
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: Cuba

Initial report

246. The Committee considered the initial report of Cuba (CEDAW/C/5/Add.4) at its 20th and 23rd meeting, held on 9 and 11 August 1983 (CEDAW/C/SR.20 and 23).

247. In submitting her report to the Committee, the representative of Cuba referred to the economic, political and social situation, in order to give the experts a better understanding of her country's report.

248. She added that, in the few years of the revolutionary process, all types of discrimination before the law had been eliminated and equality of access to education and free health services had been achieved. There had been a massive inflow of women into the work-place, and women had come to benefit from many other facilities which had been virtually non-existent or had been enjoyed by a tiny minority of the population of the country. The process of transformation had had to be carried out in the face of an economic and political blockade and constant threats and aggressions perpetrated against the economy, which had affected and greatly impeded the battle against underdevelopment and the ultimate objective of achieving full participation of women in the development process being carried out.

249. Despite those achievements, she indicated that some old and deep-seated prejudices, which were difficult to eradicate, still persisted. Those prejudices were founded on attitudes shaped over the centuries, when the male sex had been looked upon as superior to the female sex - what was commonly known as "machismo".

250. She added that, although there was no discrimination against women, they were still poorly represented in policy-making and decision-making jobs. But women had made impressive gains in employment; in March 1983, women accounted for 35.7 per cent of employment in the civil service.

251. In the field of education, equal access was also guaranteed to women, and there had been constant efforts to reduce the numbers of girls kept out of school,

particularly in rural areas of the country. Good results had already been obtained in adult education, with women comprising 43.8 per cent of the students registered in those courses in 1980-1981.

252. The Cuban representative recalled that Cuba was the first country to sign the Convention, an instrument whose spirit was completely in conformity with its national legislation as well as with the wishes and desires of the Cuban Government and people.

253. The Committee expressed appreciation for the organization and structure of the report and particularly for the fact that it devoted to each article of the Convention relevant commentaries and information, including excerpts from legislation such as the Family Code, maternity protection and labour regulations. Experts commended the frankness with which the report was introduced, in particular the reference to difficulties encountered in implementing the Convention due to the problems of underdevelopment, the persistence of cultural inequality and the difference between the de jure and de facto situation.

254. Various clarifications were requested in the course of the Committee's consideration of the report. Noting that the Constitution explicitly guaranteed the equality of men and women, the experts were interested in knowing the extent of women's participation in the discussion and drafting of the Constitution.

255. With regard to article 2, experts asked whether the relevant provisions of the Convention could be invoked directly before the courts and enforced. They also wished to know what sanctions were applied in cases of discrimination and what was the machinery to deal with them.

256. With regard to efforts to abolish sex-stereotyping, it was asked whether co-education was the only means by which that could be achieved, what other policies were in existence and, in particular, those designed to remove age-old traditional perceptions and attitudes towards women, including "machismo", and what projects were being undertaken by the Federation of Cuban Women, the trade unions and the State in that regard.

257. Specific comments were directed to the Penal Code, where certain "indices of dangerousness" were outlined under what was described as a "state of danger". They included procuring, prostitution and the exploitation or exercise of socially reprehensible vices. The experts wished to know if, as was stated in the report, the problem of prostitution had been successfully resolved, or merely controlled and, in the latter event, what were the penalties established by the law. It was also wondered whether a prison term was imposed for procuring.

258. Commenting on women's participation in public life, data was requested regarding the proportion of women in Government, in the various ministries, as well as on their levels in the hierarchy, the composition of the municipal assemblies of popular power and the extent to which women participated in them as elected representatives.

259. More detailed information was requested on the role of the Federation of Cuban Women as a non-governmental organization, its power to initiate legislative reforms and the nature of its interaction with the Government. The experts also asked whether there were other women's groups and, if so, what were their status and power vis-à-vis the Federation and the Government.

260. More details were also requested on the involvement of women in the cause of peace at the national as well as the international levels.

261. Commenting on article 10 of the Convention, the Committee noted the achievements of the State party in education. It was gratified to hear that there was a clear majority of women entering institutions of higher learning, and it noted that, in order to fulfil the requirements, those chosen had to have the highest grades. In that regard, it was also noted that students who had a "correct integral attitude" could proceed to higher education although it was also stated in the report that everyone had the right to education. That seemed to indicate discrimination regarding opinions and convictions which was also noted in reference to article 13, since freedom in artistic creation was allowed provided that the artistic content was not contradictory to the Revolution. Information was also requested on the number of fellowships and grants given to women and how they were allocated.

262. It was pointed out that it would be helpful if women were given guidance as to choice of profession in order to avoid occupational segregation. The Committee also noted that there was a contradiction between the number of women in schools, which appeared to be higher than men, and the fact that there were many women who lacked adequate technical qualifications. Questions were also asked about the method employed in the campaign to bring housewives up to the ninth-grade level.

263. Regarding women's integration in the labour force, more detailed statistics were requested on the types and fields of occupation and levels at which women were employed and, especially, as to whether they occupied decision-making and managerial positions. Figures were requested on unemployment and underemployment, overtime, night work and any other exemptions. More details were requested about efforts made to facilitate the combination of responsibilities at home with work or professional responsibilities. In that connection, the experts wondered whether the plan for encouraging productive labour at home was a sound one since it would double women's burden there.

264. Since Cuban women were reported to carry out a number of tasks in relation to public health and education, many on a volunteer basis, it was asked how women managed to find time to be involved in all those activities. The experts also noted that, with respect to protective labour regulations, certain types of work were prohibited to women and asked what exactly those jobs were.

