

**General Recommendations
made by the Committee on the
Elimination of Discrimination against Women**

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General Recommendation No. 1 (fifth session, 1986)

Initial reports submitted under article 18 of the Convention should cover the situation up to the date of submission. Thereafter, reports should be submitted at least every four years after the first report was due and should include obstacles encountered in implementing the Convention fully and the measures adopted to overcome such obstacles.

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General Recommendation No. 2 (sixth session, 1987)

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Bearing in mind that the Committee had been faced with difficulties in its work because some initial reports of States parties under article 18 of the Convention did not reflect adequately the information available in the State party concerned in accordance with the guidelines,

Recommends:

- (a) That the States parties, in preparing reports under article 18 of the Convention, should follow the general guidelines adopted in August 1983 (CEDAW/C/7) [1](#) as to the form, content and date of reports;
- (b) That the States parties should follow the general recommendation adopted in 1986 in these terms: [2](#)

"Initial reports submitted under article 18 of the Convention should cover the situation up to the date of submission. Thereafter, reports should be submitted at least every four years after the first report was due and should include obstacles encountered in implementing the Convention fully and the measures adopted to overcome such obstacles."[3](#)

- (c) That additional information supplementing the report of a State party should be sent to the Secretariat at least three months before the session at which the report is due to be considered.

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General Recommendation No. 3 (sixth session, 1987)

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Considering that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has considered 34 reports from States parties since 1983,

Further considering that, although the reports have come from States with different levels of development, they present features in varying degrees showing the existence of stereotyped conceptions of women, owing to socio-cultural factors, that perpetuate discrimination based on sex and hinder the implementation of article 5 of the Convention,

Urges all States parties effectively to adopt education and public information programmes, which will help eliminate prejudices and current practices that hinder the full operation of the principle of the social equality of women.

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General Recommendation No. 4 (sixth session, 1987)

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Having examined reports from States parties at its sessions,

Expressing concern in relation to the significant number of reservations that appeared to be incompatible with the object and purpose of the Convention,

Welcomes the decision of the States parties to consider reservations at its next meeting in New York in 1988, and to that end suggests that all States parties concerned reconsider such reservations with a view to withdrawing them.

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General Recommendation No. 5 (seventh session, 1988)

Temporary Special Measures

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Taking note that the reports, the introductory remarks and the replies by States parties reveal that while significant progress has been achieved in regard to repealing or modifying discriminatory laws, there is still a need for action to be taken to implement fully the Convention by introducing measures to promote de facto equality between men and women,

Recalling article 4.1 of the Convention,

Recommends that States Parties make more use of temporary special measures such as positive action, preferential treatment or quota systems to advance women's integration into education, the economy, politics and employment.

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General Recommendation No. 6 (seventh session, 1988)

Effective National Machinery and Publicity

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Having considered the reports of States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

Noting United Nations General Assembly resolution 42/60 of 30 November 1987,

Recommends that States parties:

1. Establish and/or strengthen effective national machinery, institutions and procedures, at a high level of Government, and with adequate resources, commitment and authority to:

(a) Advise on the impact on women of all government policies;

(b) Monitor the situation of women comprehensively;

(c) Help formulate new policies and effectively carry out strategies and measures to eliminate discrimination;

2. Take appropriate steps to ensure the dissemination of the Convention, the reports of the States parties under article 18 and the reports of the Committee in the language of the States concerned;

3. Seek the assistance of the Secretary-General and the Department of Public Information in providing translations of the Convention and the reports of the Committee;

4. Include in their initial and periodic reports the action taken in respect of this recommendation.

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General Recommendation No. 7 (seventh session, 1988)

Resources

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Noting General Assembly resolutions 40/39, 41/108 and in particular 42/60, paragraph 14, which invited the Committee and the States parties to consider the question of holding future sessions of the Committee at Vienna,

Bearing in mind resolution 42/105 and, in particular paragraph 11, which requests the Secretary-General to strengthen co-ordination between the United Nations Centre for Human Rights and the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat in relation to the implementation of human rights treaties and servicing treaty bodies,

Recommends to the States parties:

1. That they continue to support proposals for strengthening the co-ordination between the Centre for Human Rights at Geneva and the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs at Vienna, in relation to the servicing of the Committee;
2. That they support proposals that the Committee meet in New York and Vienna;
3. That they take all necessary and appropriate steps to ensure that adequate resources and services are available to the Committee to assist it in its functions under the Convention and in particular that full-time staff are available to help the Committee to prepare for its sessions and during its session;
4. That they ensure that supplementary reports and materials are submitted to the Secretariat in due time to be translated into the official languages of the United Nations in time for distribution and consideration by the Committee.

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General Recommendation No. 8 (seventh session, 1988)

Implementation of article 8 of the Convention

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Having considered the reports of States parties submitted in accordance with article 18 of the Convention,

Recommends that States parties take further direct measures in accordance with article 4 of the Convention to ensure the full implementation of article 8 of the Convention and to ensure to women on equal terms with men and without any discrimination the opportunities to represent their Government at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

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General Recommendation No. 9 (eighth session, 1989)

Statistical data concerning the situation of women

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Considering that statistical information is absolutely necessary in order to understand the real situation of women in each of the States parties to the Convention,

Having observed that many of the States parties that present their reports for consideration by the Committee do not provide statistics,

Recommends that States parties should make every effort to ensure that their national statistical services responsible for planning national censuses and other social and economic surveys formulate their questionnaires in such a way that data can be disaggregated according to gender, with regard to both absolute numbers and percentages, so that interested users can easily obtain information on the situation of women in the particular sector in which they are interested.

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General Recommendation No. 10 (eighth session, 1989)

Tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Considering that 18 December 1989 marks the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

Considering further that in those 10 years the Convention has proved to be one of the most effective instruments that the United Nations has adopted to promote equality between the sexes in the societies of its States Members,

Recalling general recommendation No. 6 (seventh session, 1988) on effective national machinery and publicity,

Recommends that, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention, the States parties should consider:

1. Undertaking programmes including conferences and seminars to publicize the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in the main languages of and providing information on the Convention in their respective countries;

2. Inviting their national women's organizations to cooperate in the publicity campaigns regarding the Convention and its implementation and encouraging non-governmental organizations at the national, regional and international levels to publicize the Convention and its implementation;

3. Encouraging action to ensure the full implementation of the principles of the Convention, and in particular article 8, which relates to the participation of women at all levels of activity of the United Nations and the United Nations system;

4. Requesting the Secretary-General to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention by publishing and disseminating, in co-operation with the specialized agencies, printed and other materials regarding the Convention and its implementation in all official languages of the United Nations, preparing television documentaries about the Convention, and making the necessary resources available to the Division for the Advancement of Women, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Office at Vienna, to prepare an analysis of the information provided by States parties in order to update and publish the report of the Committee

(A/CONF.116/13), which was first published for the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, held at Nairobi in 1985.

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General Recommendation No. 11 (eighth session, 1989)

Technical advisory services for reporting obligations

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Bearing in mind that, as at 3 March 1989, 96 States had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

Taking into account the fact that by that date 60 initial and 19 second periodic reports had been received,

Noting that 36 initial and 36 second periodic reports were due by 3 March 1989 and had not yet been received,

Welcoming the request in General Assembly resolution 43/115, paragraph 9, that the Secretary-General should arrange, within existing resources and taking into account the priorities of the programme of advisory services, further training courses for those countries experiencing the most serious difficulties in meeting their reporting obligations under international instruments on human rights,

Recommends to States parties that they should encourage, support and co-operate in projects for technical advisory services, including training seminars, to assist States parties on their request in fulfilling their reporting obligations under article 18 of the Convention.

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General Recommendation No. 12 (eighth session, 1989)

Violence against women

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Considering that articles 2, 5, 11, 12 and 16 of the Convention require the States parties to act to protect women against violence of any kind occurring within the family, at the work place or in any other area of social life,

Taking into account Economic and Social Council resolution 1988/27,

Recommends to the States parties that they should include in their periodic reports to the Committee information about:

1. The legislation in force to protect women against the incidence of all kinds of violence in everyday life (including sexual violence, abuses in the family, sexual harassment at the work place etc.);
2. Other measures adopted to eradicate this violence;
3. The existence of support services for women who are the victims of aggression or abuses;
4. Statistical data on the incidence of violence of all kinds against women and on women who are the victims of violence.

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General Recommendation No. 13 (eighth session, 1989)

Equal remuneration for work of equal value

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Recalling International Labour Organization Convention No. 100 concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value, which has been ratified by a large majority of States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

Recalling also that it has considered 51 initial and five second periodic reports of States parties since 1983,

Considering that although reports of States parties indicate that, even though the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value has been accepted in the legislation of many countries, more remains to be done to ensure the application of that principle in practice, in order to overcome the gender- segregation in the labour market,

Recommends to the States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women that:

1. In order to implement fully the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination of against Women, those States parties that have not yet ratified ILO Convention No. 100 should be encouraged to do so;
2. They should consider the study, development and adoption of job evaluation systems based on gender-neutral criteria that would facilitate the comparison of the value of those jobs of a different nature, in which women presently predominate, with those jobs in which men presently predominate, and they should include the results achieved in their reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women;
3. They should support, as far as practicable, the creation of implementation machinery and encourage the efforts of the parties to collective agreements, where they apply, to ensure the application of the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value.

