

Third Committee of the General Assembly
Sixty-third session
Agenda item

Statement by

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Chairperson

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

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Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues and friends,

I am honoured to address the Third Committee of the General Assembly in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women that oversees implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by its 185 State Parties. The Convention's Optional Protocol, which mandates the Committee to receive and consider petitions and inquire into allegations of grave or systematic violations of the Convention, has been accepted by 92 States parties, most recently by Switzerland and Tunisia during this year's annual treaty event.

Last year in my statement to the Third Committee during the Assembly's sixty-second session, I drew attention to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's many achievements over the twenty-five years since its establishment, focussing particularly on 2006 and 2007, when, thanks to the extended meeting time approved by this Assembly, the Committee had been extremely productive. I am happy to inform you that the Committee has been similarly productive in the year since I last reported to you, not least because the Assembly again responded to the Committee's request for extended meeting time including by providing a long term solution allowing it to meet three times annually from 2010.

Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,

As a result of its extended meeting time, the Committee has been able to take up reports soon after their submission. During its fortieth and forty-first session, the Committee considered the reports of 16 States parties, and a further 13 will be taken up during the forty-second session which will begin on 20 October 2008. The Committee is aware that timely consideration is a significant incentive for States parties to report in accordance with the terms of the Convention, and it is continually examining ways of streamlining its working methods to ensure that a backlog of reports to be considered does not develop.

The Committee is also very conscious of the importance of harmonization of working methods across the treaty body system, in particular in light of the new committees which are due to begin their work. In this regard, I would like to recall the Committee's statement adopted in 2006 'towards a harmonized and integrated treaty bodies' system.' Since I last reported to this Assembly, and consistent with the goal of harmonization of treaty body working methods, there have been a number of important developments with respect to the Committee. First, and perhaps most importantly, at its fortieth session, the Committee adopted its treaty-specific or CEDAW reporting guidelines, complementing the guidelines for the common core document, which are to be used by all States parties reporting to the Committee. These guidelines are contained in the Committee's report to the Assembly on its fortieth and forty-first sessions (A/38/63), and were also submitted to the most recent meeting of States parties to the Convention which was held on 30 July 2008. I encourage all States parties to study these guidelines and use them in reporting.

Other steps the Committee has taken with a view to harmonization of working methods, as well as strengthening its procedures, are the adoption of a follow-up procedure. At its forty-first session, the Committee decided to take steps to ensure that its concluding observations were more accessible, concrete and implementable, both in terms of substance and form, in particular through the inclusion of subject headings reflective of the different provisions of the Convention. It also decided to identify up to three concerns in the concluding observations requiring priority action on which it would request information from the State party within one or two years. The Committee is hopeful that this new procedure will provide a context in which it can remain in close dialogue with States parties on urgent issues in order to assist them in implementation.

Where follow-up generally is concerned, I am pleased to report that, at the invitation of the Government of Luxembourg, a delegation of the Committee conducted its first-ever follow-up visit to a State party to discuss its concluding observations with various parts of Government, the Parliament, the judiciary and the bar and civil society. Missions such as these provide an excellent opportunity to raise the visibility of the Convention, its Optional Protocol and the Committee's specific

recommendations for States parties. I encourage other States parties to follow this good practice and the example of Luxemburg.

During the past two years the Committee has also focused on non-reporting State parties. The Committee now extends a special invitation to States parties with long-overdue initial and periodic reports to submit these by specific future date, failing which it will take up implementation in the State party concerned in advance of its report. To date, States parties which have been invited to submit their reports have done so, and the Committee's usual procedure of consideration has been applied. The Committee will continue to explore ways and means of encouraging States parties to comply with their reporting obligations, including through suggesting that they seek technical assistance through the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Division for the Advancement of Women or other parts of the United Nations.

The Committee has also sought to expand the range of stakeholders with whom it interacts in relation to implementation of the Convention. While States parties have the primary responsibility in this regard, other actors are also critical. The Committee has long encouraged the input and support of non-governmental organizations, but during 2008 it adopted a statement on the role of national human rights institutions in its work and in follow-up to its recommendations. It has also included a standard paragraph in its concluding observations on the role of parliamentarians in implementation of the Convention.

Chairperson,

This year marked a new phase in the Committee's work. Since 1982, the Committee had been supported in its work by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Responsibility for the Committee's support is now with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Committee is now at a central place in the treaty-based and intergovernmental framework for human rights. At the same time, the Committee maintains its close ties with the Division, not least as it meets annually in New York, as well as with other New York based UN entities, such as UNIFEM, UNFPA and UNICEF. It is also very carefully following discussions relating to the reform of the United Nations gender architecture, and would be pleased to see a greater stress on women's rights and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Committees concluding observations in this context.

Chairperson,
Colleagues and friends,

2008 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action and the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. The Universal Declaration established the framework for the elaboration of a web of binding human rights norms, while by declaring the human rights of women and the girl child to be ‘an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights,’ the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action provided a new impetus for the integration of women’s rights into what had come to be described as ‘mainstream’ human rights. Vienna provided very specific impetus for the ratification of the Convention, the elaboration of its Optional Protocol and the work of the Committee. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women drew inspiration from the Committee’s General Recommendation no 19 on violence against women which identified such violence as discrimination against women and an issue of human rights, rather than a family or the private matter.

Sixty and fifteen years later, the Convention and the Committee have made impressive progress. Although universal ratification has not been achieved, we are well on the road to this goal. Significant progress has also been achieved in respect of removal of reservations to the Convention. The Committee’s has also made significant progress in its complaints and inquiry protocol work under the Optional Protocol. Its one inquiry case into systematic violations of women’s rights and the three complaints that it has considered which relate to domestic violence against women provided clear guidance not only for the States concerned, but also for all State parties on actions needed to prevention such violence.

Despite progress there remain challenges, and these are particularly relevant in the context of national-level implementation. Prime among these are discrimination and violence against women based on the patriarchal attitudes. The Committee frequently sees this played out in the persistence of discriminatory laws, customs and practices in States parties that remain obvious from reporting round to reporting round. Although the Convention and its implementation procedures has encouraged significant changes on the ground, including in relation to laws, policies and programmes and has transformed the lives of many, the potential of the Conventions system to bring about change at the national level has not been exploited to the full, much as a result of its lack of visibility and accessibility, and resource constraints.

As we celebrate the anniversary of the Universal Declaration we must craft ways and means to empower the procedures established by the Convention and its Optional Protocol to reach their full potential so that it can provide the framework in which all women, men, girls and boys can enjoy their human rights.

Thank you.