265. With respect to conditions of work, clarifications were requested with regard to the meaning of expressions which described women as "physically weaker" and warranting "some small privileges and some small inequalities in their favour". Regarding social security, information was requested on how the extensive social security system operating in the country was financed. It was also asked why the retirement age for women was 55 while for men it was 60 years.

266. The report showed that Cuba was making major efforts to protect family unity, but gave no information on the incidence of divorce and what happened, in case of separation, to family property, children, etc. Furthermore, it would be of interest to know in what circumstances abortion was available.

267. Regarding nutrition, clarifications were requested on what "collective feeding" meant and on the scope of distribution of dietary supplements to pregnant women.

268. The representative of Cuba, in answering the experts' questions, explained that there had been massive participation by women in the public discussion of the Constitution and that the Penal Code provided sanctions for the offence of discrimination and also contained provisions for invoking the Convention before the courts.

269. With respect to activities on behalf of peace, the trade union movement was particularly active whenever it perceived that the survival of the human species was threatened.

270. Membership in the Federation of Cuban Women was voluntary and, at present, over 2.5 million women over the age of 14, or approximately 82 per cent of the female population, were members. Those who were not members could, however, participate in the social and cultural activities of the Federation. The President of the Federation was a member of the Council of State and President of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Childhood, Youth and Equal Rights for Women, and it was through her that the problems and concerns of women were brought before the highest authorities of the country.

271. The number of women members was large in non-governmental organizations, trade unions, local popular power institutions, student organizations and in any other mass organization. It was through those different organizations that fundamental changes had been made in the national life of the country.

272. As part of the campaign to bring housewives up to the ninth-grade level of education, the Federation of Cuban Women had organized classes for the general public with advice from, and using the curriculum of, the Ministry of Education.

273. Regarding education, scholarships and other facilities were granted according to scholastic proficiency and there was no distinction between the sexes. "Correct integral attitude" referred to punctuality, academic achievement, discipline and neatness.

274. Stereotyped thinking was avoided from the earliest level at school through co-education and by paying attention to textbooks, avoiding segregation in sports and through the mass media. That purpose was also served by vocational guidance in the so-called "interest circles" which operated at all levels of the educational process. Although there was equal access to education at all levels, there were women who had not received the necessary training, a circumstance which could be explained by the fact that access to education was an achievement dating back only 20 years. Another factor that had to be taken into account was the drop-out rate.

275. Among the measures which had been taken to help girls choose non-traditional occupations there were "interest circles", which had been established for the purpose of identifying and developing children's aptitudes in order to guide them more effectively towards the kinds of education and occupations which suited them. Such circles functioned in all schools and within them students were offered classes related to the spheres of agriculture, industry, science, technology and the arts; they were organized in primary, secondary and pre-university schools and were among the optional activities open to students. The courses were taught by specialized personnel and their aim was to educate young people and, above all, to eliminate all forms of prejudice with respect to the choice of studies, careers and occupations.

276. Although it was impossible to indicate the percentage of those working in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs who were women, it could be stated that while as yet few women were ambassadors or occupied managerial posts, the number of women advisers and technical specialists in the Ministry had increased in recent years, as had the participation of women in international bodies concerned with matters not ordinarily dealt with by women.

277. Regarding the family, counselling was provided through the National Group on Sexual Education. The courts took all pertinent decisions in relation to divorce, child custody and property. Common property was divided between the spouses and the court also decided on the division of household goods, bearing in mind the interests of children.

278. Abortion was free and on request as long as it did not endanger the women's health. Also, the consent of the parents was required in the case of a minor girl in need of abortion.

279. Special maternity provisions existed, as stated in the report, and the dietary supplement for pregnant women consisted of milk and meat at a very low price, although the goods were available on the free market and at higher prices. The system of "collective feeding" described in the report referred to workers' canteens in factories and other places of work where workers could buy meals at low prices.

280. Prostitution had been eradicated through a long process of compulsory education, rehabilitation and social work. The Penal Code defined prostitution as a "state of danger" and provided specific sanctions in that regard not only for the prostitute but also for the procurer. The same was true of the sale of and public exposure to pornography and other socially deviant behaviour.

281. Some of the privileges accorded to women were based on their inherent biological differences. For that reason, a woman retired earlier than a man. However, men could also opt for early retirement if they were incapacitated by sickness or accident. The Law on Protection and Hygiene at Work indicated, for the same reason, tasks which could be harmful to women owing to their physical and biological make-up. The text of the law was not available, but the next report of Cuba would include details of the regulations envisaged in the law.

282. The Constitution guaranteed the right of all citizens to social security protection against old age, illness and accidents, and the social security legislation governed the implementation of that constitutional guarantee. The political rights of women were enshrined in the Constitution as stated in the report. Although statistics were not available, the Committee could rest assured that women held posts in the administrative and judicial branches of the Government. A great deal remained to be done in that connection, especially with regard to the presence of women in high-level posts.

283. The reference to freedom of artistic expression as long as the latter was not contrary to the Revolution had to be understood in its proper context, namely, that the Revolution had transformed the country from a colonial and neo-colonial stronghold to a place where human rights were observed. The Revolution had guaranteed the freedom and equality of all citizens and the right of all to employment, land, free education, medical care, social security, etc. Artistic expression could not be permitted to diverge from the principles of the Revolution,

nor could the interests of the population as a whole be compromised by the interests of an individual.

284. The representative of Cuba assured the Committee that more statistical data would be provided in the next report and that all questions which remained unanswered for lack of time and certain information would also be included in Cuba's second report.

285. 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.