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General Recommendation No. 14 (ninth session, 1990)

Female circumcision

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Concerned about the continuation of the practice of female circumcision and other traditional practices harmful to the health of women,

Noting with satisfaction that Governments, where such practices exist, national women's organizations, non-governmental organizations, and bodies of the United Nations system, such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund, as well as the Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, remain seized of the issue having particularly recognized that such traditional practices as female circumcision have serious health and other consequences for women and children,

Taking note with interest the study of the Special Rapporteur on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children,⁴ and of the study of the Special Working Group on Traditional Practices, ⁵

Recognizing that women are taking important action themselves to identify and to combat practices that are prejudicial to the health and well-being of women and children,

Convinced that the important action that is being taken by women and by all interested groups needs to be supported and encourage by Governments,

Noting with grave concern that there are continuing cultural, traditional and economic pressures which help to perpetuate harmful practices, such as female circumcision,

Recommends that States parties:

(a) Take appropriate and effective measures with a view to eradicating the practice of female circumcision. Such measures could include:

(i) The collection and dissemination by universities, medical or nursing associations, national women's organizations or other bodies of basic data about such traditional practices;

(ii) The support of women's organizations at the national and local levels working for the elimination of female circumcision and other practices harmful to women;

(iii) The encouragement of politicians, professionals, religious and community leaders at all levels, including the media and the arts, to co-operate in influencing attitudes towards the eradication of female circumcision;

(iv) The introduction of appropriate educational and training programmes and seminars based on research findings about the problems arising from female circumcision;

(b) Include in their national health policies appropriate strategies aimed at eradicating female circumcision in public health care. Such strategies could include the special responsibility of health personnel, including traditional birth attendants, to explain the harmful effects of female circumcision;

(c) Invite assistance, information and advice from the appropriate organizations of the United Nations system to support and assist efforts being deployed to eliminate harmful traditional practices;

(d) Include in their reports to the Committee under articles 10 and 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women information about measures taken to eliminate female circumcision.

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General Recommendation No. 15 (ninth session, 1990)

Avoidance of discrimination against women in national strategies for the prevention and control of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Having considered information brought to its attention on the potential effects of both the global pandemic of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and strategies to control it on the exercise of the rights of women,

Having regard to the reports and materials prepared by the World Health Organization and other United Nations organizations, organs and bodies in relation to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and, in particular, the note by the Secretary-General to the Commission on the Status of Women on the effects of AIDS on the advancement of women [6](#) and the Final Document of the International Consultation on AIDS and Human Rights, held at Geneva from 26 to 28 July 1989, [7](#)

Noting World Health Assembly resolution WHA 41.24 on the avoidance of discrimination in relation to HIV-infected people and people with AIDS of 13 May 1988, resolution 1989/11 of the Commission on Human Rights on non-discrimination in the field of health, of 2 March 1989, and in particular the Paris Declaration on Women, Children and AIDS, of 30 November 1989,

Noting that the World Health Organization has announced that the theme of World Aids Day, 1 December 1990, will be "Women and Aids",

Recommends:

(a) That States parties intensify efforts in disseminating information to increase public awareness of the risk of HIV infection and AIDS, especially in women and children, and of its effects on them;

(b) That programmes to combat AIDS should give special attention to the rights and needs of women and children, and to the factors relating to the reproductive role of women and their subordinate position in some societies which make them especially vulnerable to HIV infection;

(c) That States parties ensure the active participation of women in primary health care and take measures to enhance their role as care providers, health workers and educators in the prevention of infection with HIV;

(d) That all States parties include in their reports under article 12 of the Convention information on the effects of AIDS on the situation of women and on the action taken to cater to the needs of those women who are infected and to prevent specific discrimination against women in response to AIDS.

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General Recommendation No. 16 (tenth session, 1991)

Unpaid women workers in rural and urban family enterprises

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Bearing in mind articles 2 (c) and 11 (c), (d) and (e) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and general recommendation No. 9 (eighth session, 1989) on statistical data concerning the situation of women,

Taking into consideration that a high percentage of women in the States parties work without payment, social security and social benefits in enterprises owned usually by a male member of the family,

Noting that the reports presented to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women generally do not refer to the problem of unpaid women workers of family enterprises,

Affirming that unpaid work constitutes a form of women's exploitation that is contrary to the Convention,

Recommends that States parties:

(a) Include in their reports to the Committee information on the legal and social situation of unpaid women working in family enterprises;

(b) Collect statistical data on women who work without payment, social security and social benefits in enterprises owned by a family member, and include these data in their report to the Committee;

(c) Take the necessary steps to guarantee payment, social security and social benefits for women who work without such benefits in enterprises owned by a family member.

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General Recommendation No. 17 (tenth session, 1991)

Measurement and quantification of the unremunerated domestic activities of women and their recognition in the gross national product

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Bearing in mind article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

Recalling paragraph 120 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, [8](#)

Affirming that the measurement and quantification of the unremunerated domestic activities of women, which contribute to development in each country, will help to reveal the de facto economic role of women,

Convinced that such measurement and quantification offers a basis for the formulation of further policies related to the advancement of women,

Noting the discussions of the Statistical Commission, at its twenty-fifth session, on the current revision of the System of National Accounts on the development of statistics on women,

Recommends that States parties:

(a) Encourage and support research and experimental studies to measure and value the unremunerated domestic activities of women; for example, by conducting time-use surveys as part of their national household

survey programmes and by collecting statistics disaggregated by gender on time spent on activities both in the household and on the labour market;

(b) Take steps, in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, to quantify and include the unremunerated domestic activities of women in the gross national product;

(c) Include in their reports submitted under article 18 of the Convention information on the research and experimental studies undertaken to measure and value unremunerated domestic activities, as well as on the progress made in the incorporation of the unremunerated domestic activities of women in national accounts.

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General Recommendation No. 18 (tenth session, 1991)

Disabled women

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Taking into consideration particularly article 3 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,

Having considered more than 60 periodic reports of States parties, and having recognized that they provide scarce information on disabled women,

Concerned about the situation of disabled women, who suffer from a double discrimination linked to their special living conditions,

Recalling paragraph 296 of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, [9](#) in which disabled women are considered as a vulnerable group under the heading "areas of special concern",

Affirming its support for the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons (1982), [10](#)

Recommends that States parties provide information on disabled women in their periodic reports, and on measures taken to deal with their particular situation, including special measures to ensure that they have equal access to education and employment, health services and social security, and to ensure that they can participate in all areas of social and cultural life.

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General Recommendation No. 19 (11th session, 1992)

Violence against women

Background

1. Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men.
2. In 1989, the Committee recommended that States should include in their reports information on violence and on measures introduced to deal with it (General recommendation 12, eighth session).
3. At its tenth session in 1991, it was decided to allocate part of the eleventh session to a discussion and study on article 6 and other articles of the Convention relating to violence towards women and the sexual harassment and exploitation of women. That subject was chosen in anticipation of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, convened by the General Assembly by its resolution 45/155 of 18 December 1990.
4. The Committee concluded that not all the reports of States parties adequately reflected the close connection between discrimination against women, gender-based violence, and violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The full implementation of the Convention required States to take positive measures to eliminate all forms of violence against women.
5. The Committee suggested to States parties that in reviewing their laws and policies, and in reporting under the Convention, they should have regard to the following comments of the Committee concerning gender-based violence.

General comments

6. The Convention in article 1 defines discrimination against women. The definition of discrimination includes gender-based violence, that is, violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. Gender-based violence may breach specific provisions of the Convention, regardless of whether those provisions expressly mention violence.
7. Gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of article 1 of the Convention. These rights and freedoms include:
 - (a) The right to life;
 - (b) The right not to be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
 - (c) The right to equal protection according to humanitarian norms in time of international or internal armed conflict;
 - (d) The right to liberty and security of person;
 - (e) The right to equal protection under the law;

(f) The right to equality in the family;

(g) The right to the highest standard attainable of physical and mental health;

(h) The right to just and favourable conditions of work.

8. The Convention applies to violence perpetrated by public authorities. Such acts of violence may breach that State's obligations under general international human rights law and under other conventions, in addition to breaching this Convention.

9. It is emphasized, however, that discrimination under the Convention is not restricted to action by or on behalf of Governments (see articles 2(e), 2(f) and 5). For example, under article 2(e) the Convention calls on States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise. Under general international law and specific human rights covenants, States may also be responsible for private acts if they fail to act with due diligence to prevent violations of rights or to investigate and punish acts of violence, and for providing compensation.

Comments on specific articles of the Convention

Articles 2 and 3

10. Articles 2 and 3 establish a comprehensive obligation to eliminate discrimination in all its forms in addition to the specific obligations under articles 5-16.

Articles 2(f), 5 and 10(c)

11. Traditional attitudes by which women are regarded as subordinate to men or as having stereotyped roles perpetuate widespread practices involving violence or coercion, such as family violence and abuse, forced marriage, dowry deaths, acid attacks and female circumcision. Such prejudices and practices may justify gender-based violence as a form of protection or control of women. The effect of such violence on the physical and mental integrity of women is to deprive them the equal enjoyment, exercise and knowledge of human rights and fundamental freedoms. While this comment addresses mainly actual or threatened violence the underlying consequences of these forms of gender-based violence help to maintain women in subordinate roles and contribute to the low level of political participation and to their lower level of education, skills and work opportunities.

12. These attitudes also contribute to the propagation of pornography and the depiction and other commercial exploitation of women as sexual objects, rather than as individuals. This in turn contributes to gender-based violence.

Article 6

13. States parties are required by article 6 to take measures to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of the prostitution of women.

14. Poverty and unemployment increase opportunities for trafficking in women. In addition to established forms of trafficking there are new forms of sexual exploitation, such as sex tourism, the recruitment of domestic labour from developing countries to work in developed countries and organized marriages between women from developing countries and foreign nationals. These practices are incompatible with the equal enjoyment of rights by women and with respect for their rights and dignity. They put women at special risk of violence and abuse.

15. Poverty and unemployment force many women, including young girls, into prostitution. Prostitutes are especially vulnerable to violence because their status, which may be unlawful, tends to marginalize them. They need the equal protection of laws against rape and other forms of violence.

16. Wars, armed conflicts and the occupation of territories often lead to increased prostitution, trafficking in women and sexual assault of women, which require specific protective and punitive measures.

Article 11

17. Equality in employment can be seriously impaired when women are subjected to gender-specific violence, such as sexual harassment in the workplace.

18. Sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour as physical contact and advances, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography and sexual demand, whether by words or actions. Such conduct can be humiliating and may constitute a health and safety problem; it is discriminatory when the woman has reasonable grounds to believe that her objection would disadvantage her in connection with her employment, including recruitment or promotion, or when it creates a hostile working environment.

Article 12

19. States parties are required by article 12 to take measures to ensure equal access to health care. Violence against women puts their health and lives at risk.

20. In some States there are traditional practices perpetuated by culture and tradition that are harmful to the health of women and children. These practices include dietary restrictions for pregnant women, preference for male children and female circumcision or genital mutilation.

Article 14

21. Rural women are at risk of gender-based violence because traditional attitudes regarding the subordinate role of women that persist in many rural communities. Girls from rural communities are at special risk of violence and sexual exploitation when they leave the rural community to seek employment in towns.

Article 16 (and article 5)

22. Compulsory sterilization or abortion adversely affects women's physical and mental health, and infringes the right of women to decide on the number and spacing of their children.

23. Family violence is one of the most insidious forms of violence against women. It is prevalent in all societies. Within family relationships women of all ages are subjected to violence of all kinds, including battering, rape, other forms of sexual assault, mental and other forms of violence, which are perpetuated by traditional attitudes. Lack of economic independence forces many women to stay in violent relationships. The abrogation of their family responsibilities by men can be a form of violence, and coercion. These forms of violence put women's health at risk and impair their ability to participate in family life and public life on a basis of equality.

Specific recommendation

24. In light of these comments, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommends that:

(a) States parties should take appropriate and effective measures to overcome all forms of gender-based violence, whether by public or private act;

(b) States parties should ensure that laws against family violence and abuse, rape, sexual assault and other gender-based violence give adequate protection to all women, and respect their integrity and dignity. Appropriate protective and support services should be provided for victims. Gender-sensitive training of judicial and law enforcement officers and other public officials is essential for the effective implementation of the Convention;

(c) States parties should encourage the compilation of statistics and research on the extent, causes and effects of violence, and on the effectiveness of measures to prevent and deal with violence;

(d) Effective measures should be taken to ensure that the media respect and promote respect for women;

(e) States parties in their reports should identify the nature and extent of attitudes, customs and practices that perpetuate violence against women and the kinds of violence that result. They should report on the measures that they have undertaken to overcome violence and the effect of those measures;

(f) Effective measures should be taken to overcome these attitudes and practices. States should introduce education and public information programmes to help eliminate prejudices that hinder women's equality (recommendation No. 3, 1987);

(g) Specific preventive and punitive measures are necessary to overcome trafficking and sexual exploitation;

(h) States parties in their reports should describe the extent of all these problems and the measures, including penal provisions, preventive and rehabilitation measures that have been taken to protect women engaged in prostitution or subject to trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation. The effectiveness of these measures should also be described;

(i) Effective complaints procedures and remedies, including compensation, should be provided;

- (j) States parties should include in their reports information on sexual harassment, and on measures to protect women from sexual harassment and other forms of violence of coercion in the workplace;
- (k) States parties should establish or support services for victims of family violence, rape, sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence, including refuges, specially trained health workers, rehabilitation and counselling;
- (l) States parties should take measures to overcome such practices and should take account of the Committee's recommendation on female circumcision (recommendation No. 14) in reporting on health issues;
- (m) States parties should ensure that measures are taken to prevent coercion in regard to fertility and reproduction, and to ensure that women are not forced to seek unsafe medical procedures such as illegal abortion because of lack of appropriate services in regard to fertility control;
- (n) States parties in their reports should state the extent of these problems and should indicate the measures that have been taken and their effect;
- (o) States parties should ensure that services for victims of violence are accessible to rural women and that where necessary special services are provided to isolated communities;
- (p) Measures to protect them from violence should include training and employment opportunities and the monitoring of the employment conditions of domestic workers;
- (q) States parties should report on the risks to rural women, the extent and nature of violence and abuse to which they are subject, their need for and access to support and other services and the effectiveness of measures to overcome violence;
- (r) Measures that are necessary to overcome family violence should include:
- (i) Criminal penalties where necessary and civil remedies in cases of domestic violence;
- (ii) Legislation to remove the defence of honour in regard to the assault or murder of a female family member;
- (iii) Services to ensure the safety and security of victims of family violence, including refuges, counselling and rehabilitation programmes;
- (iv) Rehabilitation programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence;
- (v) Support services for families where incest or sexual abuse has occurred;
- (s) States parties should report on the extent of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and on the preventive, punitive and remedial measures that have been taken;
- (t) States parties should take all legal and other measures that are necessary to provide effective protection of women against gender-based violence, including, inter alia:

(i) Effective legal measures, including penal sanctions, civil remedies and compensatory provisions to protect women against all kinds of violence, including inter alia violence and abuse in the family, sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace;

(ii) Preventive measures, including public information and education programmes to change attitudes concerning the roles and status of men and women;

(iii) Protective measures, including refuges, counselling, rehabilitation and support services for women who are the victims of violence or who are at risk of violence;

(u) States parties should report on all forms of gender-based violence, and such reports should include all available data on the incidence of each form of violence and on the effects of such violence on the women who are victims;

(v) The reports of States parties should include information on the legal, preventive and protective measures that have been taken to overcome violence against women, and on the effectiveness of such measures.

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General Recommendation No. 20 (11th session, 1992)

Reservations to the Convention

1. The Committee recalled the decision of the fourth meeting of States parties on reservations to the Convention with regard to article 28.2, which was welcomed in General recommendation No. 4 of the Committee.

2. The Committee recommended that, in connection with preparations for the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, States parties should:

(a) Raise the question of the validity and the legal effect of reservations to the Convention in the context of reservations to other human rights treaties;

(b) Reconsider such reservations with a view to strengthening the implementation of all human rights treaties;

(c) Consider introducing a procedure on reservations to the Convention comparable with that of other human rights treaties.

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General Recommendation No. 21 (13th session, 1994)

Equality in marriage and family relations

1. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (General Assembly resolution 34/180, annex) affirms the equality of human rights for women and men in society and in the family. The Convention has an important place among international treaties concerned with human rights.

2. Other conventions and declarations also confer great significance on the family and woman's status within it. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (General Assembly resolution 217/A (III)), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (resolution 2200 A (XXI), annex), the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (resolution 1040 (XI), annex), the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (resolution 1763 A (XVII), annex) and the subsequent Recommendation thereon (resolution 2018 (XX)) and the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. [11](#)

3. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women recalls the inalienable rights of women which are already embodied in the above-mentioned conventions and declarations, but it goes further by recognizing the importance of culture and tradition in shaping the thinking and behaviour of men and women and the significant part they play in restricting the exercise of basic rights by women.

Background

4. The year 1994 has been designated by the General Assembly in its resolution 44/82 as the International Year of the Family. The Committee wishes to take the opportunity to stress the significance of compliance with women's basic rights within the family as one of the measures which will support and encourage the national celebrations that will take place.

5. Having chosen in this way to mark the International Year of the Family, the Committee wishes to analyze three articles in the Convention that have special significance for the status of women in the family:

Article 9

1. States parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality. They shall ensure in particular that neither marriage to an alien nor change of nationality by the husband during marriage shall automatically change the nationality of the wife, render her stateless or force upon her the nationality of the husband.

2. States parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.

Comment

6. Nationality is critical to full participation in society. In general, States confer nationality on those who are born in that country. Nationality can also be acquired by reason of settlement or granted for humanitarian reasons such as statelessness. Without status as nationals or citizens, women are deprived of the right to vote or to stand for public office and may be denied access to public benefits and a choice of residence. Nationality should be capable of change by an adult woman and should not be arbitrarily removed because of marriage or dissolution of marriage or because her husband or father changes his nationality.

Article 15

1. States parties shall accord to women equality with men before the law.
2. States parties shall accord to women, in civil matters, a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity. In particular, they shall give women equal rights to conclude contracts and to administer property and shall treat them equally in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals.
3. States parties agree that all contracts and all other private instruments of any kind with a legal effect which is directed at restricting the legal capacity of women shall be deemed null and void.
4. States parties shall accord to men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile.

Comment

7. When a woman cannot enter into a contract at all, or have access to financial credit, or can do so only with her husband's or a male relative's concurrence or guarantee, she is denied legal autonomy. Any such restriction prevents her from holding property as the sole owner and precludes her from the legal management of her own business or from entering into any other form of contract. Such restrictions seriously limit the woman's ability to provide for herself and her dependents.

8. A woman's right to bring litigation is limited in some countries by law or by her access to legal advice and her ability to seek redress from the courts. In others, her status as a witness or her evidence is accorded less respect or weight than that of a man. Such laws or customs limit the woman's right effectively to pursue or retain her equal share of property and diminish her standing as an independent, responsible and valued member of her community. When countries limit a woman's legal capacity by their laws, or permit individuals or institutions to do the same, they are denying women their rights to be equal with men and restricting women's ability to provide for themselves and their dependents.

9. Domicile is a concept in common law countries referring to the country in which a person intends to reside and to whose jurisdiction she will submit. Domicile is originally acquired by a child through its parents but, in adulthood, denotes the country in which a person normally resides and in which she intends to reside permanently. As in the case of nationality, the examination of States parties' reports demonstrates that a woman will not always be permitted at law to choose her own domicile. Domicile, like nationality, should be capable of change at will by an adult woman regardless of her marital status. Any restrictions on a woman's right to choose a domicile on the same basis as a man may limit her access to the courts in the country in which she lives or prevent her from entering and leaving a country freely and in her own right.

10. Migrant women who live and work temporarily in another country should be permitted the same rights as men to have their spouses, partners and children join them.

