
Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women
Eighth session

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

Second periodic report

337. The Committee considered the second periodic report of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (CEDAW/C/13/Add.4 and Amend.1) at its 145th and 147th meetings, on 1 and 2 March 1989 (CEDAW/C/SR.145 and 147).

338. In introducing the second periodic report and responding to questions presented by members of the Committee, the representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics noted that her Government had taken an active role in elaborating the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

against Women, which contained the minimum standards to ensure the equality of rights for women. She said that the equality of rights was also the underlying principle of all legislation in her country. Since the consideration of the initial report, a revolutionary restructuring had taken place in the country and perestroika had introduced radical changes into the lives of women. Women were a socio-demographic group and their place and role in society had radically altered over the years of socialist construction. The major change was their higher level of general education. She mentioned the fact that 88 per cent of the female population received higher secondary education, 92 per cent was working outside the home or studying and 51 per cent of the national economic activities were undertaken by women. She also gave statistical data on the percentage of women in politics, trade unions and the judiciary. Although the country was experiencing difficult times, the situation of women continued to be a subject of major importance.

339. The representative explained that perestroika was putting an end to the marginalization of the common woman and man in the decision-making process. One of the most important amendments to the Constitution was the article that had put an end to punishment for criticism and introduced the right to discuss vital issues openly. Perestroika, she said, corresponded to the desire of all Soviet citizens. It involved an expansion of the rights of the different republics and high-level cultural discussions. She also said that the broad strata of Soviet society, including women, should be made aware of all the changes that were taking place and that women's councils were one of the most important elements in the democratic structure of society. They had been given the opportunity of taking a more active part in the management of public affairs.

340. The representative stated that more efforts were needed to promote women to leading posts. Currently, women constituted only 12 per cent of the top engineers, 2 per cent of the members of the Academy of Sciences, 14 per cent of the heads of workshops and 40 per cent of the scientific workers. Perestroika was helping to do away with old stereotypes and attitudes as regards household duties, and the new thinking was entering the consciousness of more and more people. The country was still in a transitional period, but positive advances were continuously being made. In highlighting the most important changes taking place in the socio-economic sphere, the representative said that by 2000, 16 million workers would be released from the agricultural and industrial sectors into other sectors, and half of them would be women. That process would require vocational training to equip women with the necessary higher qualifications. Under a new law, women with children under eight years of age were allowed to take training courses during working hours without loss of pay.

341. Matters of major concern were the supply of food and the importance of rural workers increasingly acquiring control over the soil, which would lead to an improvement in the status of women and their families, as were housing problems, an increase in the production of consumer goods, a restructuring of all branches of industry, an increase in real wages and the reduction of manual labour. As a result of the recent reform of the educational system, women would be able to embark upon any profession in future. Funds totalling 11 billion roubles had been allocated from the State budget, of which 3.5 billion roubles were for the annual expenditure needed to increase the salaries of teachers, 75 per cent of whom were women.

342. The representative said that improvements had been made in the health sector as regards obstetric, therapeutic and paediatric care. The rate of mortality had decreased, medical complexes had been set up throughout the country and, since 1988, prescriptions for medicines for children under three years of age had been free of charge. She also said that a programme on the prevention of AIDS had been introduced.

343. The representative said that there was a broad system of guarantees and benefits for women. Certain measures, such as increased family allowances, higher salaries for medical doctors and higher wages in light industry, benefited women equally. The increase in housing allowances and allowances for children were part of the general improvement of social welfare measures. The working woman had assumed a new image and her interests were among the main concerns of current national policy. She said that the success of perestroika depended on the participation of women and the improvement of their status.

344. The representative drew the attention of the Committee to an expert group meeting on social support measures for the advancement of women, which had been held in November 1988. Participants in the meeting had proposed that a protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women should be prepared. It should consist of government measures for the social support of women and their families. The representative felt that the proposal deserved the most serious attention and that it would be an important step towards the advancement of women and increasing the efficiency of the implementation of the Convention.

345. The members of the Committee acknowledged the prompt submission of the second periodic report, the detailed presentation and the statistical data provided. Some of the members noted that the representative had been one of the main participants in the drafting of the Convention and found the improved economic situation under perestroika encouraging. They welcomed the critical view of the remaining problems. The Committee recognized that the country was undergoing a major process of reform aimed at the improvement of all facets of life. They welcomed the proposal for a protocol to be added to the Convention and suggested that a draft should be circulated soon and brought to the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women.

346. Members of the Committee said that perestroika and glasnost would certainly make it possible for the final obstacles to equality to be overcome. One member noted especially that Soviet women's organizations had provided assistance to developing countries in the educational sector.

347. Some members of the Committee asked whether Soviet women were aware of the discrepancies that still existed as regards wage levels and whether the Government or women's organizations contemplated introducing any measures to encourage women to change their still disadvantaged status. Others asked whether Soviet women were aware of their new rights under perestroika.

