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Intervention by
H.E. Aart Jan de Geus
Minister for Social Affairs and Employment
of
the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
37th session
January 24, 2007

Item: Consideration of the of the 4th periodic report of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in pursuance of its obligations under the Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Re: CEDAW/C/NLD/4/Add.1

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address your Committee on the occasion of the consideration of the fourth periodic report of the Netherlands in pursuance of its obligations under the Convention of the Elimination of all form of Discrimination Against Women. This report covers a period of four years.

The Netherlands highly regards the work of the Committee and my delegation is looking forward to a productive exchange of views.

Let me first introduce the members of the Dutch delegation:

1. Ferdi Licher, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, deputy delegation leader
2. Petra de Leeuw, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
3. Gülay Sert, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
4. Lydia Lousberg, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
5. Tessa Dopheide, Ministry of Justice
6. Edit Bleeker, Ministry of Justice
7. Ira van der Zaal-Van Bommel, Ministry of Justice
8. Gert Bogers, Ministry of Justice
9. Cindy Verhagen, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
10. Olivia Croes, Aruban Delegation, Bureau Foreign Affairs
11. Jocelyne Croes, Aruban Delegation, Ministry of Education, Social Affairs and Infrastructure

And I am Aart Jan de Geus, Minister of Social Affairs and Employment.

We are here at your disposal for any questions you may have on the implementation of the Convention. We will answer them to the best of our abilities.

Madam Chair,

We highly welcome the work of the CEDAW Committee. And we are glad for this opportunity to account for our policy and implementation of the Convention. Having to account for our policy compels us to reflect on our performances. This keeps us on our toes and spurs us to take action. The Netherlands regrets and objects to the reservations some States have made to the Convention. In our view these reservations are incompatible with the aims of the Convention.

Since the last time we were your guest we worked hard to implement your recommendations. We raised awareness through dissemination of the Dutch translation of the Convention. The Committee's general recommendations were translated and made public on the internet for the use of the Dutch people. We have subsidised NGOs to prepare a shadow report and have invested in research. And of course we looked into the comments the committee made regarding the political party SGP and the lifting of the ban on brothels. I will come back to this at a later moment.

But first I would like to share with you our ideals, our efforts and the results we have achieved. However, as a minister in a caretaker government I am not in the position to answer questions about future policy. This will be up to the next Dutch government.

Nonetheless, we still have a lot to discuss. In recent years we have taken big steps towards achieving our ideal. To create a society with equal rights, equal opportunities and equal liberties for men and women. A society in which men and women bear equal responsibilities – social, administrative and economic responsibilities.

Gender equality is increasingly taking shape. We are coming from far. Just 50 years ago, women could not enter into contracts nor conclude an employment contract without the prior consent of their husband. Another example: in 1960, 22% of the working population were women. The percentage of working married women was just 7%.

Today: 65% of the women in the Netherlands are part of the labour force. And only one in ten women resigns after having their first child.

In other words, there has been a significant change.

However, we are fully aware that we have not yet completed our efforts to achieve gender equality. For gender equality is more than just having a job. In a rapidly changing society with different demands, we must continue to closely monitor the positions of men and women. This must serve as our policy benchmark. Therefore we will continue to anchor women's rights in the policy of government bodies and civil society organisations.

Dutch women's rights policy is based on two pillars: gender mainstreaming and a project based approach to tackle specific problems.

In order to strengthen gender mainstreaming we have installed the Auditing Committee on Emancipation. This independent committee is reviewing all ministries with the aim to stimulate gender mainstreaming in all their policies. The committee's reports are sent to parliament and the findings of the committee are discussed at the highest political level. Individual ministers must account for the results of gender mainstreaming in their own policy fields.

Before sharing the results of our efforts I would like to point out an important aspect we experienced, regarding the implementation of certain new policies. We discovered that once you start monitoring and registering the number of cases will logically increase. Not because of a higher occurrence but because of increased visibility.

Madam Chair,

I will now mention our main focus points in policy of the last years, which addresses:

1. Labour market
2. Women from ethnic minorities
3. Safety and security;
4. Social participation
5. Glass ceiling
6. The political party SGP
7. Prostitution

1. Labour market participation

Let me start with the participation of women in the labour market.