Article 16

1. States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

(a) The same right to enter into marriage;

(b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent;

(c) The same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution;

(d) The same rights and responsibilities as parents, irrespective of their marital status, in matters relating to their children; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount;

(e) The same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights;

(f) The same rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption of children, or similar institutions where these concepts exist in national legislation; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount;

(g) The same personal rights as husband and wife, including the right to choose a family name, a profession and an occupation;

(h) The same rights for both spouses in respect of the ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property, whether free of charge or for a valuable consideration.

2. The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.

Comment

Public and private life

11. Historically, human activity in public and private life has been viewed differently and regulated accordingly. In all societies women who have traditionally performed their roles in the private or domestic sphere have long had those activities treated as inferior.

12. As such activities are invaluable for the survival of society, there can be no justification for applying different and discriminatory laws or customs to them. Reports of States parties disclose that there are still countries where de jure equality does not exist. Women are thereby prevented from having equal access to resources and from enjoying equality of status in the family and society. Even where de jure equality exists, all societies assign different roles, which are regarded as inferior, to women. In this way, principles of justice and equality contained in particular in article 16 and also in articles 2, 5 and 24 of the Convention are being violated.

Various forms of family

13. The form and concept of the family can vary from State to State, and even between regions within a State. Whatever form it takes, and whatever the legal system, religion, custom or tradition within the country, the treatment of women in the family both at law and in private must accord with the principles of equality and justice for all people, as article 2 of the Convention requires.

Polygamous marriages

14. States parties' reports also disclose that polygamy is practised in a number of countries. Polygamous marriage contravenes a woman's right to equality with men, and can have such serious emotional and financial consequences for her and her dependents that such marriages ought to be discouraged and prohibited. The Committee notes with concern that some States parties, whose constitutions guarantee equal rights, permit polygamous marriage in accordance with personal or customary law. This violates the constitutional rights of women, and breaches the provisions of article 5 (a) of the Convention.

Article 16 (1) (a) and (b)

15. While most countries report that national constitutions and laws comply with the Convention, custom, tradition and failure to enforce these laws in reality contravene the Convention.

16. A woman's right to choose a spouse and enter freely into marriage is central to her life and to her dignity and equality as a human being. An examination of States parties' reports discloses that there are countries which, on the basis of custom, religious beliefs or the ethnic origins of particular groups of people, permit forced marriages or remarriages. Other countries allow a woman's marriage to be arranged for payment or preferment and in others women's poverty forces them to marry foreign nationals for financial security. Subject to reasonable restrictions based for example on woman's youth or consanguinity with her partner, a woman's right to choose when, if, and whom she will marry must be protected and enforced at law.

Article 16 (1) (c)

17. An examination of States parties' reports discloses that many countries in their legal systems provide for the rights and responsibilities of married partners by relying on the application of common law principles, religious or customary law, rather than by complying with the principles contained in the Convention. These variations in law and practice relating to marriage have wide-ranging consequences for women, invariably restricting their rights to equal status and responsibility within marriage. Such limitations often result in the husband being accorded the status of head of household and primary decision maker and therefore contravene the provisions of the Convention.

18. Moreover, generally a de facto union is not given legal protection at all. Women living in such relationships should have their equality of status with men both in family life and in the sharing of income and assets protected by law. Such women should share equal rights and responsibilities with men for the care and raising of dependent children or family members.

Article 16 (1) (d) and (f)

19. As provided in article 5 (b), most States recognize the shared responsibility of parents for the care, protection and maintenance of children. The principle that "the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration", has been included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly resolution 44/25, annex) and seems now to be universally accepted. However, in practice, some countries do not observe the principle of granting the parents of children equal status, particularly when they are not married. The children of such unions do not always enjoy the same status as those born in wedlock and, where the mothers are divorced or living apart, many fathers fail to share the responsibility of care, protection and maintenance of their children.

20. The shared rights and responsibilities enunciated in the Convention should be enforced at law and as appropriate through legal concepts of guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption. States parties should ensure that by their laws both parents, regardless of their marital status and whether they live with their children or not, share equal rights and responsibilities for their children.

Article 16 (1) (e)

21. The responsibilities that women have to bear and raise children affect their right of access to education, employment and other activities related to their personal development. They also impose inequitable burdens of work on women. The number and spacing of their children have a similar impact on women's lives and also affect their physical and mental health, as well as that of their children. For these reasons, women are entitled to decide on the number and spacing of their children.

22. Some reports disclose coercive practices which have serious consequences for women, such as forced pregnancies, abortions or sterilization. Decisions to have children or not, while preferably made in consultation with spouse or partner, must not nevertheless be limited by spouse, parent, partner or Government. In order to make an informed decision about safe and reliable contraceptive measures, women must have information about contraceptive measures and their use, and guaranteed access to sex education and family planning services, as provided in article 10 (h) of the Convention.

23. There is general agreement that where there are freely available appropriate measures for the voluntary regulation of fertility, the health, development and well-being of all members of the family improves. Moreover, such services improve the general quality of life and health of the population, and the voluntary regulation of population growth helps preserve the environment and achieve sustainable economic and social development.

Article 16 (1) (g)

24. A stable family is one which is based on principles of equity, justice and individual fulfilment for each member. Each partner must therefore have the right to choose a profession or employment that is best suited to his or her abilities, qualifications and aspirations, as provided in article 11 (a) and (c) of the Convention. Moreover, each partner should have the right to choose his or her name, thereby preserving individuality and identity in the community and distinguishing that person from other members of society. When by law or custom a woman is obliged to change her name on marriage or at its dissolution, she is denied these rights.

Article 16 (1) (h)

25. The rights provided in this article overlap with and complement those in article 15 (2) in which an obligation is placed on States to give women equal rights to enter into and conclude contracts and to administer property.

26. Article 15 (1) guarantees women equality with men before the law. The right to own, manage, enjoy and dispose of property is central to a woman's right to enjoy financial independence, and in many countries will be critical to her ability to earn a livelihood and to provide adequate housing and nutrition for herself and for her family.

27. In countries that are undergoing a programme of agrarian reform or redistribution of land among groups of different ethnic origins, the right of women, regardless of marital status, to share such redistributed land on equal terms with men should be carefully observed.

28. In most countries, a significant proportion of the women are single or divorced and many have the sole responsibility to support a family. Any discrimination in the division of property that rests on the premise that the man alone is responsible for the support of the women and children of his family and that he can and will honourably discharge this responsibility is clearly unrealistic. Consequently, any law or custom that grants men a right to a greater share of property at the end of a marriage or de facto relationship, or on the death of a relative, is discriminatory and will have a serious impact on a woman's practical ability to divorce her husband, to support herself or her family and to live in dignity as an independent person.

29. All of these rights should be guaranteed regardless of a woman's marital status.

Marital property

30. There are countries that do not acknowledge that right of women to own an equal share of the property with the husband during a marriage or de facto relationship and when that marriage or relationship ends. Many countries recognize that right, but the practical ability of women to exercise it may be limited by legal precedent or custom.

31. Even when these legal rights are vested in women, and the courts enforce them, property owned by a woman during marriage or on divorce may be managed by a man. In many States, including those where there is a community-property regime, there is no legal requirement that a woman be consulted when property owned by the parties during marriage or de facto relationship is sold or otherwise disposed of. This limits the woman's ability to control disposition of the property or the income derived from it.

32. In some countries, on division of marital property, greater emphasis is placed on financial contributions to property acquired during a marriage, and other contributions, such as raising children, caring for elderly relatives and discharging household duties are diminished. Often, such contributions of a non-financial nature by the wife enable the husband to earn an income and increase the assets. Financial and non-financial contributions should be accorded the same weight.

33. In many countries, property accumulated during a de facto relationship is not treated at law on the same basis as property acquired during marriage. Invariably, if the relationship ends, the woman receives a

significantly lower share than her partner. Property laws and customs that discriminate in this way against married or unmarried women with or without children should be revoked and discouraged.

Inheritance

34. Reports of States parties should include comment on the legal or customary provisions relating to inheritance laws as they affect the status of women as provided in the Convention and in Economic and Social Council resolution 884 D (XXXIV), in which the Council recommended that States ensure that men and women in the same degree of relationship to a deceased are entitled to equal shares in the estate and to equal rank in the order of succession. That provision has not been generally implemented.

35. There are many countries where the law and practice concerning inheritance and property result in serious discrimination against women. As a result of this uneven treatment, women may receive a smaller share of the husband's or father's property at his death than would widowers and sons. In some instances, women are granted limited and controlled rights and receive income only from the deceased's property. Often inheritance rights for widows do not reflect the principles of equal ownership of property acquired during marriage. Such provisions contravene the Convention and should be abolished.

Article 16 (2)

36. In the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action [12](#) adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, held at Vienna from 14 to 25 June 1993, States are urged to repeal existing laws and regulations and to remove customs and practices which discriminate against and cause harm to the girl child. Article 16 (2) and the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child preclude States parties from permitting or giving validity to a marriage between persons who have not attained their majority. In the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". Notwithstanding this definition, and bearing in mind the provisions of the Vienna Declaration, the Committee considers that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 years for both man and woman. When men and women marry, they assume important responsibilities. Consequently, marriage should not be permitted before they have attained full maturity and capacity to act. According to the World Health Organization, when minors, particularly girls, marry and have children, their health can be adversely affected and their education is impeded. As a result their economic autonomy is restricted.

37. This not only affects women personally but also limits the development of their skills and independence and reduces access to employment, thereby detrimentally affecting their families and communities.

38. Some countries provide for different ages for marriage for men and women. As such provisions assume incorrectly that women have a different rate of intellectual development from men, or that their stage of physical and intellectual development at marriage is immaterial, these provisions should be abolished. In other countries, the betrothal of girls or undertakings by family members on their behalf is permitted. Such measures contravene not only the Convention, but also a woman's right freely to choose her partner.

39. States parties should also require the registration of all marriages whether contracted civilly or according to custom or religious law. The State can thereby ensure compliance with the Convention and establish

equality between partners, a minimum age for marriage, prohibition of bigamy and polygamy and the protection of the rights of children.