348. Several members of the Committee asked what was being done to change conservative male attitudes towards housework. Some members said that women still seemed to be seen as mothers rather than consumers and asked whether anything was being done to improve the recreational and leisure aspects of the lives of women. Other members asked whether the subject of violence against women, which was a world-wide phenomenon, was discussed by women's organizations under the influence

of glasnost, whether the abuse of alcohol played a role in such violence and what was being done to protect abused women.

349. One member of the Committee asked whether prostitution was practised in the country and whether any legal provisions existed to prevent or suppress it.

350. Interest was expressed in the initiatives taken by women's councils. Some members of the Committee asked what was being done to promote the status of women in political life. They commented on the declining representation of women in politics and decision-making posts. One member referred to the few women in leading positions as tokens and inquired whether affirmative action was planned to alter the situation. Considering the role played by Soviet women in the struggle for peace, it was asked whether there were women officers in the Soviet army, and if not, why not.

351. Regarding the statement made by the representative that 16 million workers, half of them women, would change their jobs, it was asked whether those women would be retrained and whether their redeployment would bring about an improvement or deterioration in their situation, in view of the fact that the introduction of advanced technology had been detrimental to the status of women in other countries. Inquiries were made about the reasons for the extremely low percentage of female heads of academic institutions. A member asked whether the reasons were a lack of enthusiasm on the part of women, a lack of qualified women or whether it was difficult for women to enter academic fields.

352. One member of the Committee wanted to know what the minimum level of remuneration in the Soviet Union was and how it compared with an average family income. She also asked whether there were sufficient child-care facilities in the country. Another member inquired whether mechanisms existed to monitor the socio-economic rights of working mothers, such as child-care leave or shorter working hours, and to ensure that the new system was not detrimental to them rather than advantageous. While appreciation was expressed for the statistical data provided in the report (CEDAW/C/13/Add.4/Amend.1), it was said that the picture would have been clearer if, in addition, the total figures for women and men had been supplied.

353. Regarding birth control, it was asked whether it was true that many women resorted to abortions, and what were the conditions under which such abortions were performed and which methods were used. It was asked further whether the existing misconceptions about chemical contraceptives were being dispelled and whether such contraceptives were available.

354. Further information was sought about the involvement of women in agricultural communities.

355. Members of the Committee asked whether the number of divorces had increased since the presentation of the country's initial report, whether the number of unmarried mothers and of de facto unions was high in the Soviet Union, and what the opinion of Soviet society about them was. A member inquired how the Government was tackling the problem that many divorces were precipitated by the abuse of alcohol. One member inquired whether the father's statutory liability to pay maintenance applied to all his children and what the sanctions in the case of non-compliance were. A question was raised about the existence of inheritance and succession laws and whether they applied also to unmarried mothers.

356. In reply to questions presented by members of the Committee in writing or raised orally, the representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics stressed the interrelationship, to which she had previously referred, between the improvement of the status of women and the recent socio-economic changes and said that, under glasnost, women had become more active and were no longer prepared to accept shortcomings in their conditions. In earlier days, she said, it was normal for women to work on night shifts but, since perestroika, women no longer wished to perform night work. She said further that the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women ^{13/} coincided with the provisions contained in the Soviet Development Plan for Social and Economic Services.

357. The most important fundamental rights and freedoms of women were enshrined in article 48 of the Constitution. Women had the right to elect, and to be elected to, the national councils. In key organs, different standing commissions dealt with a variety of problems peculiar to the lives of women, worked out measures to protect women and took part in the drafting of new laws. She explained that the Committee of Soviet Women had been in existence for a long time, but its functions were changing and it was concentrating on women's domestic life. Perestroika had also improved the work of the women's councils. Women could also be seen among the 1,200 delegates at the All-Union Conference of Soviet Women in 1987 at which new women's councils had been created. In all, there were 237,000 women's councils, with a membership of 2.3 million women. The councils worked in close contact with the trade unions and the authorities. Their role in promoting women to key posts, however, was still poorly developed.

358. The representative said that the text of the Convention had been published, but not in large quantities. The work of the Committee, its discussions and recommendations were conveyed to Soviet women through the press.

359. As regards the role of women in the family and in child rearing, she said that women did not play a subordinate role. She said that the question of education for young women was taken very seriously; it was important, however, that in being promoted, women should not lose their femininity and motherliness. Great emphasis was placed on mutual respect between the sexes. Although the health authorities and women's councils were gaining in strength, it took a long time to change prevailing attitudes enshrined in culture and traditions, especially in the Central Asian Republics. The representative said that most women shared domestic responsibilities with their spouses and the idea was also incorporated in school curricula. The sharing of responsibilities could be increased by the wider availability of modern household appliances and the social protection of the family.

360. As most women were employed in the national economy, it was important to alleviate their household burdens by developing modern appliances in order to provide them with more leisure time. Specific targets had been set for various enterprises to produce better appliances.

