

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women by Julika Erfurt

30th Session 12 - 30 January 2004

The 30th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was concluded on Friday, January 30th. For three weeks the twenty-three CEDAW experts, working in their personal capacities, considered eight country reports in a constructive dialogue with each country's government delegation and civil society representatives. Two state parties, Bhutan and Kuwait, presented reports for the first time, while Belarus, Ethiopia, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and Nepal presented periodic reports.

Feride Acar, Chairperson of the Committee, referred to CEDAW as the "international watchdog of women's human rights" and Angela King, Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Gender Issues, sees CEDAW as "instrumental" in the achievement of the Millennium Goals. The convention has now been ratified by 175 countries, and 59 states are parties to the Optional Protocol. Carolyn Hannan, Director of the Division of the Advancement of Women (DAW), stated that the progress in ratification is a "significant confirmation" of the commitment of states to the protection and promotion of women's rights. Hannan urged states to submit their initial reports, yet mentioned that the increase in reports is posing "new challenges" to the limited meeting time currently allocated to the committee. At present, a total of 35 new state's parties alone await consideration of their reports.

The Committee adopted general recommendation 25 on temporary special measures at the end of the session (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/GenRecWP1-auv.PDF>). The recommendation will provide guidance to states on article 4.1 on temporary special measures, whose scope of meaning still seemed unclear to a number of State parties and other stakeholders. While the experts spent considerable time on the consideration of the eight country reports, the Committee also continued to review the effectiveness of its working methods and made progress in its work under the Optional Protocol.

Country Reports under Consideration

While the Committee considered the country reports in a "constructive dialogue" with a country delegation, representatives of civil society of these countries were given the opportunity to prepare "shadow reports"

to critically assess the state's report and to present their findings in two sessions to the CEDAW experts. NGO representatives came in large numbers to New York during the session. They urged the experts to address specific forms of discrimination, expressed concern over insufficient legislative protection and government initiatives, and explained the extent to which cooperation takes place with national governments to improve the status of women.

The table below provides a short outline of the main issues that emerged during the consideration of the state reports for each country. While the experts meticulously went from paragraph to paragraph of the Convention and probed the government delegations for present initiatives, statistics and future plans, certain issues were repeatedly addressed in the dialogue:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Main topics in dialogue</i>
1/13	Nepal	Discriminatory legislation, girl child education, early marriage and polygamy
1/14	Kyrgyzstan	Bride-kidnapping
1/15 (1/2 2)	Kuwait	Right to vote and protection of non-Kuwaitis
1/16 (1/2 2)	Bhutan	Improvement in social development, hesitation in addressing discriminatory laws and practices, stereotypes
1/20	Nigeria	Domestication of CEDAW and the harmonisation of customary, sharia and common law
1/21	Germany	Migrant workers, part-time/full-time work, stereotypes in media, violence against women
1/23	Belarus	NGO autonomy and the stereotyping of women as

		mothers only
1/24	Ethiopia	Girl child education, early marriages and implementation of CEDAW

The following section provides a summary of the country report considerations as well as the presentation of civil society representatives to the Committee.

Nepal

Four NGO's were present at the CEDAW civil society hearing: the Forum for Women, Law and Development (<http://www.fwld.org.np/>), Women for Human Rights (**email to: lily@mos.com.np**), the Beyond Beijing Committee (**email to: info@inhured.wlink.com.np**), and a representative from the Tribhuvan University Women's Studies Program (<http://www.tribhuvan-university.edu.np/>). The Nepalese NGO's highlighted discriminatory laws (e.g. denial of citizenship to women), high maternal mortality rates, the feminisation of poverty and agriculture, the marginalisation of widows, the high teacher-student ratio and caste-barriers as most pressing concerns. The moving and powerful NGO presentation was based on personal accounts of experienced discrimination by two Nepalese women present in the room as well as factual evidence of discriminatory practices. This combination of personal and statistical evidence led to an intense and constructive discussion with the experts and provided a memorable beginning for this CEDAW session.

During the day-long discussion with the Nepalese government delegation, the experts praised the delegation for its frank description of the obstacles facing Nepalese women, but also expressed frustration that many of the country's legal provisions were still discriminatory. Particular attention was drawn repeatedly to early marriage, polygamy, domestic violence, high illiteracy rates, especially among rural women, poor health care, discriminatory citizenship and land ownership rights, and deeply rooted patriarchal norms and values that are unfavourable to women.

