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Committee on the Elimination of  
Discrimination against Women  
Second session

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Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of  
Discrimination against Women: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Initial report

90. The Committee considered the initial report of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (CEDAW/C/5/Add.12) at its 14th and 19th meetings, held on 3 and 8 August 1983 (CEDAW/C/SR.14 and 19).
91. The report was introduced by the representative of the State party who underlined that the legislation of the Soviet Union conformed in letter and spirit to the Convention and even went beyond its provisions. Article 35 of the Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics embodied the principle of equality of rights between men and women in all areas of cultural, social, political and economic life. The exercise of those rights was guaranteed through equal opportunities for women in education and training, and in social, political, economic and cultural activities as well as through the adoption of special measures to protect the health of women in the workplace and to enable them to combine motherhood with work.
92. She gave a detailed account of the historical factors which had put an end to the exploitation of man by man. In 1918, the first Soviet legislation to be enacted proclaimed the equality of political rights of all Soviet citizens. Subsequent legislative measures introduced radical changes in civil, labour and family matters with respect to equality between men and women. Women workers became fully entitled to participate in the social, economic and political life of the country. The Constitution in force not only reaffirmed the principle of equality between men and women, but guaranteed their equality by legislative, administrative, economic and other measures, and it placed emphasis also on the necessary material conditions for achieving that equality, namely, equality of social and economic conditions, equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities to receive education and training, free medical care and protection of the interests of mother and child.
93. The representative of the State party provided the experts with comprehensive statistics on employment and education of women and their representation in the country's parliament, the Supreme Soviet. She also reported on family relations in the Soviet Union which were developed under the influence of the existing moral and ethical standards of society and great importance was attached to the improvement of legislation designed to strengthen further the Soviet family. She pointed out that socialism had created economic and social conditions that made possible a mass participation of women in all spheres of the political, economic, social and cultural life of the country and in the family.
94. The Soviet political system is developing in the direction of increasingly broad participation of the citizens in the government of the State and in society.
95. In 1982, 1,146,000 women were elected to local Soviets (50.1 per cent of the total). Women deputies are widely represented in the various committees of the

Supreme Soviet, including the Foreign Affairs Committee, Youth and Health committees, etc. Women participate, on equal footing with men, in the discussion of bills, adoption of laws, approval of plans for socio-economic development, for national budget and in deciding major issues of the USSR's domestic and foreign policy. Women hold 65 per cent of all jobs in the management of public affairs, the economy and in the running of co-operative and community organizations.

96. At the present moment, there are over half a million women factory and state farm directors and managers of building sites and collective farms. Women occupy responsible positions in the Council of Ministers of the USSR. Nine women are Deputy Chairmen of Council of Ministers in Union Republics and autonomous republics. Twenty-seven women stand at the head of ministries in Union Republics and autonomous republics: among them there are ministers of industry, foreign affairs, training, health, etc. At the present time, the ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union contain over 4.7 million women. Soviet women are guaranteed full employment. Women in the USSR not only enjoy equal rights to work, but also equal pay for equal work.

97. There is a state-established system of guarantees and privileges allowing women to combine work and motherhood. The State protects women's labour and health by prohibiting the use of women on hazardous and hard jobs and by providing them with free medical service in special institutions of the State health system, as well as by developing the system of pre-school children's facilities. Material and moral support to motherhood and childhood in the USSR is secured through payment of maternity and post-natal benefits, provision of paid leave to care for sick children, benefits to large families and single mothers, and partially paid leave to mothers until the child reaches the age of one year, and so on. The rent for homes in the USSR remains unchanged since 1928 and now constitutes, including public utilities, 3 per cent of the income in workers' families.

98. Noting the importance of the political participation of women, several questions were raised regarding women's leadership positions and, specifically, whether there were women at the Politburo level, in the Central Committee, as ministers, as heads of universities, technical institutes and higher courts, as directors or general managers of State enterprises and as heads of trade unions. It was also asked whether special measures such as set percentages or quotas had been established. It was remarked that only 27 per cent of women belonged to the Communist Party, and it was questioned whether that in any way hampered the participation of women in the political, social and economic life of the country. Questions were asked regarding the qualifications to be met in order to become a member of the Party, as well as on the organization of elections and whether membership was necessary in order to participate in elections.

99. Other members inquired about the various established organizations and their co-ordination and interrelationship concerning the monitoring of the status of women, for example, among the Committee of Soviet Women, the Special Women Affairs Commission of the All Union Central Trade Unions Council, youth organizations and the recently created Permanent Commission of Deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the Problems of Life and Labour of Women and the Protection of Mother and Child.