361. Violence in the family was a punishable offence and alcohol abuse was considered an aggravating circumstance in such a case. Serious steps were being taken, however, to reduce alcoholism. Prostitution existed, but it was not a major problem; although it had caused some concern in relation to the danger of spreading AIDS. Administrative and legal measures were envisaged to tackle the problem.

362. Women were also included among the members of the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Although the actual number of women at the

decision-making level was in itself quite high, women constituted only 12-14 per cent of personnel at that level and the Government wanted to see that percentage increase. One of the reasons for the low percentage could be a lack of solidarity among women themselves. There were women in high positions in the Government and the reason for the decrease of women ministers from 27 to 22 lay in the overall reduction of ministerial posts. The Soviet Union had no quota system, but it followed a firm policy to promote women to managerial positions. In professions in the mass media, 30 per cent of the employees were women. The representative acknowledged the fact that the percentage of women members of the Academy of Sciences was low, but said that the Government had no influence in that sphere: the Academy members themselves elected new members.

363. Traditionally, women played a key role in the struggle for peace. As regards their position in the army, the representative explained that women occupied auxiliary positions. The Government's policy was to reduce all armaments and related expenditure in order to release resources for social development.

364. Eight women were working in the foreign service, in Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, France and the Federal Republic of Germany. There was one woman ambassador in Switzerland, as well as two women at a high level in the Secretariat of the United Nations. In 1987, 12 women candidates were presented to the United Nations to occupy Professional posts, and two of them were accepted and appointed. One of the reasons for the low percentage was that Soviet women did not like living abroad because of marital and family considerations.

365. Retraining activities were currently being undertaken in many enterprises and women and men were entitled to participate equally. There were no illiterate people in the country.

366. The representative stated that the functions of trade unions were far-reaching, covering all aspects of life. There were no statistics on the number of fathers who took parental leave to care for sick children and, in any event, it was for both parents to decide on the matter. Maternity leave for the first year after the birth of a child, however, was given only to mothers. Additional leave to care for a child was given to the father only if he was the sole provider of care in the family. The number of child-care facilities was not yet adequate, but there were plans to increase it. In the urban areas, the demand for places in crèches and kindergartens could be met by up to 70 per cent. It was in the interests of the family that women could, for a certain time, receive part of their wages as compensation and, therefore, could afford to stay at home and look after their children. As regards work that was considered harmful to women, she said that the Soviet Union adhered to the provisions contained in the conventions of the ILO and prohibited women to undertake such occupations.

367. The question of equal pay for equal work was currently being dealt with by a committee on labour issues and by the trade unions. Job classifications were being undertaken and the average wage was 220 roubles a month and the minimum wage was set at 70 roubles a month. The list of professions considered too arduous for women was consistent with the conventions and standards of ILO. As regards the changes in the work-force that would result from the introduction of new technologies, the representative said that new technologies were introduced by agreement between the work-force and the trade unions. Some women would have to change their places of work and would have to adapt to the new situation.

368. Concerning possible disadvantages for young women inherent in the new socio-economic improvements at the place of work, the representative said that women would have to undergo occupational retraining and had to be encouraged to take advantage of the possibilities offered to working mothers.

369. The high rates of infant mortality in Tadzhik SSR, Turkmen SSR and Uzbek SSR, which were mainly rural areas, were attributable to the fact that families were large in those regions. The rapid increase in the number of children had outstripped the State's ability to provide medical services. Solutions were being sought and some reductions in infant mortality had been achieved. Family planning was included in the health programme for up to the year 2000 and the number of contraceptive devices, as well as consultation offices for women, was being expanded. In reply to the question raised by one member of the Committee as to whether the Soviet Union still encouraged large families and presented awards to mothers of many children, the representative said that such a policy had been practised in the past and that mothers of large families received equivalent benefits and allowances. Recently, however, the family planning policy had been changing and a family with a maximum of three children was encouraged.

370. Rural women enjoyed full equality, but some differences in comparison with urban women existed in the social sphere. Currently, social and economic programmes had been directed at better meeting the needs of rural women.

371. Under the Code on Marriage and the Family, all citizens had equal rights in family relations. Those rights were safeguarded and thus women were in no way placed in an inferior position. Special attention was given to improving policy regarding the family and to strengthening the family. The representative said that both spouses had to provide each other with support in the case of the other's incapacity to work. The divorce rate was 30 per cent and had remained static during recent years. The representative acknowledged that there was a connection between the abuse of alcohol and the high divorce rate, but there was reason to hope that positive changes would be introduced. No statistics on the number of unregistered marriages were available. Laws provided for the equal rights of children born within and outside wedlock.

372. In answer to a specific request, the representative said that no final document had been circulated on the World Congress of Women, which had been held in June 1987 in Moscow.

373. The representative acknowledged the need for improving statistics and indicators and said that the statistical authorities of the Government were expanding their coverage.

374. Members of the Committee acknowledged the detailed and frank replies provided, as well as the fact that information on the work of the Committee had been disseminated to Soviet women. The Committee noted the recognition of the Government that there were still goals to be achieved.