Labour is an important factor in the realisation of economic independence of women. As I previously mentioned, more and more women have jobs. We aimed to achieve 60% in 2006, yet reached 56%. Is this a disappointment? Certainly, but there is also good news. Let us examine the figures more closely.

Between 2002 and 2005 the labour market participation of women stagnated between 53% and 54%. This period coincides almost exactly with the economic recession in the Netherlands.

According to the most recent figures of Statistics Netherlands, with the recent turn of the economic tide the labour market participation of women has started to rise again. Since the end of the recession in 2005 this increase has been around 2% in one year. If we sustain this pace in the years ahead, we will achieve our goal in 2010: 65% of women to have a job of 12 hours weekly or more.

The years of recession have not been lost. After all, in this period we worked harder than ever. We introduced reforms, made investments and developed new policies. In short, we created the conditions that will allow us to benefit to the full from the economic upturn.

Let me present some examples.

The law on child care entered into force January 2005. We have invested considerably in child care facilities. The number of child care places has risen from 20,000 to 200,000 in 15 years and is still increasing. As of January first 2007, all schools are legally obliged to provide child care from 7.30 AM to 6.30 PM to better meet the needs of parents.

We have also made child care affordable for all income groups, especially the poorest. Never before has such an amount of money been made available for child care. Parents pay a maximum of one third of the costs for child care. The shortage of affordable child care places is therefore less and less an obstacle for parents to combine paid work and family responsibilities. Together with all

stakeholders we developed quality criteria, which are being supervised by local authorities.

In the Netherlands working parents have the right to take parental leave. The newly developed 'life-course savings scheme' helps working people to take such leave. Parents on parental leave also enjoy a substantial amount of tax relief.

Madam Chair,

Through these measures, we contributed in creating better conditions and removed obstacles to work. Nonetheless, we do not wish to force anyone to work. Freedom of choice is essential for men and women. Many women chose to work part-time. The high numbers of women in part-time jobs has led to some criticism. Criticism I do not share, provided that the choice is made freely and does not pose a threat to the economic independence of women.

Yet, I do not close my eyes for all of the critique. The 2006 Dutch Women's Rights Monitor shows that women do not always have full freedom of choice. Men, for example, still do not equally share in responsibilities for care and household tasks. And employers still take insufficiently into consideration care duties when scheduling working hours. This is something we will have to address.

2. Women from ethnic minorities

The position of ethnic minority women in the labour market requires special attention. While the overall labour market participation of women between 2002 and 2005 remained constant, participation of ethnic minority women actually decreased. This is worrying.

We therefore established a special high level task force known as the Participation of Women from Ethnic Minorities Committee (PaVEM). With the help of PaVEM, the 30 largest cities in the Netherlands motivate women and girls from ethnic minority groups, who currently stay at home, to participate in society. Research has been carried out, instruments developed and pilots implemented.

We also developed a Plan of Action on Emancipation and Integration which focuses mainly on the social participation of vulnerable and disadvantaged women from ethnic minorities. These women enjoy little if any education, are often unemployed or poorly paid. They are socially isolated because their knowledge of the Dutch language is poor or non-existent and they have hardly any contact with people of Dutch origin. So far this group has hardly been reached.

We developed policy instruments for local authorities to gain insight in the position of ethnic minority women and, where necessary, to adjust policies. Local participation teams consisting of active ethnic minority women have

been set up to advise local authorities and they serve as a bridge between target group and policy makers.

With the help of these women we initiate dialogues between men and women of ethnic minority groups on taboo subjects such as honour crimes, 'lover boys' and safety and security. Moreover, we are creating a nationwide network of anti-discriminations bureaus.

These are just some examples of the many activities undertaken in recent years. Ethnic minority women and girls are progressively performing better in education and training, compared to ethnic minority men and boys. Education and training increase the chances of finding work. This is a good sign, yet again work remains to be done.

3. Safety and security

This brings me to another policy focus point: safety and security. Women, men and children can only develop themselves in a safe environment. Every victim of violence is one too many. Far too many women are victims of domestic violence; sexual violence; honour-related violence; genital mutilation and human trafficking.

We have taken measures to tackle violence against women. I shall mention a few initiatives.