100. Information was requested concerning the composition and functions of the latter, which was created in 1976, and it was asked whether its establishment was not required because inequalities existed in the status of men and women.

Concerning the power of that Commission to make recommendations on all questions related to women, more details were requested as well as clarification on the meaning of the expression "binding recommendations".

101. Several experts remarked that there seemed to be a general emphasis on the role of women as mothers rather than on the status of women themselves, since there was an impressive amount of legislation and social security benefits covering the rights of mothers and children. Interest was shown in the family-planning policy of the USSR. In the report, it was mentioned that abortion was legal and yet reference was made to measures against illegal abortions. It was also asked what was the actual role of fathers in the upbringing of children, since that was the joint responsibility of both parents under the law, and whether fathers received the same benefits as mothers regarding parental leave. A question was asked about the total amount of State grants to women and children, since a substantial increase had been noted from 1970 to 1980. Information was also requested regarding adoption and whether a single parent, either man or woman, could adopt a child. Noting that there existed a provision regarding the choice of the family name by the spouses, it was asked whether, upon divorce, a husband who had chosen to take his wife's maiden name could retain it. The experts were most interested in knowing more on the attitudes of husbands vis-à-vis their working wives and whether there was an equitable sharing of responsibilities in the home. The experts asked for further information on specific measures and privileges which allowed the working mother to combine motherhood and work successfully and whether such measures and privileges applied to the father.

102. In connection with divorce, the experts commended the law which forbade the husband to initiate procedures during the first year of a baby's life or while the mother was pregnant. It was asked what the practical results of that legislative provision had been. Another question asked was whether the system provided for an equal sharing of responsibilities at the dissolution of a marriage, particularly as regards parental rights and duties.

103. Some experts expressed interest in the working of the judicial system, which dealt specifically with the problem of financial provisions for children, asking whether the problem of compelling the divorced husband to contribute to the support of his child had been solved.

104. Some members of the Committee asked about the position of single mothers and if they could initiate paternity procedures.

105. Concerning the nationality of the married woman, information was sought regarding provisions governing the acquisition or loss of nationality.

106. There was scant information in the report, some experts noted, regarding provisions of the Penal Code, and it was asked what provisions or regulations were in force regarding rape and prostitution and also whether there existed special rehabilitation programmes for women and what was the incidence of prostitution.

107. Regarding education, some experts noted that 60 per cent of the State expenditure on education was devoted to schooling and asked what was the overall amount of the education budget. They also requested additional information on the participation of women in higher institutions and, particularly, on the number or proportion of them holding executive or managerial offices.

108. In the field of employment, the experts noted the extent and importance of the participation of women in various economic sectors and commended the Soviet Union for the realizations achieved. A question was asked about the spheres and extent of the "considerable scope for further advancement of women to leading positions" referred to in the report and whether the Government was taking immediate steps in that regard, for instance, by granting preference to women over men when they had the same qualifications.

109. Regarding the principle of equal pay for equal work, several experts inquired whether such a right was implemented in practice even when it was embodied in labour law. Taking into account the high number of women working in the fields of education, health care, social work and textiles, some experts wondered whether those figures did not reveal stereotype attitudes. In that respect, additional and comparative figures on the respective levels of wages of men and women were requested, particularly concerning the increases accorded to women working in the textile sector.

110. Concerning the special and favourable status granted to working women regarding their working conditions and their social security advantages, some experts asked whether such privileges could not impair equality.

111. Concerning protective labour legislation, it would be helpful to the Committee to receive more information, together with copies of the relevant laws, since it was said that certain professions were considered harmful to women.

112. Replying to the questions, the representative of the State party noted that the Soviet Union placed a high value on the political significance of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which dealt with the vital interests of women throughout the world, with their equality in all spheres of social activity and within the family.

113. As requested, she informed the members of the Committee that the Constitution of the Soviet Union fully reflected the requirements of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Many of the Convention's provisions were developed and given detailed interpretation by other legislative instruments passed in the Soviet Union, such as the Fundamentals of Labour, Public Health, and Public Education Legislation in the USSR and the Union Republics, as well as the Law on Elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, Fundamentals of Marriage and Family Legislation in the USSR and the Union Republics, the Law on Citizenship of the USSR and other legislation. She assured the Committee that Soviet legislation relating directly to women was comprehensive and at the same time specific.