Ms. Feride Acar, the Chairperson of the Committee, stressed in her closing remarks that "urgent action" was required to eliminate the "blatantly discriminatory" legislation towards women. As the NGO representatives had highlighted, the Chairperson stated that the citizenship laws required serious attention and that the implementation of existing laws needed to be ensured. At the same time, she said it

was encouraging that gender equality was considered a priority matter for the government, however “a long distance [needed] to be crossed” to achieve full gender equality. While the government’s prioritisation of the education issue is welcomed by the Committee, it expressed “great concern” about the persistence of stereotypical attitudes and discriminatory patriarchal values. Culture is not a static phenomenon; it is a changing one, and efforts to eliminate discriminatory values are precisely built into the provisions of the Convention, she said. Ms. Acar concluded the session by encouraging the government to take active steps to fight stereotypical attitudes and enhance gender awareness campaigns.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting of the experts and Nepal’s delegation, go to:

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1423.doc.htm>.

For the Committee’s concluding comments, go to

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/NepalCC.PDF>

Kyrgyzstan

With the ratification of over 30 international conventions, including CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, and a vast array of domestic legislation, the foundation for gender equality has been firmly established in the first decade of Kyrgyzstan’s independence. Women are still underrepresented in political and public life and the experts noted that without the political empowerment of women and their increased participation in decision-making, the transformation into a truly democratic state would be impossible.

Seven Kyrgyz nongovernmental organisations submitted their shadow report to the CEDAW Committee: the Association of Crisis Centres (**[email to: mairam@users.kyrnet.kg](mailto:mairam@users.kyrnet.kg)** or **mairam@as.kyrnet.kg**), the Adilet Legal Clinic (**legal@elcat.kg** or **legal@mail.kg**), the political party Elmuras (no contact information), the Gender Research Centre (no contact information), the Women Support Centre (**[email to: rjench@geol.freenet.bishkek.su](mailto:rjench@geol.freenet.bishkek.su)** or **root@women.freenet.bishkek.su**), the Reproductive Health Alliance (**[email to: rhak@infotel.kg](mailto:rhak@infotel.kg)**), and the Women Entrepreneurs Support Association (**www.unifemcis.org**). The representatives of the Kyrgyz NGO’s argued for the increased representation of women in executive bodies, the introduction of gender-analyses, mainstreaming and budgeting, the importance of awareness-raising campaigns and the necessity of improvements in legislation on land-matters and human

trafficking. So far no legal precedent exists to resolve discrepancies between domestic laws and the CEDAW convention, yet Kyrgyz NGO's have plans to establish groups to analyse the legislation and to address the discrepancies. They also expressed concern over the feminisation of poverty, especially among rural women (82% live beneath poverty line), domestic violence, human trafficking, reproductive rights, political participation, and gender policies.

The dialogue between the 23 experts and the Kyrgyz delegation circled around two main issues: the abolition of stereotypical attitudes and customary practices, such as "bride theft", and discussions on "how to make it work", or, ways to effectively implement and improve the extensive legal provisions promoting gender equality. An interesting issue of concern was that of temporary special measures, especially quotas. The experts encouraged the Kyrgyz government to introduce quotas, yet the delegation explained that while the issue had been broadly discussed in State agencies and academic and public circles, there was no legislation requiring quotas and that women feel ambivalent about quotas. During the 70 years of Soviet power, there were 30 per cent quotas, but with collapse of the Soviet Union, many women had become convinced that the quotas were "rather decorative".

Although experts commended the Government for formulating numerous legislative reforms, including a new draft law on gender equality, many expressed concern that gender analysis of discriminatory legislation had not actually improved the situation of Kyrgyz women. Noting that the country's land laws contained some discriminatory provisions, several experts questioned the dissemination of a new law that allowed the owner of a plot of land to sell property only in its entirety and with a certificate of title. Given that the husbands alone usually held certificates of title it was not possible for a woman who separated from her husband to cash out her share of the land or sell or exchange a portion of it.

Ms. Acar, the Chairperson, concluded the session by stressing the importance of women's representation in public and political life. She commended the Kyrgyz government on its efforts to combat human trafficking through regional cooperation, yet remained concerned about the re-emergence of patriarchal traditions and discriminatory practices, especially those of polygamy and kidnapping of women. The Committee felt strongly that eradication of such discriminatory practices and the combating of stereotypes are fundamental in eliminating all discrimination against women in any society.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting of the experts and the Kyrgyz delegation, go to <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1424.doc.htm>.

