



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women
Sixty-second session**

Summary record (partial)* of the 1340th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 29 October 2015, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Hayashi

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Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention
(*continued*)

Combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of Liberia (continued)

* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (continued)

Combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of Liberia (continued)
(CEDAW/C/LBR/7-8; CEDAW/C/LBR/Q/7-8 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Liberia took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 10 to 14 (continued)

2. **Ms. Duncan-Cassell** (Liberia), replying to questions asked at the previous meeting (CEDAW/C/SR.1339), said that the Government had established an economic empowerment programme for women and girls and had increased the number of day-care places available to facilitate women's access to the labour market. It had also devised a policy to reduce sexual harassment and violence in schools and workplaces and had taken a number of measures to attract more women teachers. In regard to women's health, free HIV/AIDS testing and counselling had been made readily available and treatment was provided within the community wherever possible so that women were not forced to travel long distances to receive care.

3. **Ms. Nwankwo** asked what action the Government was taking to ensure that women who became pregnant as a result of rape had access to safe abortion services and to increase the availability, affordability and accessibility of modern contraceptive methods.

4. **Ms. Gbedemah** said that she would like further information on the steps taken to facilitate the return of girls who had dropped out of school to mainstream education. She also asked whether the State party had considered introducing temporary special measures to ensure more girls had access to the national scholarship system. Lastly, she wished to know how many perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence in schools had been investigated, prosecuted and punished in recent years.

5. **Ms. Duncan-Cassell** (Liberia) said that the Government had devised numerous initiatives to increase access to modern contraceptive methods and reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. A counselling service had been established to provide psychological support to women victims of rape and a reproductive health bill had recently been drafted. Considerable efforts had been made to better understand the reasons why some girls dropped out of school and to work with their families and local communities to encourage their return to education. A new school had recently been opened to accommodate girls who could not be reintegrated into the mainstream school system. Concerning access to the national scholarship system, the Government had set up several drop-in resource centres where girls could freely access different types of information, which would help them to research and apply for scholarships. No data were currently available regarding the number of persons investigated, prosecuted and punished for acts of sexual harassment and violence against girls in schools. However, a male teacher who had been found guilty of committing acts of sexual violence against four female students had recently been sentenced to several years' imprisonment and social workers had been assigned to schools in order to prevent future acts of that nature.

6. **Ms. Pomeranzi** asked what specific programmes had been developed to mitigate the disproportionate impact of the Ebola outbreak on the employment and economic empowerment of women and girls and the extent to which such programmes incorporated long-term and sustainable social protection schemes for women.

Information on the participation of women in all Ebola emergency response and recovery efforts would also be useful.

7. **Ms. Gbedemah** asked what measures had been taken to increase the supply of piped water to rural communities in order to alleviate the domestic burden facing rural women. She also wished to know what support had been provided to rural areas under the Social Cash Transfer Programme and whether an impact assessment had been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the National Rural Women Programme. She would welcome information on whether the State party would consider making specific reference to the role of the Traditional Women's Council in the Constitution and whether it intended to introduce special temporary measures to enhance the participation of rural women in community decision-making processes, including in developing policies and legislation in areas that affected their rights. What efforts had been made to improve access to education and health-care services for rural women?

8. **Ms. Duncan-Cassell** (Liberia) said that the Government had extended the scope of the Poverty Reduction Strategy and Social Cash Transfer Programme to cover 8 out of 15 counties and had launched various programmes to improve access to education for women and girls. Since 2009, various women's associations, including the Rural Women's Association and the Village Savings and Loans Association, had been established with a view to strengthening women's economic empowerment. Loans and financial support had also been made available for women entrepreneurs and several projects sponsored by the African Development Bank had been introduced to support women business-owners who had been badly affected by the Ebola crisis. The Government remained firmly committed to working closely with the Traditional Women's Council and had implemented programmes to train traditional midwives in modern childbirth techniques to improve the health outcomes of rural women. Concerted efforts had also been made to ensure that women could participate actively in the political decision-making process and to incorporate a gender perspective in all national policies

9. Regarding rural women, various programmes were in place or shortly to be launched aimed at empowering women; improving their living conditions, such as through better access to water and sanitation; and modernizing the agricultural activities in which they were involved. The goal was to adopt a cross-cutting approach to gender mainstreaming and increase women's participation in the workforce, including in the private sector.