Recommendations

Violence against women

40. In considering the place of women in family life, the Committee wishes to stress that the provisions of General Recommendation 19 (eleventh session) [13](#) concerning violence against women have great significance for women's abilities to enjoy rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men. States parties are urged to comply with that general recommendation to ensure that, in both public and family life, women will be free of the gender-based violence that so seriously impedes their rights and freedoms as individuals.

Reservations

41. The Committee has noted with alarm the number of States parties which have entered reservations to the whole or part of article 16, especially when a reservation has also been entered to article 2, claiming that compliance may conflict with a commonly held vision of the family based, inter alia, on cultural or religious beliefs or on the country's economic or political status.

42. Many of these countries hold a belief in the patriarchal structure of a family which places a father, husband or son in a favourable position. In some countries where fundamentalist or other extremist views or economic hardships have encouraged a return to old values and traditions, women's place in the family has deteriorated sharply. In others, where it has been recognized that a modern society depends for its economic advance and for the general good of the community on involving all adults equally, regardless of gender, these taboos and reactionary or extremist ideas have progressively been discouraged.

43. Consistent with articles 2, 3 and 24 in particular, the Committee requires that all States parties gradually progress to a stage where, by its resolute discouragement of notions of the inequality of women in the home, each country will withdraw its reservation, in particular to articles 9, 15 and 16 of the Convention.

44. States parties should resolutely discourage any notions of inequality of women and men which are affirmed by laws, or by religious or private law or by custom, and progress to the stage where reservations, particularly to article 16, will be withdrawn.

45. The Committee noted, on the basis of its examination of initial and subsequent periodic reports, that in some States parties to the Convention that had ratified or acceded without reservation, certain laws, especially those dealing with family, do not actually conform to the provisions of the Convention.

46. Their laws still contain many measures which discriminate against women based on norms, customs and socio-cultural prejudices. These States, because of their specific situation regarding these articles, make it difficult for the Committee to evaluate and understand the status of women.

47. The Committee, in particular on the basis of articles 1 and 2 of the Convention, requests that those States parties make the necessary efforts to examine the de facto situation relating to the issues and to introduce the required measures in their national legislations still containing provisions discriminatory to women.

Reports 48. Assisted by the comments in the present general recommendation, in their reports States parties should:

(a) Indicate the stage that has been reached in the country's progress to removal of all reservations to the Convention, in particular reservations to article 16;

(b) Set out whether their laws comply with the principles of articles 9, 15 and 16 and where, by reason of religious or private law or custom, compliance with the law or with the Convention is impeded.

Legislation

49. States parties should, where necessary to comply with the Convention, in particular in order to comply with articles 9, 15 and 16, enact and enforce legislation.

Encouraging compliance with the Convention

50. Assisted by the comments in the present general recommendation, and as required by articles 2, 3 and 24, States parties should introduce measures directed at encouraging full compliance with the principles of the Convention, particularly where religious or private law or custom conflict with those principles.

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General Recommendation No. 22 (14th session, 1995)

Amending article 10 of the Convention

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,

Noting that the States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, at the request of the General Assembly, will meet during 1995 to consider amending article 20 of the Convention,

Recalling its previous decision, taken at its tenth session, to ensure effectiveness in its work and prevent the building up of an undesirable backlog in the consideration of reports of States parties,

Recalling that the Convention is one of the international human rights instruments that has been ratified by the largest number of States parties,

Considering that the articles of the Convention address the fundamental human rights of women in all aspects of their daily lives and in all areas of society and the State,

Concerned about the workload of the Committee as a result of the growing number of ratifications, in addition to the backlog of reports pending consideration, as reflected in annex I,

Concerned also about the long lapse of time between the submission of reports of States parties and their consideration, resulting in the need for States to provide additional information for updating their reports,

Bearing in mind that the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women is the only human rights treaty body whose meeting time is limited by its Convention, and that it has the shortest duration of meeting time of all the human rights treaty bodies, as reflected in annex II,

Noting that the limitation on the duration of sessions, as contained in the Convention, has become a serious obstacle to the effective performance by the Committee of its functions under the Convention,

1. Recommends that the States parties favourably consider amending article 20 of the Convention in respect of the meeting time of the Committee, so as to allow it to meet annually for such duration as is necessary for the effective performance of its functions under the Convention, with no specific restriction except for that which the General Assembly shall decide;
2. Recommends also that the General Assembly, pending the completion of an amendment process, authorize the Committee to meet exceptionally in 1996 for two sessions, each of three weeks' duration and each being preceded by pre-session working groups;
3. Recommends further that the meeting of States parties receive an oral report from the chairperson of the Committee on the difficulties faced by the Committee in performing its functions;
4. Recommends that the Secretary-General make available to the States parties at their meeting all relevant information on the workload of the Committee and comparative information in respect of the other human rights treaty bodies.

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General Recommendation No. 23 (16th session, 1997)

Article 7 (political and public life)

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;

(c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

Background

1. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women places special importance on the participation of women in the public life of their countries. The preamble to the Convention states in part:

"Recalling that discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity".

2. The Convention further reiterates in its preamble the importance of women's participation in decision-making as follows:

"Convinced that the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields".

3. Moreover, in article 1 of the Convention, the term "discrimination against women" is interpreted to mean:

"any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field".

4. Other conventions, declarations and international analyses place great importance on the participation of women in public life and have set a framework of international standards of equality. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,[14](#) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,[15](#) the Convention on the Political Rights of Women,[16](#) the Vienna Declaration,[17](#) paragraph 13 of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,[18](#) general recommendations 5 and 8 under the Convention,[19](#) general comment 25 adopted by the Human Rights Committee,[20](#) the recommendation adopted by the Council of the European Union on balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process[21](#) and the European Commission's "How to Create a Gender Balance in Political Decision-making".[22](#)

5. Article 7 obliges States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life and to ensure that they enjoy equality with men in political and public life. The obligation specified in article 7 extends to all areas of public and political life and is not limited to those areas specified in subparagraphs (a), (b) and (c). The political and public life of a country is a broad concept. It refers to the exercise of political power, in particular the exercise of legislative, judicial, executive and administrative powers. The term covers all aspects of public administration and the formulation and implementation of policy at the international, national, regional and local levels. The concept also includes many aspects of civil society, including public boards and local councils and the activities of organizations

such as political parties, trade unions, professional or industry associations, women's organizations, community-based organizations and other organizations concerned with public and political life.

6. The Convention envisages that, to be effective, this equality must be achieved within the framework of a political system in which each citizen enjoys the right to vote and be elected at genuine periodic elections held on the basis of universal suffrage and by secret ballot, in such a way as to guarantee the free expression of the will of the electorate, as provided for under international human rights instruments, such as article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

7. The Convention's emphasis on the importance of equality of opportunity and of participation in public life and decision-making has led the Committee to review article 7 and to suggest to States parties that in reviewing their laws and policies and in reporting under the Convention, they should take into account the comments and recommendations set out below.

Comments

8. Public and private spheres of human activity have always been considered distinct, and have been regulated accordingly. Invariably, women have been assigned to the private or domestic sphere, associated with reproduction and the raising of children, and in all societies these activities have been treated as inferior. By contrast, public life, which is respected and honoured, extends to a broad range of activity outside the private and domestic sphere. Men historically have both dominated public life and exercised the power to confine and subordinate women within the private sphere.

9. Despite women's central role in sustaining the family and society and their contribution to development, they have been excluded from political life and the decision-making process, which nonetheless determine the pattern of their daily lives and the future of societies. Particularly in times of crisis, this exclusion has silenced women's voices and rendered invisible their contribution and experiences.

10. In all nations, the most significant factors inhibiting women's ability to participate in public life have been the cultural framework of values and religious beliefs, the lack of services and men's failure to share the tasks associated with the organization of the household and with the care and raising of children. In all nations, cultural traditions and religious beliefs have played a part in confining women to the private spheres of activity and excluding them from active participation in public life.

11. Relieving women of some of the burdens of domestic work would allow them to engage more fully in the life of their communities. Women's economic dependence on men often prevents them from making important political decisions and from participating actively in public life. Their double burden of work and their economic dependence, coupled with the long or inflexible hours of both public and political work, prevent women from being more active.

12. Stereotyping, including that perpetrated by the media, confines women in political life to issues such as the environment, children and health, and excludes them from responsibility for finance, budgetary control and conflict resolution. The low involvement of women in the professions from which politicians are recruited

can create another obstacle. In countries where women leaders do assume power this can be the result of the influence of their fathers, husbands or male relatives rather than electoral success in their own right.

Political systems

13. The principle of equality of women and men has been affirmed in the constitutions and laws of most countries and in all international instruments. Nonetheless, in the last 50 years, women have not achieved equality, and their inequality has been reinforced by their low level of participation in public and political life. Policies developed and decisions made by men alone reflect only part of human experience and potential. The just and effective organization of society demands the inclusion and participation of all its members.

14. No political system has conferred on women both the right to and the benefit of full and equal participation. While democratic systems have improved women's opportunities for involvement in political life, the many economic, social and cultural barriers they continue to face have seriously limited their participation. Even historically stable democracies have failed to integrate fully and equally the opinions and interests of the female half of the population. Societies in which women are excluded from public life and decision-making cannot be described as democratic. The concept of democracy will have real and dynamic meaning and lasting effect only when political decision-making is shared by women and men and takes equal account of the interests of both. The examination of States parties' reports shows that where there is full and equal participation of women in public life and decision-making, the implementation of their rights and compliance with the Convention improves.