For the Committee's concluding comments, go to <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/KyrgyzstanC.C.PDF>.

Kuwait

Upon the delegation's request, the discussion of the Kuwaiti report was split in two to give the delegation sufficient time to prepare the answers. The Kuwaiti report discussion proved to be frustrating and difficult to handle, in part, because few responses were given by the delegation and those repeatedly digressed from the issues at hand. The delegation's answers provided in the second session often did not provide direct replies to the issues raised and made the government and its delegation seem indifferent to the Convention. Also, the delegation was composed of UN-mission and embassy members rather than Kuwaiti policy-makers, so the effect of the dialogue between experts and delegation on the national debate remains to be seen.

Unfortunately, no Kuwaiti NGO representatives came to New York to present a shadow report, which might shed light on the situation of women NGO's in the country. The only other country that was not represented by civil society organisations was Bhutan.

The experts noted that Kuwait is the sole country where voting rights are granted to men only. A decree by the Emir in 1999 to grant women the right to vote was defeated in Parliament by one vote, "a democratic process defeating a democratic practice", as the head of the delegation said. The expert from Algeria argued that the law has no religious foundations and that Kuwaiti women should be given the right to vote as well as hold seats in Parliament, perhaps through a quota system.

The experts also expressed concern about the situation of immigrants. Kuwait has a unique demographic situation in which non-Kuwaitis outnumber Kuwaitis. Several experts inquired about the protection of rights of non-Kuwaitis, especially those of women, particularly in the domains of education, and sexual and labour exploitation.

In the initial reply the head of the delegation urged the experts "to be realistic" about the implementation of CEDAW. While the status of women in some ways had progressed, it lagged behind in others. During the official reply in the following week, the delegation limited itself to the reading of laws and regulations. Regarding the Convention's applicability to Kuwait's domestic legislation it was noted that the Constitution did not contradict the Convention. The government is trying to implement CEDAW in a way that it does not clash with Islamic sharia,

which was “a way of life” in Kuwait. They also mentioned that everyone living in Kuwait is subject to the same laws and that non-Kuwaitis have the same rights as Kuwaiti citizens.

In closing, the Committee Chairperson called for a “more concrete demonstration” of the Government’s political will to implement CEDAW. The instrument concerns the elimination of de facto discrimination against women as much as it does the de jure discrimination. It also concerns the elimination of direct discrimination as much as eliminating indirect discrimination. The Committee is, therefore, looking forward to hear about measures and policies taken by the Government to ensure full implementation in all its forms.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting of the experts and Kuwait’s delegation, go to

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1425.doc.htm> and
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1429.doc.htm>.

For the Committee’s concluding comments, go to

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/KuwaitCC.PDF>.

Bhutan

Bhutan is a country that has been enjoying considerable social development and major economic and political transformation in the last decades. The country is now preparing for its first-ever constitution, life-expectancy has been raised from 48 to 66 years and about 90 per cent of the population has free access to health care. Literacy is up from 17 per cent to about 54, and primary school enrolment is up to 72 per cent. While Bhutan took “consistent steps” to comply with CEDAW, the biggest challenge is to fight more subtle and indirect forms of gender discrimination.

Unfortunately Bhutan was not represented by members of civil society and no shadow report was submitted. One expert mentioned in an informal consultation that this was due to insufficient financial support, rather than lack of initiative among local NGO’s.

The experts commended the delegation on the social development achievements in the country, especially on health care, but also expressed concern about a “kind of acceptance” of stereotypes and traditional perceptions of gender roles. Women do most of the housework and are often perceived uniquely in their roles as mothers, wives and keepers of extended families. Concern was also expressed

about a “certain hesitation” to address gender discrimination and to proactively develop a legislation that is not only gender neutral, but promotes gender equality. The experts sought clarification on whether stereotypes are being addressed in schools and what direct efforts are undertaken to promote women’s advancement.

The experts also addressed the issue of marriage practices and marriage age. References in the report indicate that marriage between relatives is an accepted practice in certain areas and the Committee expressed concern about possible incestuous relationships. The marriage age in common-law marriages in Bhutan is 15, which undermines the legal marriage age of 18.

Similar to the case of Kuwait, the Bhutanese delegation prepared the replies to the experts for the following week. The head of the delegation stressed in the reply that there have been no direct attacks on women, such as bride burning, female infanticide, or dowry deaths, as experienced in other countries. Certain perceptions hinder the full realisation of gender equality, yet with better capacity it will be possible to “step up targeted advocacy and awareness programmes” to address that.