10. **Ms. Pomeranzi** said that she would welcome further information on social protection strategies that were specifically aimed at women, as well as the funding allocated to them. She clarified that it was not sufficient to state that the beneficiaries of social protection payments would be heads of household, since in many cases men rather than women were the main breadwinners.

11. **Ms. Patten** said that Liberia was rich in natural resources and observed that the concessions awarded for their exploitation often included social benefits for local communities. She wished to know how the State party ensured that women enjoyed such benefits and what measures were in place or envisaged to ensure that local women and the wider community could participate in negotiations.

12. **Ms. Duncan-Cassell** (Liberia) said that all partners and donors of the recovery and resilience programmes had insisted that a gender perspective should be incorporated in the programmes. In that connection, the Social Cash Transfer Programme was wholly administered by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and was aimed at counties in which almost 80 per cent of beneficiary households were headed by women. Admittedly, when it came to the specific

programme activities, more precise language regarding the target beneficiaries might be a good idea.

13. Regarding concessions for the exploitation of natural resources, civil society representatives, community chiefs and elders, rural women's organizations and other traditional and community leaders were stakeholders in what was a participatory process. Social benefits were allocated directly to the county, and there were clear guidelines as to the structure of the board of officials responsible for distributing those funds at the local level. A gender perspective had also been incorporated into forest management agreements and recent land reforms, and the Government was taking concrete steps to increase community and women's participation in all such processes and negotiations.

Articles 15 and 16

14. **Ms. Halperin-Kaddari** said that she was somewhat surprised at the content of paragraph 39 of the replies to the list of issues (CEDAW/C/LBR/Q/7-8/Add.1), in which it was stated that women married under customary law had the same rights as those married under statutory law and had the right to seek legal redress from the courts. In fact, all the information received by the Committee suggested that little had changed in real terms. For example, under customary law, polygamy was still permitted and men and women were not treated equally. In that connection, she wished to know whether the 2003 Inheritance Act, which sought to establish inheritance rights and change the perception that a woman married under customary law became the property of her husband, was being enforced. Moreover, since the drafting of the Act had entailed a review of customary law and its subsequent reinstatement as civil law, she wondered whether that approach could be replicated in other areas of marriage and divorce. Information on whether a woman married under customary law could seek redress in civil law and the corresponding process should also be provided.

15. Regarding civil law, she sought clarification on how custody cases were decided, particularly with regard to how the principle of the best interests of the child was applied; what the legal age for marriage was, since it seemed to vary from law to law; and what was meant by common-law marriage and its legal ramifications.

16. **Ms. Duncan-Cassell** (Liberia) said that efforts were under way to harmonize customary and civil law and that the most appropriate way to do that was through the constitutional review process. One of the priority areas for the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection was ensuring that women had access to information and were aware of their rights so that they could seek legal redress in a court of law if they so wished. In that connection, while there was nothing preventing a woman married under customary law from seeking redress in the civil courts, it was not clear that she would know that that was an avenue open to her.

17. There were proposals for the new constitution to contain a provision in which the various forms of marriage would be recognized and thus protected. The term "common-law marriage" was applied to a couple who had been cohabiting for a number of years without any legally binding contract, thereby rendering the woman, and possibly her children, vulnerable in the event that the common-law husband were to leave. It was now proposed that a couple who had been living together for at least three consecutive years should be defined as legally married to ensure better protection for women in such situations. In that connection, while various legal provisions contained different legal ages for marriage, the Constitution, which set the marriageable age at 18, took precedence. It was hoped that the principle that marriage should be entered into voluntarily, as well as the principle of the joint division of

assets in the absence of any other contract between the couple, would be enshrined in either the new constitution or statutory law.

18. As to custody, legislative proposals included provisions for deciding on child support, which would be based on earnings, and custody of the child, which would be decided in accordance with the principle of the best interests of the child.

19. **Ms. Halperin-Kaddari** asked the delegation to clarify whether the current legislation prohibited same-sex consensual acts and whether it was true that a proposed amendment to the law on domestic relations would make same-sex marriage an offence and, if so, what the Government's position was in that regard.

20. **Ms. Duncan-Cassell** (Liberia) said that she was neither aware of any such prohibition in current law nor of any such proposed bill and would thus respond to those points in writing at a later date. In closing, she said that the Government of Liberia very much looked forward to receiving the Committee's concluding observations and recommendations. Gender equality and empowering women were key government priorities and it was hoped that the new constitution and related legislation would pave the way for significant improvements in the lives of women and girls in Liberia.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 4.25 p.m.