
Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women
Second session
1 - 12 August 1983

Excerpted from: Supplement No. 45 (A/39/45)

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

Initial report

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

through 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 representative 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 the 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 areas in order to have a more balanced idea on wage patterns and occupational 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 related 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 industry, precision machine building and tailoring. They were active in trade 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 party 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.