School enrolment has increased at a significant rate in the last few years and the government made specific efforts to increase the enrolment of girls. An important part of the school curriculum is reproductive health education. Family-planning and counselling have also been made available to couples, since the country is faced with a high population growth rate and wants to encourage a “small-family norm”.

In the closing remarks, Ms. Acar, the Chairperson, remarked that Bhutan was at an important crossroads in its political, social and economic development in drafting its first-ever constitution. She encouraged the delegation to include “essential building blocks for a non-discriminatory political and social system”, and urged to include a definition of discrimination as an important legislative and policy safeguard.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting of the experts and Bhutan’s delegation, go to <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1426.doc.htm> and <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1429.doc.htm>.

For the Committee’s concluding comments, go to <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/BhutanCC.PDF>.

Nigeria

Nigeria is a highly complex, large and Africa's most populous nation. The state is based on a federal political structure and three judicial systems. The experts noted that the Nigerian state has shown ample political will to comply with the implementation of CEDAW, yet that the tripartite legal system and complex governing processes slowed down the pace towards gender equality significantly.

The Nigerian shadow report was coordinated by the Women's Aid Collective (www.wacolnig.org), yet over sixty organisations participated in the workshop, which outcome culminated into this report. NGO representatives stated that no adequate steps have been taken to implement CEDAW. The Convention is not operative in Nigeria and has so far failed to be translated into practice. Government programs and legislation were not subject to gender analyses, nor is the allocation of funds gender-specific. A number of activists expressed deep concern about high rates of maternal and infant mortality. 72 per cent of the deaths of female minors is reportedly caused by abortion and lack of post-abortion care. Civil society representatives urged Nigeria to stop the criminalisation of human trafficking victims, to improve and increase the numbers of prevention and reintegration programs, to introduce awareness campaigns to fight domestic violence, increase the number of women's shelters and to review existing citizenship laws that discriminate against Nigerian women. In their concluding comments, several NGO representatives addressed the discriminating nature of sharia law and outlined the often arbitrary rules that women are subject to due conflicts between sharia, customary and common law.

During the vivid dialogue between the experts and the Nigerian delegation, the experts expressed concern about the contradictions and inconsistencies created by the application of the three legal systems. They cautioned against the maintenance of customary and religious practices which often negatively affected Nigerian women. Many experts stressed the need to harmonise the legal framework to ensure the uniformity of human rights protection. Other questions concerned the possible adoption of uniform family and marriage laws and the fundamental issue over whether diversity took precedence over international regulations, such as CEDAW. The slow process of domestication of the Convention was equally widely debated. The experts argued that the slow process delayed women's entitlement to enjoy their human rights and that the situation demanded a "radical", not a gradual change.

The well-staffed Nigerian delegation argued that the government had

taken “some concrete steps” in 2003 to implement the Convention, such as the Anti-trafficking Act and the Child Protection Act. Acknowledging the slow domestication of CEDAW, members of the delegation pointed to Nigeria’s history of military rule. When the Convention was ratified in 1985 it was considered taboo to talk about it. The delegation believes that with the introduction of the democratic process, the full realisation and domestication of the Convention will come about shortly.

While there was much technical legal debate over the domestication process and the different new Acts, little evidence was given to show direct programmes and initiatives to address blatant forms of gender discrimination, such as mentioned by the NGO’s. The delegation repeatedly insisted that the promotion of gender equality was their utmost priority, yet it seems necessary, in the Chairperson’s words, “to take proactive and creative measures to ensure that diversity does not pose as “cover” for human rights violations”.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting between the experts and Nigeria’s delegation, go to <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1427.doc.htm>.

For the Committee’s concluding comments, go to <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/NigeriaCC.PDF>.

Germany

Experts expressed surprise about how “an economically, culturally, technologically and politically advanced country” such as Germany could have such “conservative perceptions” on violence against women. Ms. Riemann-Hanewinkel, the head of the German delegation, strongly emphasised that the right to a life free of violence must be and is a political priority, but acknowledged that “even the best laws would fail if women are not provided with competent support”.

