



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

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
Twenty-third session

Summary record of the 476th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 20 June, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gonzalez

later: Ms. Kim Yung-chung (Vice-Chairperson)

later: Ms. Gonzalez (Chairperson)

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

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The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

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

Initial periodic report of Cameroon
(CEDAW/C/CMR/1)

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

2. **Ms. Ngo Som** (Cameroon), introducing the initial report of Cameroon (CEDAW/C/CMR/1), said that Cameroon had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1994, without reservation. All social partners, the administration, non-governmental organizations, feminist groups and other segments of civil society had been consulted during the preparation of the report.

3. Discrimination against women in Cameroon was, generally speaking, a social rather than a legal phenomenon. Most laws were not discriminatory and did not differentiate between men and women. Measures had been taken, even before ratification, to improve the status of women. For example, a woman no longer needed her husband's permission to travel abroad, employed wives had been given the right to receive housing subsidies, and girl students suspended during a pregnancy were allowed to return to school. Legal decisions by the courts had also eliminated some cases of discrimination, as in a 1963 Supreme Court decision, which recognized the wife's right to inherit. Many discriminatory provisions and practices nevertheless continued to exist, as described in the report.

4. Since the entry into force of the Convention, the legislative framework had not changed, but it was to be hoped that measures currently under consideration would improve that framework and help to eliminate discrimination against women. Within the Ministry of Justice, a national commission to revise the laws and regulations included a Commission on Civil Legislation on which the Ministry of Women's Affairs was represented. That Commission was currently working to develop a code of family law with a view to improving and reforming the relevant texts. Within the Ministry of Women's Affairs, draft texts were being prepared on the promotion of women's rights,

including a bill on violence against women which was being prepared on the basis of in-depth studies on violence against women, female genital mutilation and the implementation of relevant laws.

5. Structures for the advancement of women existed at all levels of society. At the government level, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which had been re-established in 1997, was the main body working for women's rights in Cameroon. In addition, Centres for the Advancement of Women and Appropriate Technology Centres provided cultural, socio-economic and technological resources. There were also networks of organizations, associations and non-governmental organizations working to promote women's rights, combat violence and discrimination against women and provide women with cultural, socio-economic, scientific and technological resources.

6. Many obstacles, however, remained to full implementation. With more than 200 ethnic groups in the country, it was at times difficult to harmonize legal texts. Moreover, traditional attitudes and customs often relegated women to a subsidiary role and there was a tendency to follow custom rather than the law. As a result of the country's colonial past, elements of both Anglo-Saxon and French legal practice coexisted, resulting in inconsistencies in the country's legislation. There was a general lack of knowledge of the Convention, and the absence of a clear legal definition of discrimination and of penalties for discrimination made existing provisions difficult to interpret at the local level. The high rate of illiteracy and the generally low levels of education among women, their lack of political power and their diffidence about asserting themselves made implementation difficult. The resources allocated to the promotion of women's rights were also woefully inadequate and the difficult economic climate, characterized by structural adjustment policies, had led to the dismantling of social security and protection services. In addition, the external debt burden and globalization had increased economic disparities, created uncertainty in the job market and exacerbated gender inequality.

7. The Government was committed to the elimination of violence and discrimination against women. A multisectoral Action Plan for the Integration of Women in Development had been adopted, based on the priorities set out in the Beijing Platform for Action, including the improvement of the legal status of women and the elimination of violence against women.

A national action plan on the elimination of female genital mutilation had been adopted to improve the health and living conditions of women through integrated programmes to put an end to that practice and an in-depth study was under way in order to determine appropriate strategies. Studies and consultations on the problem of violence against women had begun and the Government intended to draft a bill on that subject which would incorporate the provisions of regional and international instruments on the protection of women's rights.

8. In keeping with its commitment to promote and protect women's rights, Cameroon intended to create a women's rights monitoring unit; develop databases concerning discrimination and violence against women according to region, ethnic group and socio-professional milieu; increase awareness of the provisions of the Convention at all levels of society; continue legislative reform; and strengthen the efforts of professional associations and non-governmental organizations in the fight against discrimination against women.

