
Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women
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Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination
of Discrimination against Women: Burkina Faso

Initial report

Burkina Faso

84. The Committee considered the initial report of Burkina Faso (CEDAW/C/5/Add.67) at its 176th and 180th meetings, on 23 and 25 January (see CEDAW/C/SR.176 and 180).

85. The representative of Burkina Faso, in introducing the report, emphasized the particular interest that the Government attached to the advancement of women. Social and sociocultural problems related to the status of women were dealt with by the Department for the Advancement of the Family in the Ministry of Health and Social Action to enable women to participate in the country's development.

86. She explained that there had been difficulties and confusion in the preparation of the report. Burkina Faso had ratified the Convention in 1984 and the initial report would have been due in 1985. In order to tackle the long and difficult task of coordinating action to promote the advancement of women, the Ministry of the Plan and Cooperation, in collaboration with the Secretariat of State for Social Action, had decided to engage in a national dialogue to develop a multisectoral strategy for the advancement of women. Those multiple efforts and technical problems had prevented an assessment of the situation from being made in the initial report. The representative pointed out that a second periodic report, sent in December, had taken better account of the guidelines concerning the form of the report.

87. She provided an overview of the situation of women in Burkina Faso and noted that the social status of women, who made up 51.8 per cent of the total population, was characterized by a vulnerability as regards health; a low level of education; and a heavy burden of household tasks. Women controlled the major part of the non-monetary economy, especially in subsistence agriculture, the education of children and household tasks. She added that 85.1 per cent of the active population worked in agriculture and cottage industries.
88. With regard to education, she stated that the ratio of female to male pupils had been roughly 1:3 between 1984 and 1985. Girls were better represented in secondary technical schools (54 per cent of the total student population) because of the secretarial and business branches. In higher education, women were very weakly represented. She added that in 1985/86, only 916 girls had obtained scholarships compared with 3,441 boys. She pointed out that those discrepancies were mainly on account of certain sociocultural pressures.
89. As regards employment, the representative mentioned that, in January 1986, only 20.7 per cent of the posts in the public sector had been occupied by women. Most of the female officials were to be found in the middle ranks as, for example, secretaries, teachers and nurses. In the private sector, in 1980, only 4.9 per cent of the employees had been women. A survey of the National Office for the Promotion of Employment had revealed a concentration of women in administrative and business jobs.
90. As not many statistics were disaggregated by gender, the Government was considering making statistics on women more transparent, which would improve the assessment of the role of women in the economy. That task would be carried out in the context of a regional project to be undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
91. She pointed out that the country's global goals went hand-in-hand with the basic articles of the Convention. The basic task was to raise the awareness of the population in order to bring about the attitudinal changes necessary for a liberation of the society from the burdens of tradition.
92. After her introduction, the representative drew the attention of members to the new government institutions that had been created to eliminate discrimination against women. Among those were the Department for the Promotion of the Family and the Department of Family Health in the Ministry of Health and Social Action, as well as the Ministry of Rural Cooperative Action and the Ministry of Primary Education and Mass Literacy. Furthermore, the Union of Women of Burkina Faso, a political organization, was devoted to raising women's consciousness.
93. The activities of those new entities included seminars, training workshops and pilot projects, as well as an operation entitled "Operation Pountoua", which provided political education to women throughout the country.
94. With regard to legislation, she noted that an order signed on 4 August 1984 governing agricultural and agrarian reform accorded women the same rights to farm land as men. A decree of 19 March 1986 entitled female civil servants to receive family allowances, and a law on the civil service of 26 October 1988 gave women equal access to jobs in the civil service.

95. She added that the restructuring of the judicial system was aimed at removing the vestiges of the old feudal system. One extremely important measure was the new legal code governing individuals and the family, which gave spouses equal rights and duties in a marriage. The code abolished the levirate, a custom by which a widow became the property of her deceased husband's family and was obliged to marry one of his relatives. The new code also provided for the equality of women in respect of the acquisition or modification of nationality and permitted dual nationality.

96. In the area of health, the representative emphasized the adoption of a new family planning policy in 1986, which was intended to raise public awareness of questions related to pregnancy, infant and maternal mortality and sexual relations. In the context of "Social Action", strategies had been elaborated to combat prostitution and to protect minors. A national committee, as well as regional and local ones, had been set up to ensure the implementation of the strategies. The implementation was a two-phase process: in the first years the work had focused on measures to raise consciousness; subsequently more rigorous and prohibitive measures had been applied.