While the dialogue of the experts and the German delegation primarily focused on the issues of violence against women, the protection of immigrants, and the legalisation of prostitution, the German NGO representatives focused a significant part of their presentation on the current restructuring of the social welfare system and its disproportionately severe effects on women. The NGO’s present at the hearing were KOK (www.kok-potsdam.de), Femmes de Terre (www.frauenrechte.de), and the German Women’s Council (www.frauenrat.de). The other main contributors to the Shadow report are agisra E.V. (www.agisra.de), ECPAT Germany (www.ecpat.de),

the Initiative fuer einen Geschlechtergerechten Haushalt in Berlin (www.genderbudgets.de), and the Democratic Women's Association ([mail to: frauen.dfb@t-online.de](mailto:frauen.dfb@t-online.de)).

Civil society representatives expressed grave concern that due to the welfare "reform", women are increasingly pushed into part-time jobs, which negatively affect their pension plans and increases the feminisation of poverty, especially among older and single women. The welfare reform also decreased the unemployment payments of married individuals. Since the unemployment rate is much higher among women than men, it indicates a trend that women are increasingly financially dependent on their spouses. The NGO representatives also mentioned the discriminating effects of sexist advertising, the increase in violence against women, the need for nation-wide training session of the judiciary and the police, and the lack of gender budgeting.

The head of the German delegation said that, for many decades, violence against women had been considered taboo in both parts of the country. In the west, the stereotype was of a good family in which violence was not discussed, and similarly in the east, the stereotype had been that socialists were good, so no negative data had been recorded in the statistics. Since 1997, the issue of violence against women has begun to be addressed. Ms. Riemann-Hanewinckel did state that while much has been achieved, the gains have not been sufficient.

The delegation further stated that ethnic minorities enjoy equal protection under the law and that protection instruments are in place. Efforts have also been undertaken to challenge and change existing stereotypes about minorities in schools and through public awareness raising campaigns. A survey on the situation of migrant women in Germany is expected to be published shortly.

Regarding the conservative image of women in the country, the head of the delegation stated that efforts are being undertaken to change it. The situation in both parts of the country is very different: while in the East, women actively search for employment and women are not expected to stay home with their children in the first few years. In the West, however, this image is only slowly changing. As long as full-time jobs in the East and childcare facilities in the West are lacking, these gender image will be difficult to change.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting of the experts and Germany's delegation, go to <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1428.doc.htm>.

For the Committee's concluding comment, go to

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/GermanyCC.PDF>.

Belarus

Experts called for a “massive paradigm shift” to provide women in Belarus with an enabling environment for change. As long as women are associated only with family responsibilities, they will be discriminated in the labour market and the political sphere. Belarus is moving into a market economy and without sufficient protection and the political will to raise awareness on gender equality women are at risk to be subject to discrimination.

Two NGO's presented the shadow report: the Women Independent Democratic Movement (<http://www.cacedu.unibel.by/widm/>), which represents a total of ten Belarus NGO's, and the Belarus Association of Young Christian Women ([email to: ywcabelarus@telecom.by](mailto:ywcabelarus@telecom.by)). The representatives of civil society focused on the issues of domestic violence and the problematic positions of NGO's in Belarus. Sexual violence in both the home and the workplace has increased substantially since the end of the cold war and the state's independence. The NGO representatives expressed concern that no direct efforts are undertaken to raise awareness, persecute the perpetrators, introduce counselling services and protection for victims, and to train the police and judiciary. Civil society representatives also expressed concern over the feminisation of low-paid jobs and poverty, and the legal, social and political difficulties to establish non-governmental organisations. Organisations can only be founded by being subject to a legal procedure that analyses their objectives and planned initiatives. The representatives argued that this is used by the government as a tool to hinder the creation of NGO's and the strengthening of civil society in Belarus.

The head of Belarussian delegation stated that the period 2000-2004 covered by this report was a “vibrant” one in Belarus' national gender policy. The uncertainty, stress and lack of confidence that characterised the situation of women in the beginning of the 1990s no longer existed and women have “ample opportunities” now to participate in all spheres of life. He acknowledged however that sexual harassment and violence at the workplace (12 per cent) and the home (30 per cent) represents a “serious obstacle” in achieving gender equality and promised that efforts are being undertaken to fight it at all levels.

In the face of dwindling birth-rates, several experts worry that the maintenance of the family is seen as more important than the protection

and promotion of women's rights. Throughout the report the family is considered very important, yet the experts questioned whether the government has a sense of women as individuals within a family unit and protects them as such, rather than focusing the attention on their reproductive and social responsibilities only.

In her closing statement, the Chairperson emphasised that women's full participation in public positions and civil society was important for Belarus' democratisation process. She also urged the government to address stereotypes and introduce targeted action to fight patriarchal norms and traditions. Especially crucial was a law on violence against women and awareness raising campaigns to fundamentally challenge gender-specific stereotypes.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting the experts and the delegation of Belarus, go to <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1430.doc.htm>.