114. Special guarantees of equality which women enjoyed in the Soviet Union were contained in article 35 of the Constitution. Women were guaranteed equal rights to education and vocational training, employment, remuneration for employment, and promotion in all social, political, economic and cultural activities. She pointed out that in the Soviet Union the principle of equal pay for equal work was vigilantly observed and that there was no discrimination as regards remuneration. Wage scales were fixed and the trade unions participated in the determination of wages and conditions of work. There was a listing of occupations harmful or dangerous to women's health where employment was forbidden. In that respect, the USSR State Committee on Labour and Social Affairs adopted appropriate regulations in collaboration with the USSR Health Ministry with regard to women's employment to

these occupations. There were 32 professions in agriculture and industry where those new standards had been introduced. Specific measures had been adopted to protect the jobs and health of women and to enable women to combine work with motherhood.

115. With reference to social security, she explained the pension provisions for married and widowed women. Regarding marriage, she explained that the minimum age for marriage for a woman was 18, but that under very exceptional circumstances the court could lower it to 16. When a husband failed to fulfil his parental obligations, the Criminal Code established different measures of penalties. The sharing of household tasks was left entirely to the couple to solve in a friendly manner. There was also flexibility as to whether the children took the surname of the father or of the mother if the marriage was dissolved. In no agreement was possible, the Family Court would decide. The same applied to the domicile of children. Both mother and father had the same rights and duties. Paid leave for caring for a sick child was given to men and women alike. However, only the mother was given paid maternity leave and partially paid leave to take care of a child for up to one year. The Marriage and Family Code stipulated that adult men or women could adopt children. If the parties concerned were married, the consent of both partners was required.

116. When a marriage was dissolved, the Marriage and Family Code stipulated that both the mother and the father retained equal rights and obligations in connection with the raising of children. If no agreement could be reached on custody, the court that had ruled on the dissolution of the marriage determined which parent had custody of the children. Concerning paternity, the same Code stipulated that, in the absence of any joint statement on the paternity of a child born out of wedlock, paternity was determined by the court.

117. There was no prostitution in the USSR and rape was severely punished. The latter carried a penalty of imprisonment of up to 10 years in cases of physical violence or threat of murder. Rape of minors or gang rape was punished with 8 to 15 years' imprisonment.

118. There was a clear and upward trend in the employment of women at the highest levels although no women are members of the Politburo at the present. There were, however, 487 women in the Soviet Presidium or 33 per cent of the total, and membership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party was by election at the Party Congress. An even larger percentage (47 per cent) of women members could be found in the Supreme Soviets of Union and autonomous republics and in the local Soviets of People's Deputies. Four thousand two hundred and four women have been elected to serve as judges in People's Courts, whereas among court assessors over one half were women. More than half a million women were factory and state farm directors, managers of building sites and collective farms and heads of government departments. There were two women on the Council of Ministers of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and nine women held ministerial positions. Many of the deputy-ministers and chairmen of State committees were women. There were 106,000 women as either directors or deputy directors of secondary schools. Although women were not conscripted for military service, they were employed by the Ministry of Defence in hospital services attached to the military and in other social positions. The representative of the State party explained that secretaries of party organizations were elected political leaders and that 27 per cent of them were women.

119. Clarification was provided regarding women's involvement in the shaping of foreign policy, as well as in peace and disarmament efforts. Soviet women were making a major effort to promote peace in the world. Labour collectives played an important role in policy formulation. Many activities such as the holding of rallies were financed through the Soviet Peace Fund which relied on voluntary contributions from citizens. Women were included in delegations to foreign countries and often were the heads of those delegations. As to a woman becoming Head of State, that eventuality depended not only on the educational background and personal ability of the person, but also on the specific outstanding qualities which would enable that person to carry out the varied obligations which the people expected of a leader.

120. Soviet women also had an organization of their own: the Committee of Soviet Women. The Committee actively co-operated with the Permanent Commission of Deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the Problems of Life and Labour of Women and the Protection of Mother and Child and with women's commissions in the trade unions. The commissions have the right to originate legislative measures provided for in the Constitution of the USSR and participate in work on draft legislation concerning further improvements in the status of women. Regarding the purpose and functions of the Permanent Commission, she explained that it had been decided that all matters relating to women should be dealt with by the Permanent Commission. The membership of the Permanent Commission was determined by the Supreme Soviet and comprised both women and men. It could review the activities at the local level, require the submission of reports and make recommendations on matters concerning women and children. Similar commissions had also been established in all the Union and autonomous republics as well as at the local level. Members of the Permanent Commission were deputies of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, at the Supreme Soviets of the Union and autonomous republics and of the local Soviets.

121. The Committee thanked the representative of the State party for her thorough reply. Some experts stated that the USSR fully implemented the provisions of the Convention and that the Soviet women played a very important role in the life of their people. It was recognized that there were some questions which, for lack of time, had been impossible to answer.

122. 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.