

COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN 37TH SESSION (NEW YORK, 15 JANUARY TO 2 FEBRUARY 2007)

SURINAME (3ND PERIODIC REPORT)

Information Submitted to the Committee

On 25 January 2007, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the Committee) examined the 3rd periodic report¹ submitted by Suriname. Jeffrey Joemmanbaks, Coordinating Director for Gender within the Directorate of the Ministry of Home Affairs led the delegation and submitted a written statement summarising the State party's responses² to the list of issues and questions³ raised by the Committee.

The 3rd periodic report was drafted by external consultants, but consultations took place with the Government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It provides a short socio-economic sketch of Suriname, but focuses mainly on describing developments and measures adopted under each article of the Convention. The report also briefly introduces the more general framework contributing to the promotion of women's rights, such as the Multi-annual Development Plan for 2001-2005, which stresses the importance of gender mainstreaming in a number of areas, including social policy and health care. In this regard, it also points to the establishment of the National Gender Policy Bureau within the Ministry of Home Affairs and the introduction of the Integrated Gender Plan of Action 2000-2005. The State party indicates that in 2001, national legislation was assessed with regard to the application of the Convention. As a result, more programmes and measures were implemented and a better understanding of the situation of women in Suriname was reached. The Committee however regretted the lack of detailed information on the implementation of the provisions of the Convention. Suriname's written responses focus on the status of the reviews of laws that discriminate against women, the measures to strengthen the National Gender Bureau and the network of gender focal points within the various ministries. They also look at the measures taken by the Government to increase the political participation of women and combat violence against women, trafficking and exploitation. Other topics addressed include stereotypes, education, employment, health, marriage legislation and ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

An NGO shadow report was also submitted by the Women's Rights Centre and Ultimate Purpose.⁴ It includes information amongst others on laws in contravention of the Convention; domestic violence; women in decision-making; the situation of women in employment, specifically focusing on sexual harassment, maternity leave and economic independence; sexual and reproductive rights, including HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality and abortion; vulnerable groups of women; marriage law; and the status of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

Themes and Issues

¹ <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/280/45/PDF/N0528045.pdf?OpenElement>.

² <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/558/58/PDF/N0655858.pdf?OpenElement>.

³ <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/467/15/PDF/N0646715.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁴ <http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/Suriname%20Critical%20Issues.pdf>

Constitution, Laws and National Machinery

The Committee expressed disappointment that not much progress had been achieved since the country's last report in 2002. It asked the delegation about the position of the Convention in the country's domestic legislation, the national machinery and the resources available to vulnerable women. The Committee added that much remained to be done in Suriname in order to repeal existing discriminatory provisions in the *Penal Code*, *Personnel Act* and other laws, including acts relating to marriage and inheritance. The Committee noted that the report did not contain much information on the national machinery for advancing gender equality. The Committee's impression was that there was a lot that the Government was promising to do, but was not yet doing. The delegation's response was that the country had to make special provisions in national legislation, because the Convention was not directly applicable in the national law despite judges having the authority to invoke its articles. It agreed that the *Penal* and the *Criminal Codes* needed to be amended, along with other laws. Following the delegation's statement that there was no clearly defined time frame for the draft law on equal treatment of men and women, the Committee stressed the immediate need for new legislation to advance equality of women. It also pointed out the importance of training the judiciary on women's rights and introducing special temporary measures to accelerate their *de facto* equality. However, the Committee suggested that the delegation refrain from using the term 'positive discrimination' in this regard.

Political Participation and Decision-Making

The Committee was optimistic about the progress achieved regarding women's political representation in elected positions. However, it expressed concern that progress had not been made in posts that were made by appointment and that women were excluded from holding district commissioner offices. It worried that women's lack of representation in political life was the result of traditional attitudes regarding women's role in the family. The Committee then asked what steps had been taken to assist women in achieving equitable representation at all levels of political and public life. The delegation said that the Government was aware of the unequal representation of men and women in decision-making positions and agreed that part of the problem was stereotyping. At the lower and middle levels, however, there had been movement towards equality. The delegation added that the Women's Parliament Forum had conducted a study of the quota mechanism and found that the goal of 30 per cent women participating in decision-making processes had not been achieved during the latest elections.

The Committee also wanted to know about the measures taken by the Government to extend participation of indigenous people and other minorities and expressed concern that the report contained no information on this issue. The delegation indicated that Maroons⁵ were now represented in the Government, referring to the appointment of a Maroon woman as a minister. It added that Maroons and indigenous people had 10 seats in the Parliament, four of which were women. Furthermore, the delegation said that five appointed diplomats were Maroons, including one female ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago.