General observations

9. **Ms. Ouedraogo** said that the ratification of the Convention by Cameroon without reservations was commendable, as were the efforts of the Government to submit its report in as timely a way as possible, despite the difficulties it faced. She welcomed the fact that all sectors of society had been involved in the preparation of the report, and that it contained gender disaggregated data. The establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs had provided a good foundation for the promotion of women.

10. It was regrettable, however, that gender stereotypes persisted and that strategies intended to change mentalities had thus far proven inadequate. A national information, education and communication strategy was needed to lift the social burdens which impeded women's development and thus the implementation of the Convention.

11. Finally, she was greatly encouraged by the high rate of school enrolment for girls and the high literacy rate among women, which demonstrated the Government's commitment to providing women with the tools for their empowerment.

12. **Ms. Abaka** said that the political decentralization which had occurred in Cameroon was good for women,

who were often more effective within their local communities. She stressed the need to ensure that the impact of the Convention cut across all the regions of the country, however, despite the ethnic differences between some regions. The Government must meet that challenge by using ethnic diversity to unify rather than divide.

13. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** said that the Government should be congratulated on its ratification of the Convention, even though all the structures for its implementation were not yet in place. The submission of the report and the dialogue with the Committee would provide the momentum for further improvement in the status of women. She suggested that the submission of the second and third periodic reports could be combined in order for Cameroon to get back on schedule, since the submission of the initial report had been somewhat delayed.

14. It was commendable that the Government had listed the obstacles to the implementation of the Convention in a very frank manner. In the next report, she looked forward to hearing about the impact of the programmes and changes in legislation designed to overcome those obstacles.

Article 1

15. **Ms. Manalo** said that she would like to hear more about the Government's strategy to obtain a legal definition of discrimination. A national commission had undertaken an ambitious project to review the Civil, Administrative, Commercial and Criminal Codes to identify legislation that discriminated against women, and she wondered if a time frame had been established for the achievement of positive results. She would also like to learn more about the involvement of the Consultative Committee for the Advancement of Women in promoting legislation favourable to women, and whether there had been any formal announcement by the Government that it intended to modify discriminatory customs and practices.

16. **Ms. Goonesekere** noted Cameroon's 1996 Constitution incorporated the Convention and gave it the force of law, thus providing a definition of discrimination by reference to the Convention. She would like details of any cases where the Convention had been invoked before the courts. She wondered whether women were aware that they could use the Convention and the Constitution to claim their rights;

whether legal aid was available to help in bringing such cases before the courts; and whether any alternative complaints procedure existed. She would also like to know the extent to which the rural population had access to the higher courts.

17. She shared the concerns expressed about the time frame for legal reform. Some laws, for example the Labour Code, were extremely enlightened, and she would like to hear more about the process which had been used to put those laws into place.

18. **Ms. Feng Cui** said that, with over 200 ethnic groups in Cameroon and as many forms of customary law, it would be very difficult to enforce such laws uniformly. A way must be found to incorporate the definition of discrimination contained in the Convention into national law, otherwise efforts to implement the Convention would be fruitless. She asked for more details on the relationship between the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Consultative Committee for the Advancement of Women and on the goals of the legislative reform.

19. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** asked if there had been any discussion on the question of drafting a law on equal opportunity, which could include a definition of discrimination. Such a definition might exist in the Constitution by reference to the Convention, but it was somewhat removed from everyday experience and a law would be closer to the people. She also asked whether Cameroon intended to sign and ratify the optional protocol to the Convention.

Article 3

20. **Ms. Ouedraogo** requested more detailed information on the allocation of resources since, without the necessary material, human and financial resources, the national mechanisms would not be able to achieve their goals. She would like to know how the budget of the Ministry of Women's Affairs compared to the budgets of other ministries and whether it was sufficient for programme execution. She would also like to see an outline, and receive information on the objectives, of the national plan of action for the advancement of women. Finally, more information was needed on coordination among the focal points for women and the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

21. **Ms. Abaka** asked whether the Ministry of Women's Affairs would be implementing programmes oriented exclusively towards women and

mainstreaming gender-specific policies through the focal points in various ministerial departments. She also wished to know what measures would be adopted to mitigate the negative effects of structural adjustment and globalization.