Temporary special measures

15. While removal of de jure barriers is necessary, it is not sufficient. Failure to achieve full and equal participation of women can be unintentional and the result of outmoded practices and procedures which inadvertently promote men. Under article 4, the Convention encourages the use of temporary special measures in order to give full effect to articles 7 and 8. Where countries have developed effective temporary strategies in an attempt to achieve equality of participation, a wide range of measures has been implemented, including recruiting, financially assisting and training women candidates, amending electoral procedures, developing campaigns directed at equal participation, setting numerical goals and quotas and targeting women for appointment to public positions such as the judiciary or other professional groups that play an essential part in the everyday life of all societies. The formal removal of barriers and the introduction of temporary special measures to encourage the equal participation of both men and women in the public life of their societies are essential prerequisites to true equality in political life. In order, however, to overcome centuries of male domination of the public sphere, women also require the encouragement and support of all sectors of society to achieve full and effective participation, encouragement which must be led by States parties to the Convention, as well as by political parties and public officials. States parties have an obligation to ensure that temporary special measures are clearly designed to support the principle of equality and therefore comply with constitutional principles which guarantee equality to all citizens.

Summary

16. The critical issue, emphasized in the Beijing Platform for Action,[23](#) is the gap between the de jure and de facto, or the right as against the reality of women's participation in politics and public life generally. Research

demonstrates that if women's participation reaches 30 to 35 per cent (generally termed a "critical mass"), there is a real impact on political style and the content of decisions, and political life is revitalized.

17. In order to achieve broad representation in public life, women must have full equality in the exercise of political and economic power; they must be fully and equally involved in decision-making at all levels, both nationally and internationally, so that they may make their contribution to the goals of equality, development and the achievement of peace. A gender perspective is critical if these goals are to be met and if true democracy is to be assured. For these reasons, it is essential to involve women in public life to take advantage of their contribution, to assure their interests are protected and to fulfil the guarantee that the enjoyment of human rights is for all people regardless of gender. Women's full participation is essential not only for their empowerment but also for the advancement of society as a whole.

The right to vote and to be elected (article 7, para. (a))

18. The Convention obliges States parties in constitutions or legislation to take appropriate steps to ensure that women, on the basis of equality with men, enjoy the right to vote in all elections and referendums, and to be elected. These rights must be enjoyed both de jure and de facto.

19. The examination of the reports of States parties demonstrates that, while almost all have adopted constitutional or other legal provisions that grant to both women and men the equal right to vote in all elections and public referendums, in many nations women continue to experience difficulties in exercising this right.

20. Factors which impede these rights include the following:

(a) Women frequently have less access than men to information about candidates and about party political platforms and voting procedures, information which Governments and political parties have failed to provide. Other important factors that inhibit women's full and equal exercise of their right to vote include their illiteracy, their lack of knowledge and understanding of political systems or about the impact that political initiatives and policies will have upon their lives. Failure to understand the rights, responsibilities and opportunities for change conferred by franchise also means that women are not always registered to vote;

(b) Women's double burden of work, as well as financial constraints, will limit women's time or opportunity to follow electoral campaigns and to have the full freedom to exercise their vote;

(c) In many nations, traditions and social and cultural stereotypes discourage women from exercising their right to vote. Many men influence or control the votes of women by persuasion or direct action, including voting on their behalf. Any such practices should be prevented;²

(d) Other factors that in some countries inhibit women's involvement in the public or political lives of their communities include restrictions on their freedom of movement or right to participate, prevailing negative attitudes towards women's political participation, or a lack of confidence in and support for female candidates by the electorate. In addition, some women consider involvement in politics to be distasteful and avoid participation in political campaigns.

21. These factors at least partially explain the paradox that women, who represent half of all electorates, do not wield their political power or form blocs which would promote their interests or change government, or eliminate discriminatory policies.

22. The system of balloting, the distribution of seats in Parliament, the choice of district, all have a significant impact on the proportion of women elected to Parliament. Political parties must embrace the principles of equal opportunity and democracy and endeavour to balance the number of male and female candidates.

23. The enjoyment of the right to vote by women should not be subject to restrictions or conditions that do not apply to men or that have a disproportionate impact on women. For example, limiting the right to vote to persons who have a specified level of education, who possess a minimum property qualification or who are literate is not only unreasonable, it may violate the universal guarantee of human rights. It is also likely to have a disproportionate impact on women, thereby contravening the provisions of the Convention.

The right to participate in formulation of government policy (article 7, para. (b))

24. The participation of women in government at the policy level continues to be low in general. Although significant progress has been made and in some countries equality has been achieved, in many countries women's participation has actually been reduced.

25. Article 7 (b) also requires States parties to ensure that women have the right to participate fully in and be represented in public policy formulation in all sectors and at all levels. This would facilitate the mainstreaming of gender issues and contribute a gender perspective to public policy-making.

26. States parties have a responsibility, where it is within their control, both to appoint women to senior decision-making roles and, as a matter of course, to consult and incorporate the advice of groups which are broadly representative of women's views and interests.

27. States parties have a further obligation to ensure that barriers to women's full participation in the formulation of government policy are identified and overcome. These barriers include complacency when token women are appointed, and traditional and customary attitudes that discourage women's participation. When women are not broadly represented in the senior levels of government or are inadequately or not consulted at all, government policy will not be comprehensive and effective.

28. While States parties generally hold the power to appoint women to senior cabinet and administrative positions, political parties also have a responsibility to ensure that women are included in party lists and nominated for election in areas where they have a likelihood of electoral success. States parties should also endeavour to ensure that women are appointed to government advisory bodies on an equal basis with men and that these bodies take into account, as appropriate, the views of representative women's groups. It is the Government's fundamental responsibility to encourage these initiatives to lead and guide public opinion and change attitudes that discriminate against women or discourage women's involvement in political and public life.

29. Measures that have been adopted by a number of States parties in order to ensure equal participation by women in senior cabinet and administrative positions and as members of government advisory bodies include: adoption of a rule whereby, when potential appointees are equally qualified, preference will be given to a

woman nominee; the adoption of a rule that neither sex should constitute less than 40 per cent of the members of a public body; a quota for women members of cabinet and for appointment to public office; and consultation with women's organizations to ensure that qualified women are nominated for membership in public bodies and offices and the development and maintenance of registers of such women in order to facilitate the nomination of women for appointment to public bodies and posts. Where members are appointed to advisory bodies upon the nomination of private organizations, States parties should encourage these organizations to nominate qualified and suitable women for membership in these bodies.

The right to hold public office and to perform all public functions (article 7, para. (b))

30. The examination of the reports of States parties demonstrates that women are excluded from top-ranking positions in cabinets, the civil service and in public administration, in the judiciary and in justice systems. Women are rarely appointed to these senior or influential positions and while their numbers may in some States be increasing at the lower levels and in posts usually associated with the home or the family, they form only a tiny minority in decision-making positions concerned with economic policy or development, political affairs, defence, peacemaking missions, conflict resolution or constitutional interpretation and determination.

31. Examination of the reports of States parties also demonstrates that in certain cases the law excludes women from exercising royal powers, from serving as judges in religious or traditional tribunals vested with jurisdiction on behalf of the State or from full participation in the military. These provisions discriminate against women, deny to society the advantages of their involvement and skills in these areas of the life of their communities and contravene the principles of the Convention.

The right to participate in non-governmental and public and political organizations (article 7, para. (c))

32. An examination of the reports of States parties demonstrates that, on the few occasions when information concerning political parties is provided, women are under-represented or concentrated in less influential roles than men. As political parties are an important vehicle in decision-making roles, Governments should encourage political parties to examine the extent to which women are full and equal participants in their activities and, where this is not the case, should identify the reasons for this. Political parties should be encouraged to adopt effective measures, including the provision of information, financial and other resources, to overcome obstacles to women's full participation and representation and ensure that women have an equal opportunity in practice to serve as party officials and to be nominated as candidates for election.

33. Measures that have been adopted by some political parties include setting aside for women a certain minimum number or percentage of positions on their executive bodies, ensuring that there is a balance between the number of male and female candidates nominated for election, and ensuring that women are not consistently assigned to less favourable constituencies or to the least advantageous positions on a party list. States parties should ensure that such temporary special measures are specifically permitted under anti-discrimination legislation or other constitutional guarantees of equality.

34. Other organizations such as trade unions and political parties have an obligation to demonstrate their commitment to the principle of gender equality in their constitutions, in the application of those rules and in the composition of their memberships with gender-balanced representation on their executive boards so that these bodies may benefit from the full and equal participation of all sectors of society and from contributions

made by both sexes. These organizations also provide a valuable training ground for women in political skills, participation and leadership, as do non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Article 8 (international level)

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

Comments

35. Under article 8, Governments are obliged to ensure the presence of women at all levels and in all areas of international affairs. This requires that they be included in economic and military matters, in both multilateral and bilateral diplomacy, and in official delegations to international and regional conferences.

36. From an examination of the reports of States parties, it is evident that women are grossly under-represented in the diplomatic and foreign services of most Governments, and particularly at the highest ranks. Women tend to be assigned to embassies of lesser importance to the country's foreign relations and in some cases women are discriminated against in terms of their appointments by restrictions pertaining to their marital status. In other instances spousal and family benefits accorded to male diplomats are not available to women in parallel positions. Opportunities for women to engage in international work are often denied because of assumptions about their domestic responsibilities, including that the care of family dependants will prevent them accepting appointment.

37. Many permanent missions to the United Nations and to other international organizations have no women among their diplomats and very few at senior levels. The situation is similar at expert meetings and conferences that establish international and global goals, agendas and priorities. Organizations of the United Nations system and various economic, political and military structures at the regional level have become important international public employers, but here, too, women have remained a minority concentrated in lower-level positions.

38. There are few opportunities for women and men, on equal terms, to represent Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations. This is frequently the result of an absence of objective criteria and processes for appointment and promotion to relevant positions and official delegations.

