee expresses its concern that no unified State policy is in place to eliminate discrimination against women and achieve equality between women and men. In particular, the Committee notes with concern that the Government predominantly uses an approach of service delivery to women rather than a human rights approach when implementing the Convention. In addition, such an approach emphasizes the protection of and the delivery of services to women mainly as mothers and members of families, thus perpetuating stereotypical attitudes concerning the roles and responsibilities of women.

358. The Committee urges the Government to reassess its overall policy towards women in a manner that recognizes women as individuals entitled to the realization of their human rights in accordance with the Convention. It calls on the Government, in its new national action plan to improve the situation of women in Belarus 2001-2005, to take a human-rights-oriented approach. It also urges the Government to ensure that its gender equality efforts target men as well as women.

359. The Committee expresses its concern that the country's legislation, in particular with regard to women's role in the labour market, appears to be overly protective of women as mothers and thus creates further obstacles to women's participation in the labour market.

360. The Committee calls on the Government to undertake a comprehensive legislative review so as to ensure that the full meaning of article 1 of the Convention is reflected in the country's Constitution and legislation. The Committee further urges the Government to create adequate remedies for women to obtain easy redress from direct and indirect discrimination, especially in the area of employment. It also calls on the Government to improve women's access to such remedies, including access to courts, by facilitating legal aid to women and embarking on legal literacy campaigns.

361. The Committee is concerned by the continuing prevalence of sex-role stereotypes and by the reintroduction of such symbols as a Mothers' Day and a Mothers' Award, which it sees as encouraging women's traditional roles. It is also concerned whether the introduction of human rights and gender education aimed at countering such stereotyping is being effectively implemented.

362. The Committee recommends the training of teachers to strengthen capacity for human rights education in schools. It also recommends monitoring human rights education and gender studies with regard to the number of educational establishments offering such education, and also the impact of such education.

363. The Committee is concerned at the limited capacity of the national machinery to develop and support the implementation of a national gender equality policy to accelerate the implementation of the Convention.

364. The Committee urges the Government to strengthen the status, the human and financial resources as well as the capacity of the national machinery to gather and analyse data and information and to develop legislative and policy proposals in all areas covered by the Convention.

365. The Committee is concerned at the economic situation of women, which is characterized by poverty and unemployment, displacement of women from the labour market and even from sectors previously dominated by women. The Committee also notes with concern that re-employed women hold positions below their levels of education and skills. The Committee is also concerned that women are employed predominantly in low-paying jobs and that a wage gap between women and men persists. The Committee expresses its concern at the economic situation of particularly vulnerable groups of women, such as those with sole responsibility for families, older women and women with disabilities.

366. The Committee urges the Government to establish a legislative basis that ensures women equal access to the labour market and equal opportunities to work and to create protection against direct and indirect discrimination with regard to access and opportunities. It calls on the Government to implement unemployment policies targeted at women. In particular, it recommends measures to facilitate women's entry into growth sectors of the economy rather than into traditionally female-dominated employment. It calls on the Government to support women's entrepreneurship through the creation of a conducive legislative and regulatory environment and access to loans and credit.

367. The Committee is concerned that poverty is widespread among women.

368. The Committee calls on the Government to collect data and information on women living

in poverty, disaggregated by age and according to urban and rural areas, to develop targeted policies and support services, and make efforts to prevent more women from falling below the poverty line.

369. The Committee is concerned that, although some efforts have been made, there is no holistic approach to preventing and eliminating violence against women, and punishing perpetrators.

370. The Committee calls on the Government to assess the impact of measures already taken to address the incidence of violence against women. It recommends addressing the root causes of violence against women, especially domestic violence, so as to improve the effectiveness of legislation, policies and programmes aimed at combating such violence. It also recommends that the legislation on violence against women be reviewed and strengthened. It further recommends that the Government put in place immediate means of redress and increase psychological counselling for victims, including for those women who are serving prison sentences. The Committee urges the Government to implement training and sensitization programmes for the judiciary, law enforcement officials and members of the legal profession, as well as awareness-raising measures to create zero tolerance in society with regard to violence against women.

371. The Committee expresses its concern about the increasing trend in trafficking for purposes of prostitution of Belarusian women, often under false pretences.

372. The Committee encourages the Government to increase its efforts, including through international and cross-border cooperation with recipient and transit countries, to prevent trafficking in women, attack its root causes through poverty alleviation and assist its victims through efforts of counselling and reintegration.

373. The Committee expresses its concern with regard to women's health throughout the life cycle.

374. The Committee urges the Government to maintain adequate and affordable physical and mental health services for women throughout their life cycle, including for older women. In particular, the Committee urges the Government to increase affordable contraceptive choices for women and men so as to increase the use of contraception. It also urges the Government to review its occupational health and safety legislation and standards, with a view to reducing protective standards, which often have a discriminatory effect on women in general and pregnant women in particular. It further recommends the collection of data on illnesses affecting women more than men and the monitoring of HIV/AIDS prevalence among women. The Committee also recommends further efforts by the Government to address the effects on women and children of the Chernobyl disaster, availing itself of international humanitarian assistance.

375. The Committee encourages the Government to accept the amendment to article 20, paragraph 1, of the Convention concerning the time of meetings of the Committee.

376. The Committee encourages the Government to sign and ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

377. The Committee requests that the Government respond in its next periodic report to the

specific issues raised in these concluding comments. It also requests the Government to improve the collection and analysis of data and statistics disaggregated by sex and age in the areas of poverty and violence against women, and relating to articles 10, 11, 12 and 14 of the Convention, and to provide them in the next report. It further requests the Government, in its next report, to provide an assessment of the impact of measures taken to implement the Convention.

378. The Committee requests the wide dissemination in Belarus of the present concluding comments, in order to make the people of Belarus, particularly Government administrators and politicians, aware of the steps that have been taken to ensure de jure and de facto equality for women and the future steps required in that regard. It also requests the Government to continue to disseminate widely, in particular to women's and human rights organizations, the Convention and its Optional Protocol, the Committee's general recommendations and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.