Article 5

22. **Ms. Ouedraogo** said that she welcomed the report's descriptive and analytical approach. She pointed out, however, that it did not contain enough information on domestic violence, which had regrettably become so prevalent in many countries that it was accepted as a way of life. She urged the Government of Cameroon to initiate discussions on the topic at the national level in order to provide much needed support to women, who silently bore the suffering and stigma of victims, and to their families.

23. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** acknowledged that sexual stereotyping existed in both developed and developing countries, but it was particularly difficult to end the practice when it was deeply rooted in cultural and customary traditions. Insofar as its persistence constituted a violation of women's human rights, she asked whether the Government had considered pursuing the eradication of stereotyping as a human rights issue. She also wished to know whether information on the Convention had been disseminated in public education efforts promoting the human rights of women.

24. Many European States had begun to include a gender component within the terms of economic cooperation with African countries and she urged Cameroon to include a gender perspective for future cooperation.

25. **Ms. Khan** said that behavioural patterns were difficult to change, but the task was even more challenging where negative attitudes were reinforced by discriminatory laws. She would therefore like to know what the prospects were for the adoption of immediate measures to change discriminatory laws and impose sanctions against persons and institutions which practised systematic discrimination against women.

26. She would also like to know more about the policy on nationality and the inability of women to pass on their citizenship to foreign husbands and children born out of wedlock. Clarification was also needed on the population policy. Moreover, she

wondered whether there had been any studies to determine the main obstacles to reducing the size of families; whether polygamy was legal or customary; and whether the Government intended to conduct a review of textbooks and other teaching materials to discourage sexual stereotyping.

27. The work of non-governmental organizations could support the Government's efforts to mobilize and inform women and she therefore strongly urged Cameroon to consider measures that would create an enabling environment for non-governmental organizations.

28. **Ms. Abaka** pointed out the complementarity between the Convention and the Beijing Platform for Action and said that the legal status of the Convention provided the ideal basis for the enforcement of the policy issues set out in the Platform for Action. She also encouraged Cameroon to exchange ideas with other countries of the region as a means of learning from their experiences how they tackled and overcame cultural obstacles.

29. **Ms. Ferrer** enthusiastically praised the delegation of Cameroon for the frankness and quality of the initial report.

Article 6

30. **Ms. Corti** said that she agreed with the report's frank description of prostitution as a social scourge and with its enumeration of the real causes of the phenomenon. She asked how the Ministry of Women's Affairs was tackling the problem. The preventive and punitive measures outlined in the report, which reflected a multidisciplinary approach, were a step in the right direction. However, while she welcomed the organization of awareness campaigns, she questioned whether conducting them "from time to time" was sufficient, considering that prostitution was very widespread in Cameroon and affected both old and young; awareness-raising should be a continuous process. Sex education was another means of preventing prostitution. She asked whether sex education was taught in schools and, if so, at which grade levels, and requested further information on the sex education programmes offered in Cameroon.

31. She asked whether the Ministry of Women's Affairs felt that the punitive measures provided for under the Criminal Code were sufficient and whether clients as well as prostitutes were penalized. The report

made no mention of measures to combat traffic in women; she wondered whether appropriate changes to the Criminal Code were being envisaged. Serious efforts would be needed to combat prostitution, in view of its complex causes, including poverty. Civil society, through non-governmental organizations, should become involved in that effort, along with government focal points and other institutions. Human rights education could also help to strengthen awareness of women's rights as human beings. Prostitution was a form of slavery that reflected the view that women were inferior members of society. In dealing with the problem, Cameroon should ascertain what measures had been taken in other countries and should learn from their experiences.