Trafficking in Women and Prostitution

The Committee was concerned that the issue of trafficking of women did not seem to receive the emphasis it needed, noting that human trafficking was a major problem in the Caribbean and was connected with the issue of prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region. The Committee

⁵ Maroons make up around ten per cent of the population and are descendants of African slaves.

added that the Government must pay attention to prostitution in Suriname and identify the drivers of prostitution. It worried that Maroon girls from interior communities⁶ were regularly used for prostitution by foreigners who came to exploit these regions and argued for legislation to regulate this practice. The Committee stressed that it was not an excuse to say that prostitution was the oldest profession and that poverty was the main driver of prostitution, but that it was important to understand that prostitution is about exploitation and the power exerted by men over women. It expressed concern about the lack of information or statistics provided on trafficking in women and recommended that these issues receive better attention in the next report. The delegation indicated that the Ministry of Justice and Police had recently adopted new regulations on trafficking in persons. It added that three cases of trafficking had already been brought before the courts, during which one person had been sentenced. Regarding the exploitation of Maroon women, the delegation claimed that the police was gathering data on this issue and hoped that it would be able to present better information to the Committee in the future.

Stereotypes and Education

In response to the Committee expressing concern that the report reported no changes with regard to stereotypes, the delegation implied that it was up to NGOs and international organisations to change cultural traditions. The Committee agreed that the media had a strong influence on the issue of societal stereotypes, but stressed that more information was needed on what the Government was doing to change people's attitudes. The delegation's response was that the Government was encouraging education and information programmes through State television shows such as *Suriname Today*, which was led by a woman. It added that the country was also participating in Caribbean Community youth programmes and said that while the Government accepted responsibility for the implementation of the Convention, it also appreciated support from civil society.

The Committee identified the absence from school of about 40 per cent of the children in the interior as a serious problem and inquired about the Government's efforts in that regard. The Committee was also concerned about the issue of teenage pregnancy and said that it was important that pregnant girls be encouraged to go back to school. Moreover, the Committee said that it appeared, again, that it was left to NGOs to come up with initiatives in the field of continuing education because the Government had not adopted any programmes in that regard. The delegation's response was that the country's education plan would specifically address many gender issues, including mainstreaming, teenage pregnancies and access to education. However, the plan has yet to be adopted. The delegation added that strategies were needed to address some cultural traditions because girls in the interior felt they did not have many options after primary school, other than family and early maternity.

Violence against Women

The Committee asked for more information about the two draft laws on domestic violence. It wanted to know what factors were keeping the drafts from being sent to the Parliament and, in the absence of a specific law on violence, what mechanism existed to remedy sexual and domestic violence. The delegation indicated that there were two draft laws relating to violence. One contained specific amendments to the *Penal Code*, including the definition of violence against women while the other specifically focused on domestic violence. The delegation did not have specific information about its provisions and did not address the Committee's other concerns with regard to violence against women.

⁶ A non-coastal rural district.

Health

The Committee asked for updated information on the issue of health because they noted that the report only contained data up to 2002. It saw as a serious issue that only 14 per cent of the population had health insurance. Moreover, the Committee asked how the Government intended to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of reducing maternal mortality and demanded information about measures taken to combat malaria and under-nourishment. It also suggested that the Government should play close attention to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, requesting more details about the prohibition on education on contraceptives. The Committee criticised the report's claim that prostitutes were the main reason for the spread of HIV/AIDS in rural villages. The delegation's response was that indeed, public information about contraceptives was forbidden under the law, but that distributing contraceptives was not penalised. On prostitution, the delegation said that prostitutes usually left their villages to look for work elsewhere, but that the trend now was for prostitutes to return to their villages, spreading HIV/AIDS there.

The Committee wanted to receive information on the number of deaths from unsafe abortions and the rate of abortion among indigenous women. The delegation explained that gathering data about abortions was not easy as specialists were involved and the data was not usually provided to the Government because of privacy rules. It added that a comprehensive reform of the health sector was under way and that the results would be included in the next report.

Conclusions and next steps

The Committee expressed concern that Government officials had not been involved in drafting the periodic report and recommended that they should be more involved in the drafting of the report as it would make them more aware of the real situation of women. The Committee stressed the need to educate Government officials on the provisions of the Convention so that all policies and programmes were implemented within the framework of the Convention. The Committee also expressed concern that there seemed to be a severe shortage of funds for the collection of statistics and recommended that the Government seek immediate assistance from international agencies in this regard.

The delegation and the Committee experts established a constructive dialogue and the delegation was cooperative in answering all the questions. The delegation thanked the experts for the open and frank discussion and recognised that while much remained to be done, they assured the experts of Suriname's determination to implement the Convention.

In the Concluding Comments,⁷ the Committee said that conceptually the Government had recognised the need to integrate the Convention and Millennium Development Goals in its plans and programmes. Among other things however, the Government should seriously consider strengthening the legislative framework for the implementation of the Convention and make it applicable at the domestic level. The Committee added that every Government should know about the Convention and all planning should take it into consideration. The Committee looked forward to Suriname's ratification of the Optional Protocol. Other Committees⁸ also noted that women in Suriname still do not fully enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights, due in part to traditional customs and attitudes toward women.

⁷ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw37/concludingcommentsAU/Suriname.pdf>.

⁸ The Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination both in 2004.

This situation manifests itself, among other ways, in the form of violence against women and discrimination in employment.