39. The globalization of the contemporary world makes the inclusion of women and their participation in international organizations, on equal terms with men, increasingly important. The integration of a gender perspective and women's human rights into the agenda of all international bodies is a government imperative. Many crucial decisions on global issues, such as peacemaking and conflict resolution, military expenditure and nuclear disarmament, development and the environment, foreign aid and economic restructuring, are taken with limited participation of women. This is in stark contrast to their participation in these areas at the non-governmental level.

40. The inclusion of a critical mass of women in international negotiations, peacekeeping activities, all levels of preventive diplomacy, mediation, humanitarian assistance, social reconciliation, peace negotiations and the

international criminal justice system will make a difference. In addressing armed or other conflicts, a gender perspective and analysis is necessary to understand their differing effects on women and men.[24](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Articles 7 and 8

41. States parties should ensure that their constitutions and legislation comply with the principles of the Convention, and in particular with articles 7 and 8.

42. States parties are under an obligation to take all appropriate measures, including the enactment of appropriate legislation that complies with their Constitution, to ensure that organizations such as political parties and trade unions, which may not be subject directly to obligations under the Convention, do not discriminate against women and respect the principles contained in articles 7 and 8.

43. States parties should identify and implement temporary special measures to ensure the equal representation of women in all fields covered by articles 7 and 8.

44. States parties should explain the reason for, and effect of, any reservations to articles 7 or 8 and indicate where the reservations reflect traditional, customary or stereotyped attitudes towards women's roles in society, as well as the steps being taken by the States parties to change those attitudes. States parties should keep the necessity for such reservations under close review and in their reports include a timetable for their removal.

Article 7

45. Measures that should be identified, implemented and monitored for effectiveness include, under article 7, paragraph (a), those designed to:

- (a) Achieve a balance between women and men holding publicly elected positions;
- (b) Ensure that women understand their right to vote, the importance of this right and how to exercise it;
- (c) Ensure that barriers to equality are overcome, including those resulting from illiteracy, language, poverty and impediments to women's freedom of movement;
- (d) Assist women experiencing such disadvantages to exercise their right to vote and to be elected.

46. Under article 7, paragraph (b), such measures include those designed to ensure:

- (a) Equality of representation of women in the formulation of government policy;
- (b) Women's enjoyment in practice of the equal right to hold public office;
- (c) Recruiting processes directed at women that are open and subject to appeal.

47. Under article 7, paragraph (c), such measures include those designed to:

- (a) Ensure that effective legislation is enacted prohibiting discrimination against women;
- (b) Encourage non-governmental organizations and public and political associations to adopt strategies that encourage women's representation and participation in their work.

48. When reporting under article 7, States parties should:

- (a) Describe the legal provisions that give effect to the rights contained in article 7;
- (b) Provide details of any restrictions to those rights, whether arising from legal provisions or from traditional, religious or cultural practices;
- (c) Describe the measures introduced and designed to overcome barriers to the exercise of those rights;
- (d) Include statistical data, disaggregated by sex, showing the percentage of women relative to men who enjoy those rights;
- (e) Describe the types of policy formulation, including that associated with development programmes, in which women participate and the level and extent of their participation;
- (f) Under article 7, paragraph (c), describe the extent to which women participate in non-governmental organizations in their countries, including in women's organizations;
- (g) Analyse the extent to which the State party ensures that those organizations are consulted and the impact of their advice on all levels of government policy formulation and implementation;
- (h) Provide information concerning, and analyse factors contributing to, the under-representation of women as members and officials of political parties, trade unions, employers organizations and professional associations.

Article 8

49. Measures which should be identified, implemented and monitored for effectiveness include those designed to ensure a better gender balance in membership of all United Nations bodies, including the Main Committees of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and expert bodies, including treaty bodies, and in appointments to independent working groups or as country or special rapporteurs.

50. When reporting under article 8, States parties should:

- (a) Provide statistics, disaggregated by sex, showing the percentage of women in their foreign service or regularly engaged in international representation or in work on behalf of the State, including membership in government delegations to international conferences and nominations for peacekeeping or conflict resolution roles, and their seniority in the relevant sector;

(b) Describe efforts to establish objective criteria and processes for appointment and promotion of women to relevant positions and official delegations;

(c) Describe steps taken to disseminate widely information on the Government's international commitments affecting women and official documents issued by multilateral forums, in particular, to both governmental and non-governmental bodies responsible for the advancement of women;

(d) Provide information concerning discrimination against women because of their political activities, whether as individuals or as members of women's or other organizations.

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General Recommendation No. 24 (20th session, 1999)

(article 12 : Women and health)

Introduction

1. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, affirming that access to health care, including reproductive health is a basic right under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, determined at its 20th session, pursuant to article 21, to elaborate a general recommendation on article 12 of the Convention.

Background

2. States parties' compliance with article 12 of the Convention is central to the health and well-being of women. It requires States to eliminate discrimination against women in their access to health care services, throughout the life cycle, particularly in the areas of family planning, pregnancy, confinement and during the post-natal period. The examination of reports submitted by States parties pursuant to article 18 of the Convention demonstrates that women's health is an issue that is recognized as a central concern in promoting the health and well-being of women. For the benefit of States parties and those who have a particular interest in and concern with the issues surrounding women's health, the present general recommendation seeks to elaborate the Committee's understanding of article 12 and to address measures to eliminate discrimination in order to realize the right of women to the highest attainable standard of health.

3. Recent United Nations world conferences have also considered these objectives. In preparing this general recommendation, the Committee has taken into account relevant programmes of action adopted at United Nations world conferences and, in particular, those of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. The Committee has also noted the work of the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other United Nations bodies. It has also collaborated with a large number of non-governmental organizations with a special expertise in women's health in preparing this general recommendation.

4. The Committee notes the emphasis which other United Nations instruments place on the right to health and to the conditions which enable good health to be achieved. Among such instruments are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

5. The Committee refers also to its earlier general recommendations on female circumcision, human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), disabled women, violence against women and equality in family relations, all of which refer to issues which are integral to full compliance with article 12 of the Convention.

6. While biological differences between women and men may lead to differences in health status, there are societal factors which are determinative of the health status of women and men and which can vary among women themselves. For that reason, special attention should be given to the health needs and rights of women belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, such as migrant women, refugee and internally displaced women, the girl child and older women, women in prostitution, indigenous women and women with physical or mental disabilities.

7. The Committee notes that the full realization of women's right to health can be achieved only when States parties fulfil their obligation to respect, protect and promote women's fundamental human right to nutritional well-being throughout their life span by means of a food supply that is safe, nutritious and adapted to local conditions. Towards this end, States parties should take steps to facilitate physical and economic access to productive resources especially for rural women, and to otherwise ensure that the special nutritional needs of all women within their jurisdiction are met.

Article 12

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning.

2. Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph 1 of this article, States Parties shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation.

8. States parties are encouraged to address the issue of women's health throughout the woman's lifespan. For the purposes of this general recommendation, therefore, *women* includes girls and adolescents. This general recommendation will set out the Committee's analysis of the key elements of article 12.

Key elements

Article 12 (1)

9. States parties are in the best position to report on the most critical health issues affecting women in that country. Therefore, in order to enable the Committee to evaluate whether *measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care* are appropriate, States parties must report on their health legislation,

plans and policies for women with reliable data disaggregated by sex on the incidence and severity of diseases and conditions hazardous to women's health and nutrition and on the availability and cost-effectiveness of preventive and curative measures. Reports to the Committee must demonstrate that health legislation, plans and policies are based on scientific and ethical research and assessment of the health status and needs of women in that country and take into account any ethnic, regional or community variations or practices based on religion, tradition or culture.

10. States parties are encouraged to include in their reports information on diseases, health conditions and conditions hazardous to health that affect women or certain groups of women differently from men, as well as information on possible intervention in this regard.

11. Measures to eliminate discrimination against women are considered to be inappropriate if a health care system lacks services to prevent, detect and treat illnesses specific to women. It is discriminatory for a State party to refuse to legally provide for the performance of certain reproductive health services for women. For instance, if health service providers refuse to perform such services based on conscientious objection, measures should be introduced to ensure that women are referred to alternative health providers.

12. States parties should report on their understanding of how policies and measures on *health care* address the health rights of women from the perspective of women's needs and interests and how it addresses distinctive features and factors which differ for women in comparison to men, such as:

(a) Biological factors which differ for women in comparison with men, such as their menstrual cycle and their reproductive function and menopause. Another example is the higher risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases which women face;

(b) Socio-economic factors that vary for women in general and some groups of women in particular. For example, unequal power relationships between women and men in the home and workplace may negatively affect women's nutrition and health. They may also be exposed to different forms of violence which can affect their health. Girl children and adolescent girls are often vulnerable to sexual abuse by older men and family members, placing them at risk of physical and psychological harm and unwanted and early pregnancy. Some cultural or traditional practices such as female genital mutilation also carry a high risk of death and disability;

(c) Psychosocial factors which vary between women and men include depression in general and post-partum depression in particular as well as other psychological conditions, such as those that lead to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia;

(d) While lack of respect for the confidentiality of patients will affect both men and women, it may deter women from seeking advice and treatment and thereby adversely affect their health and well-being. Women will be less willing, for that reason, to seek medical care for diseases of the genital tract, for contraception or for incomplete abortion and in cases where they have suffered sexual or physical violence.

13. The duty of States parties to *ensure, on a basis of equality between men and women, access to health care services, information and education* implies an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil women's rights to health care. States parties have the responsibility to ensure that legislation and executive action and policy comply

with these three obligations. They must also put in place a system which ensures effective judicial action. Failure to do so will constitute a violation of article 12.

14. The obligation to *respect rights* requires States parties to refrain from obstructing action taken by women in pursuit of their health goals. States parties should report on how public and private health care providers meet their duties to respect women's rights to have access to health care. For example, States parties should not restrict women's access to health services or to the clinics that provide those services on the ground that women do not have the authorization of husbands, partners, parents or health authorities, because they are unmarried²⁵ or because they are women. Other barriers to women's access to appropriate health care include laws that criminalize medical procedures only needed by women and that punish women who undergo those procedures.