Article 7

32. **Ms. Myakayaka-Manzini** said that she was concerned about the decline in the number of women in Cameroon's legislature. She asked how the Ministry of Women's Affairs intended to promote changes in customs and traditions that hindered women's participation in public life, such as the law authorizing husbands to stop their wives from engaging in paid work. She would also like to know what percentage of women participated in elections, in view of the power of husbands to hinder such participation despite constitutional guarantees. She wondered whether the Government had considered taking any special measures, such as the establishment of quotas for women's participation in political parties, and whether there were any support systems to encourage women's political participation. In view of problems with the electoral system, under which women tended to lose at the preliminary level because so few of them were nominated as candidates, she asked whether any consideration had been given to the introduction of a more woman-friendly system, such as one that provided for proportional representation of women. Lastly, she asked how active women's organizations had been in promoting women's participation in decision-making and how their efforts were related to those of the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

33. **Ms. Regazzoli** said that there was clearly a need to change the electoral system in Cameroon, since it discouraged women from participating in politics. According to the report, women's participation in the legislature had peaked in 1992 and had subsequently fallen sharply, while women's participation at the

municipal level had risen steadily. She asked whether any legislation had been proposed to implement the actions enumerated in paragraph 190 of the Beijing Platform for Action, particularly the establishment of quotas for the participation of women in politics; if not, she asked whether the Ministry of Women's Affairs would consider proposing such legislation. Steps should also be taken to reduce illiteracy and to strengthen the education and training of women to prepare them for participation in public life.

Article 10

34. **Ms. Cartwright** said she trusted that the information compiled in the preparation of Cameroon's initial report would constitute a good starting point for its efforts to improve the status of women. She noted that illiteracy was a major obstacle to women's advancement, since it hindered their ability to participate in the community, obtain health care, earn a living and obtain information on family planning and nutrition. Those considerations were particularly critical in view of the high fertility rate. The falling rate of school enrolment among girls, especially at the secondary level, was therefore of great concern. She asked whether the development of continuing education programmes and efforts to increase the enrolment of girls had begun to change attitudes and improve enrolment rates, and whether those measures had had any impact in Islamic regions, where girls tended to marry very young and preference was given to the education of boys, or in other areas where girls were less likely to receive an education because of traditions and customs.

Article 11

35. **Ms. Kim Yung-chung** said she had noted that one out of five heads of household in Cameroon was a woman and that most households were below the poverty line. She asked whether women heads of household had opportunities to work. The problem of women's employment was linked to the problem of women's education. Most working women were in the informal sector, where their choice of occupation was restricted and social security was unavailable. As a first step towards redressing the situation, measures should be taken to prevent girls from dropping out of school and to encourage them to obtain technical and vocational education in non-traditional areas such as science, management, media and information science.

Such measures were critical to the country's future. She asked whether the basic problem of girls' education was being addressed in the context of efforts to enhance women's employment opportunities and health.

36. **Ms. Regazzoli** said that she, too, was concerned about the difficulties experienced by women in entering the formal labour market owing to their insufficient education. In view of the laws providing for equal pay for equal work, she asked whether the Ministry of Women's Affairs intended to propose legislation to eliminate the practice of requiring women to provide a certificate showing that they were unmarried as a precondition for employment. Women should be provided not only with literacy and training courses, but also with courses on collective bargaining to encourage them to join unions and negotiate to obtain better working conditions and on-the-job training.

Article 12

37. **Ms. Abaka** said that health was a precondition for the enjoyment of all other rights, as Cameroon's report rightly indicated. The Government should use the Committee's general recommendation 24 as a guide in addressing the many problems associated with the implementation of article 12, and should take a holistic approach to the protection of girls' and women's health throughout their life cycle. Cameroon had taken an important first step in that direction by identifying the factors that affected women's health, such as serial childbirths, food taboos, traditional practices and a heavy workload. Although Cameroon's financial resources were scarce owing, inter alia, to the effects of structural adjustment programmes and globalization, its people's health could not wait. Programmes targeting girls and women, especially those of reproductive age, should be put in place and efforts should be made to reduce the country's high rates of maternal and infant mortality. Awareness programmes should be launched to educate the entire population, both male and female, about the health and social consequences of the high fertility rate. Traditionally, large families were a cultural value in Africa; intensive efforts must be made to change that attitude, since it was hazardous to women's health and to society as a whole, as the resources and infrastructure of African countries were strained by population growth. Lastly, the achievements of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa

were being eroded by the effects of human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), yet Cameroon's report contained no information on the subject. She hoped that the delegation of Cameroon would provide information on the impact of HIV/AIDS in its replies to the questions put by Committee members.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.