For the Committee's concluding comments, go to <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/BelarusCC.PDF>.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia's report was the last one under consideration during this session. Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in Africa and female genital mutilation, marital rape, early marriages, and abduction are still commonly practised. The state delegation noted that the elimination of discrimination against women will require a change in attitudes and practices of both men and women.

The Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association (no website) and the Network of Ethiopian Women Association (no website) compiled the shadow report for Ethiopia. The civil society representatives drew a harsh picture of the realities faced by women in the East-African country. Violence against women was the most prominent and visible form of discrimination. The NGO representative expressed concern that the legislation was lacking specific provisions for violence against women and that no direct efforts have been undertaken by the government to fight the wide-spread phenomenon. Other issues addressed during the NGO hearing were the lack of initiatives facilitating women's economic empowerment, the political underrepresentation of women, and education.

The head of the Ethiopian delegation urged the Committee to see the

gender debate in Ethiopia in the larger context of dire poverty, natural disasters, women's lack of education and limited access to resources. Some progress however has been made: the punishment for rape has been increased to 5 years of imprisonment (it consisted of a payment of a camel before), a new family code has been adopted by several regional states, and the penal code is being revised. While the experts supported the political commitment to the implementation of CEDAW, they urged for the introduction of proactive initiatives to inform the population about anti-discriminatory provisions in the legislation, the Convention and other international laws ratified by the state. One expert argued that as long as the awareness of the existence of this legislation is not raised, traditional practices that are harmful to women and girls will be maintained and the law would continue to be rendered a "dead letter". Other experts inquired about the state's fight against poverty and urged the delegation to include a gender dimension into the poverty reduction strategy.

The delegation talked a lot about "educating the women" and presented educational campaigns, rather than political actions, as the remedy to many of the issues. It seemed at several points that the female members of the delegation did not perceive themselves as being part of "the women" of Ethiopia and portrayed the female part of the population as "unenlightened" and "backward". In the words of the Chairperson, Ethiopia "has a long way to go" until gender equality is realised and women and men enjoy the same rights, freedom and responsibility.

To see the press release summarising the record of the meeting of the experts and Ethiopia's delegation, go to <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/wom1431.doc.htm>.

For the Committee's concluding comments, go to <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw30/EthiopiaCC.PDF>.

Afterthought

While it was an eye-opening experience to monitor CEDAW it also proved to be frustrating and depressing at the end of several days. The 23 experts were well prepared and tirelessly probed the government delegations for answers. Some delegations showed good will in engaging in a frank dialogue about programs, initiatives and surveys, while also acknowledging that problems persisted. Other government delegations however seemed under-informed and showed less interest in openly discussing and rethinking the current situation of local women.

A refreshing and empowering part of this CEDAW session was the civil society input of the eight countries under consideration. They provided a moving testimony of local women's struggle for gender equality as well as statistical and factual evidence to back up their demands. These organisations are the mouthpiece of thousands of women and their work has shaped the environment for gender debates in their respective countries.

What can WILPF do?

As changes in gender-specific legislation, policies and education in many places have proven to be slow, it is essential that women's rights are being advocated through civil society. WILPF has a long tradition of uniting and supporting women all over the world by assisting them in their quest for freedom and equality. Two different initiatives could be taken by WILPF and WILPFers to assist women in the countries under consideration during this CEDAW session in pressuring their governments for the protection and promotion of women's rights:

The creation of national sections So far there are only three WILPF sections in the Middle East (Israel, Lebanon and Palestine), two in Africa (Burundi and Sierra Leone) and none in Eastern Europe. The creation of national sections in Nigeria, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Ethiopia, Bhutan, and Belarus would contribute to the education, empowerment, and mobilisation of local women and to a bottom-up movement to promote women's equality.

WILPF Partnerships with existing local women's organisations The development of partnerships with existing social justice and women's organisations would increase their networking capacities and access to information and resources. In the context of partnerships with local organisations, exchange programs could also be organised between WILPF women and women of these organisations to trade experiences and knowledge.

The thirty-first CEDAW session will be held from 6 to 23 July 2004 and the thirty-second session from 10 to 28 January 2005. The Working Group on Communications under the Optional Protocol will hold its fourth session from 30 June to 2 July 2004 and its fifth session from 31 January to 4 February 2005.

Julika Erfurt WILPF, UN office February 6, 2004