97. Another national committee had been established to deal with the practice of excision. It was responsible for the dissemination of information and for the organization of research into the reasons for the practice in order to be able to formulate proposals for its eradication.

98. In the economic context, the representative stressed the need for women to become more visible in the economy in order that they might exert a stronger influence on the country's development. Through technical training and the promotion of appropriate technologies, various government institutions were trying to alleviate the burden of women's daily tasks.

99. The establishment of the Union of Women of Burkina Faso had been an important step towards the elimination of discrimination against women. The Union was trying to create a better image of women in society and had already achieved some breakthroughs in changing men's attitudes to women. One visible success, the representative noted, was the fact that more women were working in more jobs than ever before.

100. Various ministries and departments were working through public information measures to remove traditional obstacles to the advancement of women, such as: the tendency to educate boys rather than girls; the lack of access of women to training and financial services; the unfamiliarity of women with the law; and the heavy burden of their domestic tasks. One of the specific measures was the creation of a fund for the promotion of income-generating activities for women in order to improve their access to credit.

101. The Committee commended the representative for the frankness of the report and the enthusiasm with which it had been presented. It was, however, difficult for members to assess fully the extent of the progress made in implementing the Convention as the report lacked basic data and the recommended structure. Nevertheless, the report demonstrated political will and commendable efforts on the part of the Government of Burkina Faso. The experts welcomed the additional information provided by the representative.

The Committee also commended the early ratification by Burkina Faso of the Convention without reservation as a bold step. It was asked whether the Convention had been incorporated into the legislation and whether there were cases relating to it before the courts.

102. Members expressed their satisfaction that the new programmes to implement the Convention focused on women's role in the economy rather than on women's stereotyped role in the family. Furthermore, Burkina Faso had tried to prevent women from relapsing into a marginal role after the revolution. It was asked whether the approach taken to change the mentality of women could succeed without changing the attitudes of men. It was considered that the creation of a panoply of organizations and structures, as well as various acts of legislation, such as the new Code for Individuals and the Family, would help women to improve their status. More information was requested on the status of legislation, in particular, whether the Code for Individuals and the Family of 4 August 1990 had entered into force.

103. Information was requested on activities in the area of bilateral cooperation for the advancement of women. It was asked whether there was a mechanism to monitor whether some of the resources from UNDP were administered by women, and whether women benefited from them. Further information was sought on the Union of Women of Burkina Faso, its staff, budget and activities. More details were requested on the national unions mentioned in the report, as well as on the Provincial Revolutionary authorities, in particular their role and their relationship to the Government.

104. Acknowledging the difficulties in preparing a report without a sufficient statistical network, members suggested that that fact justified the need for a recommendation that States parties should be invited to seek assistance in the preparation of their reports.

105. With regard to article 2, clarification was requested concerning the political and executive structure for the implementation of the Convention; the responsibilities for appointments; and the relations of non-governmental organizations to that structure. It was also asked whether Burkina Faso had a constitution and, if so, whether it contained an article on equality. Information was requested on whether there were provisions prohibiting excision.

106. On article 3, a question on the National Popular Service was raised. Information was requested on the nature of that Service and on the role of women therein. Information was also requested on the number of women in the Union of Women of Burkina Faso as well as on the ways in which they participated in that organization. It was asked what the reason was for the decline in the number of female ministers, high commissioners and ambassadors since 1987.

107. As regards article 4, it was asked whether there were any possibilities in the legislation to promote priority actions and temporary measures for women to accelerate de facto equality.

108. Concerning article 5, further information was requested on the extent of attitudes and cultural practices, such as polygamy and excision, based on inferiority stereotypes of women, and it was asked if there had been any

changes. Similarly, regarding women's participation in public life, it was asked, in particular, whether the national committees had achieved any significant changes in the conditions for such a participation.

109. On article 6, details were requested on the dimension of prostitution, its causes and measures undertaken to reduce it. Clarification was sought regarding the notion of enforced prostitution. It was asked if there was a problem related to AIDS.