A bill has been presented to parliament that will enable to deny access to perpetrators of domestic violence from their own homes during ten days.

Pilot programs in two police regions have enabled us to have a better understanding of the nature and scope of honour-related violence. Police officers and others involved were trained to identify signs of honour-related violence.

Women who are victims of domestic violence and at the same time dependent on the residence status of their husband can obtain an independent residence permit within three years of settling in the Netherlands.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment is subsidising projects of women and women's organisations designed to prevent and combat violence against women. We have financed 50 small projects with grass root organisations, through which 5000 women were reached.

4. Participation

With regard to participation, work is an essential instrument to empower women. Decent work makes women economically independent, boosts their self-respect and teaches them to be more assertive. Though not every woman is sufficiently equipped to work. Research has shown the existence of a group of 200.000 vulnerable and isolated women in the Netherlands. For this group

participation in the community is a good start. Volunteer work can serve as a stepping stone towards a paid job. Volunteer work can be done in i.a. the neighbourhood, at schools or in community clubs. We subsidise projects that encourage this. Not only because volunteers benefit, but also because they function as role models within their communities. One example is a project in six municipalities, which encourages ethnic minority women to do volunteer work, to become active in the community and develop their talents. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment finances projects to reach 50.000 women over a 3-year period.

5. Glass ceiling

We all know examples of talented women unable to reach the highest jobs in the public and private sector. Fortunately, we are witnessing a rise in the percentage of women on company boards and in executive positions in all sectors of society. This is a positive development which is partly due, I think, to Networks of Ambassadors, which consist of people in top positions in industry and civil society organisations who aim to get women in top positions. We still have a long way to go. The glass ceiling still exists, but is getting thinner.

6. SGP

As I said at the beginning of my statement, we consider it very important to account for our policy and to listen to the views of others. This keeps us sharp. We take the recommendations and areas of concern expressed by the CEDAW committee seriously. Five years ago you expressed criticism regarding subsidies paid to the SGP, a political party that excluded women as members. Following a court judgement, the subsidies for the SGP have been stopped. The court was of the opinion that the Dutch State was acting in contravention of Article 7 (a) and (c) of the Women's Convention. The State appealed against the judgment of the court to the Court of Appeal. The Netherlands government believes that one should be cautious to intervene in the constitution of political parties. A variety of fundamental rights and freedoms are at stake. It is essential to weigh these rights and freedoms very carefully; one must balance the right to stand for election and the prohibition of discrimination with the freedom of assembly of a political party. A court decision is expected towards the end of 2007. In the mean time, there have been developments within the SGP itself. Women may now become a member of the party. However, they may still not hold a representative position in the party.

7. Lifting the ban on brothels

The Netherlands have been and still are criticised for the lifting of the ban on brothels in the Netherlands. The policy on prostitution however is broadly supported by Dutch parliament, citizens and NGOs, as stated in their shadow report. We still believe we have valid arguments for the legalisation of brothels. It has given us more and better possibilities to improve the position of sex workers, to exercise more control over the sex industry and to combat

human trafficking. We can now act and punish more effectively, as has been done. Municipalities are responsible for an adequate control system and they can decide to introduce permits for brothels. In this way local authorities can control safety, health and working conditions in brothels. Brothels are regularly checked for possible infringements. In case of violation of the permit, direct and firm action is taken, for example by closing down the brothel. During inspections police look carefully for any signs of human trafficking. As a result of this new legislation we have better insight in the world of prostitution and more cases of human trafficking have been revealed.

We realise that we cannot achieve our objectives from one day to the next. Prostitution will never become a regular profession. We will have to stay alert for developments, due to the Internet, that pose new risks and asses these regularly.

The second evaluation of the lifting of the ban on brothels will be published this April. The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings will also publish her findings in April on the effectiveness of our policy against human trafficking. The next government will respond to these findings.

Let me conclude: achieving gender equality is an ongoing process. In recent years we have made large investments in women's rights policy and gender mainstreaming. And the results of policy are not always immediately visible. Striving for gender equality requires constant attention. Therefore we are grateful to the Committee for today's constructive dialogue and we are looking forward to its recommendations.

Thank you very much Madam Chair.

I now yield the floor to the Aruban delegation.