15. The obligation to *protect rights* relating to women's health requires States parties, their agents and officials to take action to prevent and impose sanctions for violations of rights by private persons and organizations. Since gender-based violence is a critical health issue for women, States parties should ensure:

(a) The enactment and effective enforcement of laws and the formulation of policies, including health care protocols and hospital procedures to address violence against women and abuse of girl children and the provision of appropriate health services;

(b) Gender-sensitive training to enable health care workers to detect and manage the health consequences of gender-based violence;

(c) Fair and protective procedures for hearing complaints and imposing appropriate sanctions on health care professionals guilty of sexual abuse of women patients;

(d) The enactment and effective enforcement of laws that prohibit female genital mutilation and marriage of girl children.

16. States parties should ensure that adequate protection and health services, including trauma treatment and counselling, are provided for women in especially difficult circumstances, such as those trapped in situations of armed conflict and women refugees.

17. The duty to *fulfil rights* places an obligation on States parties to take appropriate legislative, judicial, administrative, budgetary, economic and other measures to the maximum extent of their available resources to ensure that women realize their rights to health care. Studies such as those which emphasize the high maternal mortality and morbidity rates worldwide and the large numbers of couples who would like to limit their family size but lack access to or do not use any form of contraception provide an important indication for States parties of possible breaches of their duties to ensure women's access to health care. The Committee asks States parties to report on what they have done to address the magnitude of women's ill-health, in particular when it arises from preventable conditions, such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. The Committee is concerned at the growing evidence that States are relinquishing these obligations as they transfer State health functions to private agencies. States parties cannot absolve themselves of responsibility in these areas by delegating or transferring these powers to private sector agencies. States parties should therefore report on what they have done to organize governmental processes and all structures through which public power is exercised to promote and protect women's health. They should include information on positive measures taken

to curb violations of women's rights by third parties, to protect their health and the measures they have taken to ensure the provision of such services.

18. The issues of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted disease are central to the rights of women and adolescent girls to sexual health. Adolescent girls and women in many countries lack adequate access to information and services necessary to ensure sexual health. As a consequence of unequal power relations based on gender, women and adolescent girls are often unable to refuse sex or insist on safe and responsible sex practices. Harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, polygamy, as well as marital rape, may also expose girls and women to the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Women in prostitution are also particularly vulnerable to these diseases. States parties should ensure, without prejudice and discrimination, the right to sexual health information, education and services for all women and girls, including those who have been trafficked, including those who have been trafficked, even if they are not legally resident in the country. In particular, States parties should ensure the rights of female and male adolescents to sexual and reproductive health education by properly trained personnel in specially designed programmes that respect their rights to privacy and confidentiality.

19. In their reports States parties should identify the test by which they assess whether women have access to health care *on a basis of equality of men and women* in order to demonstrate compliance with article 12. In applying these tests, States parties should bear in mind the provisions of article 1 of the Convention. Reports should therefore include comments on the impact that health policies, procedures, laws and protocols have on women when compared with men.

20. Women have the right to be fully informed, by properly trained personnel, of their options in agreeing to treatment or research, including likely benefits and potential adverse effects of proposed procedures and available alternatives.

21. States parties should report on measures taken to eliminate barriers that women face in gaining *access to health care services* and what measures they have taken to ensure women timely and affordable access to such services. Barriers include requirements or conditions that prejudice women's access such as high fees for health care services, the requirement for preliminary authorization by spouse, parent or hospital authorities, distance from health facilities and absence of convenient and affordable public transport.

22. States parties should also report on measures taken to ensure access to quality health care services, for example, by making them acceptable to women. Acceptable services are those which are delivered in a way that ensures that a woman gives her fully informed consent, respects her dignity, guarantees her confidentiality and is sensitive to her needs and perspectives. States parties should not permit forms of coercion, such as non-consensual sterilization, mandatory testing for sexually transmitted diseases or mandatory pregnancy testing as a condition of employment that violate women's rights to informed consent and dignity.

23. In their reports, States parties should state what measures they have taken to ensure timely access to the range of services which are *related to family planning*, in particular, and to sexual and reproductive health in general. Particular attention should be paid to the health education of adolescents, including information and counselling on all methods of family planning.²⁶

24. The Committee is concerned about the conditions of health care services for older women, not only because women often live longer than men and are more likely than men to suffer from disabling and

degenerative chronic diseases, such as osteoporosis and dementia, but because they often have the responsibility for their ageing spouses. Therefore, States parties should take appropriate measures to ensure the access of older women to health services that address the handicaps and disabilities associated with ageing.

25. Women with disabilities, of all ages, often have difficulty with physical access to health services. Women with mental disabilities are particularly vulnerable, while there is limited understanding, in general, of the broad range of risks to mental health to which women are disproportionately susceptible as a result of gender discrimination, violence, poverty, armed conflict, dislocation and other forms of social deprivation. States parties should take appropriate measures to ensure that health services are sensitive to the needs of women with disabilities and are respectful of their human rights and dignity.

Article 12 (2)

26. Reports should also include what measures States parties have taken to ensure women appropriate services *in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period*. Information on the rates at which these measures have reduced maternal mortality and morbidity in their countries, in general, and in vulnerable groups, regions and communities, in particular, should also be included.

27. States parties should include in their reports how they supply *free services where necessary* to ensure safe pregnancies, childbirth and post-partum periods for women. Many women are at risk of death or disability from pregnancy-related causes because they lack the funds to obtain or access the necessary services, which include ante-natal, maternity and post-natal services. The Committee notes that it is the duty of States parties to ensure women's right to safe motherhood and emergency obstetric services and they should allocate to these services the maximum extent of available resources.

Other relevant articles in the Convention

28. When reporting on measures taken to comply with article 12, States parties are urged to recognize its interconnection with other articles in the Convention that have a bearing on women's health. Those articles include article 5 (b), which requires States parties to ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function; article 10, which requires States parties to ensure equal access to education, thus enabling women to access health care more readily and reducing female students' drop-out rates, which are often due to premature pregnancy; article 10(h) which provides that States parties provide to women and girls specific educational information to help ensure the well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning; article 11, which is concerned, in part, with the protection of women's health and safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the reproductive function, special protection from harmful types of work during pregnancy and with the provision of paid maternity leave; article 14 (2) (b), which requires States parties to ensure access for rural women to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning, and (h), which obliges States parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure adequate living conditions, particularly housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications, all of which are critical for the prevention of disease and the promotion of good health care; and article 16 (1) (e), which requires States parties to ensure that women have the same rights as men to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights.

Article 16 (2) also proscribes the betrothal and marriage of children, an important factor in preventing the physical and emotional harm which arise from early childbirth.

Recommendations for government action

29. States parties should implement a comprehensive national strategy to promote women's health throughout their lifespan. This will include interventions aimed at both the prevention and treatment of diseases and conditions affecting women, as well as responding to violence against women, and will ensure universal access for all women to a full range of high-quality and affordable health care, including sexual and reproductive health services.

30. States parties should allocate adequate budgetary, human and administrative resources to ensure that women's health receives a share of the overall health budget comparable with that for men's health, taking into account their different health needs.

31. States parties should also, in particular:

(a) Place a gender perspective at the centre of all policies and programmes affecting women's health and should involve women in the planning, implementation and monitoring of such policies and programmes and in the provision of health services to women;

(b) Ensure the removal of all barriers to women's access to health services, education and information, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health, and, in particular, allocate resources for programmes directed at adolescents for the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS;

(c) Prioritize the prevention of unwanted pregnancy through family planning and sex education and reduce maternal mortality rates through safe motherhood services and prenatal assistance. When possible, legislation criminalizing abortion could be amended to remove punitive provisions imposed on women who undergo abortion;

(d) Monitor the provision of health services to women by public, non-governmental and private organizations, to ensure equal access and quality of care;

(e) Require all health services to be consistent with the human rights of women, including the rights to autonomy, privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and choice;

(f) Ensure that the training curricula of health workers includes comprehensive, mandatory, gender-sensitive courses on women's health and human rights, in particular gender-based violence.

1 Adopted by the Committee at its 24th meeting on 11 August 1983.

2 Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-first Session, Supplement No. 45 (A/41/45), para. 362.

3 General recommendation 1 was adopted at the Committee's fifth session.

4 E/CN.4/Sub.2/1989/42 of 21 August 1989.

5 E/CN.4/1986/42.

6 E/CN.6/1989/6/Add.1.

7 HR/AIDS/1989/3.

8 Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.85.IV.10), chapter I, section A.

9 Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.85.IV.10), chapter I, section A.

10 A/37/351/Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1, annex, section VIII.

11 See Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985 (United Nations publications, Sales No. E.85.IV.10), chap. I, sect. A.

12 A/CONF.157/24 (Part I), chap. III.

13 See Official Records of the General Assembly, Forth-seventh Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/47/38), chap. I.

14 General Assembly resolution 217 A (III).

15 General Assembly resolution 2200 A (XXI), annex.

16 General Assembly resolution 640 (VII).

17 Report of the World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 14-25 June 1993 (A/CONF.157/24 (Part I)), chap. III.

18 Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995 (A/CONF.177/20 and Add.1), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

19 See Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-third Session, Supplement No. 38 (A/43/38), chap. V.

20 CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7, 27 August 1996.

21 96/694/EC, Brussels, 2 December 1996.

22 European Commission document V/1206/96-EN (March 1996).

23 Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995 (A/CONF.177/20 and Add.1), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

24 See para. 141 of the Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held at Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995 (A/CONF.177/20, chap. I, resolution 1, annex II). See also para. 134, which reads in part: "The equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."

25 General recommendation 21, paragraph 29.

26 Health education for adolescents should further address, *inter alia*, gender equality, violence, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive and sexual health rights.

27 Reference to resolutions in which the Committee adopted the Cairo and Beijing recommendations to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity.

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