110. With regard to article 7, a query was raised about the levels at which women were represented in the ministries. It was asked whether the ministries promoted women's issues mainly through the creation of posts for women. Another question related to the structure of the parliament. Noting the possibility of persisting discrimination, more concrete information on women in the public sector and on possible obstacles to equality was requested. It was also asked whether women were judges and, if so, what their rank was.

111. On article 9, it was asked whether women who married foreigners could transmit their own nationality to their children.

112. As regards article 10, quantitative information was requested on the results of the literacy campaigns. It was asked if the campaigns had referred to the principle of equality. It was also asked what was being done to educate parents to discourage multiple pregnancies and to cease giving education for boys preference over that for girls. Information was requested on the criteria for awarding scholarships.

113. On article 11, questions on the size of the private sector, the kind of activities undertaken, and the number of women involved were raised. It was also asked whether legislation existed to guarantee equality for women in the private sector. Another question was raised with regard to the existence and functioning of a pension system for women. It was asked which institution was responsible for remedying wage discrepancies between men and women.

114. With regard to article 12, information was requested on the availability of family planning services throughout the country, particularly in rural areas. A question was also raised on the number of cases of HIV-infection. General information on the family planning policy of the country was sought. Information was also requested on the training of midwives and counsellors. With regard to excision, one member wanted to know whether there were any tangible results of the campaign against such practices. The attention of the representative was drawn to general recommendation No. 14 (ninth session, 1990) on female circumcision.

115. On abortion, the question was raised whether it was illegal under any circumstances.

116. On article 13, the Committee requested more information on programmes promoting women's access to credit.

117. On article 14, reference was made to the agricultural/agrarian reform of 1984 and it was asked if that reform had brought about equality with regard to ownership and the right to inherit farmland. Further information was

requested on: measures to implement article 14 of the Convention; the issue of actual control of the land; and measures undertaken to guarantee equal rights for women in the agrarian sector.

118. With regard to article 15, information was requested on the restructuring of the judicial system and the position of women before the law. It was asked whether women could go to court, whether they needed representation and how their domicile was defined legally. Information was also sought on the nature of the matters brought before the courts.

119. On article 16, one question concerned the system of allocating allowances between family members. Specific information was requested in the case of dissolution of a marriage and its financial implications. It was asked whether there was an inheritance law and whether such a law assisted women and children. Information was requested about the measures to inform women about their new rights and the strategies to change the de facto situation. Further questions were asked about the divorce rate; the reasons for dissolving a marriage; what the age of marriage was under the new family code; and whether the new code excluded customary law.

120. In replying to questions raised by members, the representative of Burkina Faso noted that the concept of the family in Burkina Faso was different from that in Europe: the size of a family could be up to 20-30 persons, especially in rural areas. With regard to attitudinal change, she emphasized the importance of information and awareness campaigns.

121. Regarding the legal situation, the representative said that under the new Code for Individuals and the Family, which had been in force since 4 August 1990, all customary law had been abrogated. Before its entry into force, the Code had been examined by various national organizations and would, she hoped, be applied vigorously. The principle of equality was strictly observed on the national level: women were entitled to equal pay for work of equal value and to equal voting rights. Although there were, historically, some matriarchal societies in Burkina Faso, she said that the man remained the head of the family. Regarding the judiciary system, she noted that both the new people's conciliation courts and the people's departmental courts tried to ensure that the judiciary system was based on principles of equality and transparency.

122. Regarding organizations and structures, she said that the main tasks of the various national unions were the mobilization, sensitization, training and organization of women and other groups. The unions worked at the village, departmental and provincial levels. She explained that, in the context of a multisectoral strategy, the Department for the Promotion of the Family could be regarded as the focal point for the advancement of women.

123. The Union of Women of Burkina Faso, which carried considerable political weight, organized seminars, conferences and development projects, mainly in the field of the political education of women. The National Popular Service, however, aimed at providing both girls and boys with military, political and civil training, which lasted from 18 to 24 months; men and women performed the same tasks.

124. On the international level, the representative noted the openness of Burkina Faso to bilateral and multilateral cooperation. She pointed out that three ministries, Plan and Cooperation, Health and Social Action, and Economic Promotion, were involved in the execution of the UNDP project to strengthen women in the informal sector.

125. With regard to article 2, she stated that a new constitution had been adopted in 1990, which guaranteed the principle of equality and women's rights. She pointed to the close cooperation with non-governmental organizations despite their non-involvement in the preparation of the report. Concerning dowry and forced marriage practices, she noted that those issues were dealt with primarily through information and awareness campaigns.

126. Under article 3, the representative emphasized that membership of the Union for Women of Burkina Faso was open to all and that the number of members constantly changed. She attributed the decline in female ministers and ambassadors over the previous years to political changes rather than to a failure of anti-discrimination policies.

127. As regards article 4, she mentioned that transitory measures had existed before the Convention, although on a modest scale.

128. Turning to article 5, she said that the Government was focusing on the most humiliating practices and stereotypes, such as excision and forced marriage, in its struggle for the advancement of women. The fight against sexist prejudices, however, was also on the agenda for "Social Action". Although some programmes had only been in existence for one year, dialogue and awareness-raising had brought some tangible results. On the problem of violence against women, she noted that, fortunately, not many cases had been brought before the authorities. She added that, under the new family code, the practice of levirate (forced remarriage of widows) was forbidden. Furthermore, she noted that it was often difficult for the various women's organizations to make their views known, as some of the issues were considered taboo.

129. With regard to article 6, the representative outlined the policies against prostitution. She noted that prostitution was often a result of the fact that girls migrated from their villages to the cities, took up employment as an au pair or a similar job, and on losing their job resorted to prostitution. Measures to break that chain of events included information and awareness campaigns as well as training courses to prepare the girls better for their jobs. The Department for Social Reintegration dealt primarily with those issues, which were often part of the broader question of the protection of minors. Regarding AIDS, the representative referred to the existence of an anti-AIDS commission that had been established under the Ministry of Health.

130. With regard to article 7, she said that there was currently no parliamentary structure. Concerning women's role in the public sector, she pointed out that the number of female ministers had been more or less constant over the past years. However, factors such as lower literacy rates, household burdens and a widespread attitude on the part of women not to strive for higher posts remained major obstacles to women's participation and equality in public life.

131. On article 9, the representative stated that there was no possibility for women who were married to foreigners to transmit their nationality to their children as the principle of double nationality was not recognized.

132. With regard to article 10, she drew the attention of members to a pilot project of the National Teaching Institute to encourage girls to attend school in rural areas. Grants were made available for secondary education. Furthermore, she mentioned the efforts to tackle the problem of early pregnancies through sex education in schools. Regarding scholarships, she said that the discrepancy in the number of boys and of girls who had received them reflected the smaller representation of girls in higher education rather than any discriminatory criteria in awarding the scholarships.

133. On article 11, the representative said that there was a need for a strategy to bring about equality for women. As regards the pension system, she said that although social security was not very efficient because of the high unemployment rate, women had rights equal to those of men, and in the public sector they could also take maternity leave. Concerning wage discrepancies, she explained that women's salaries, because of women's lower levels, did not usually exceed those of men, and were not indicative of any discrimination.

134. Under article 12, she noted that family planning was available throughout the country at the provincial level and that abortion was illegal, not least because of the fear of possible damage to women's health through inexperienced health workers and poor health services. The family planning policy, adopted in 1986, was based on a brochure on information, education and communication, which emphasized the importance of sex education for parents and teenagers to limit the number of pregnancies.

135. On the issue of excision, she pointed out that the strategy to eradicate the practice consisted in undertaking research and surveys, on the basis of which information was disseminated to sensitize the population. On the education of midwives, she said that they were trained to perform each birth as hygienically as possible and that they were monitored.

136. With regard to article 16, the representative stated that divorce was predominantly an urban phenomenon, the main reasons for which were violence, alcoholism and infidelity. She said that the new family code had not determined a certain age for marriage. It was assumed, however, that prior to the age of 18, mutual consent had to be supported by the approval of the parents.

137. Members congratulated the representative for the report as it demonstrated the political will of the Government to bring about change. They noted with appreciation the ratification of the Convention without reservation, the prompt submission of the report according to schedule, its frankness and the enthusiasm of its presentation. Furthermore, they expressed the hope that the second periodic report would describe in detail the measures taken to overcome the obstacles that had been so clearly identified.