

Experts of the Committee on the Rights of the Child Commend Cyprus' Children's Houses for Child Victims of Abuse, Ask about Measures to Prevent School Bullying and Statelessness

17 May 2022

MEETING SUMMARIES

The Committee on the Rights of the Child today concluded its consideration of the fifth and sixth combined periodic report of Cyprus, with Committee Experts praising Cyprus' Children's Houses for child victims of abuse, and raising questions about measures in place to prevent school bullying and statelessness.

Bragi Gudbrandsson, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, commended the establishment of Children's Houses in Cyprus for child victims of abuse, which had beautiful buildings and wonderful staff. He also welcomed that children were allowed to testify outside of courtrooms.

Another Committee Expert addressed bullying in schools, saying that there were several incidences that seemed to indicate bullying based on ethnicity. The Expert called for comprehensive legislation on discrimination of children, and a concrete action plan for eliminating discrimination. One Committee Expert further asked for details on a proposed law against bullying. Did it penalise bullying of children by other children? The Committee did not wish to criminalise children for such actions.

A Committee Expert said that current legislation did not provide a clear definition of statelessness. Further, children were unable to obtain nationality if either of their parents were staying in Cyprus irregularly. What measures were in place to reduce statelessness? What were obstacles to adopting a draft bill on statelessness, and what rules did the bill establish?

Introducing the report, Louiza Christodoulidou Zannetou, Law Commissioner of Cyprus and head of the delegation, said that in 2017, the Government had established the Children's House, which provided all necessary services to child victims of abuse. Professionals working with children received continuous training on domestic violence, gender crimes, violence against women, child abuse, trafficking, gender equality, and risk assessment. Amendments had been made to legislation to ensure that witness children could testify from a room other than the court or in the Children's House.

Ms. Christodoulidou Zannetou also said that Cyprus had continued preparing and enacting important legislation to strengthen the country's anti-bullying measures. In 2021, the Cypriot sports organization law was amended to introduce provisions combatting bullying in sports.

She added that the national strategy for preventing and addressing school violence, introduced in 2018, aimed to prevent bullying and violence in schools.

The delegation said that measures had been implemented to reduce violence in schools, including the establishment of a bullying observatory. Students and teachers were provided with educational materials on preventing bullying, promoting diversity and mediation skills. The delegation also explained that although there were discussions underway on criminalising bullying in schools, the aim of proposed legislation was not to criminalise the acts of children, but to provide appropriate protections for child victims and penalise offending adults.

The delegation further addressed statelessness, saying that the draft bill on statelessness had been submitted in 2020. Issues had arisen related to this bill's compatibility with the Cypriot Constitution. Statelessness was decided upon as part of asylum processing procedures, and persons determined to be stateless could apply for Cypriot nationality. If such applications were rejected, stateless persons could apply for special residency permits. Stateless persons' social rights were upheld and respected.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Gudbrandsson thanked the delegation for the informative answers it had provided and wished the State party well in its ongoing work protecting the rights of children.

Ms. Christodoulidou Zannetou said that the Committee's review and concluding observations would contribute to further enhancing Cyprus' implementation of the Convention. The Cypriot Government and all stakeholders would continue to do their utmost to promote and protect the rights of children.

Mikiko Otani, Committee Chair, said that the Committee had learned more about the situation of the rights of the child in Cyprus through the dialogue, and expressed hope that the recommendations of the Committee would contribute to further strengthening those rights.

The delegation of Cyprus consisted of representatives from the Office of the Law Commissioner; Ministry of Interior; Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare; Cypriot Police; Ministry of Education; and the Permanent Mission of Cyprus to the United Nations Office at Geneva.

The Committee will issue the concluding observations on the report of Cyprus at the end of its ninetieth session on 3 June. Those, and other documents relating to the Committee's work, including reports submitted by States parties, will be available on the [session's webpage](#). Summaries of the public meetings of the Committee can be found [here](#), while webcasts of the public meetings can be found [here](#).

The Committee will next meet in public on Wednesday, 18 May at 9 a.m. to start its consideration of the combined second to fourth periodic report of Kiribati ([CRC/C/KIR/2-4](#)).

Report

The Committee has before it the combined fifth to sixth periodic report of Cyprus ([CRC/C/CYP/5-6](#)).

Presentation of Report

LOUIZA CHRISTODOULIDOU ZANNETOU, Law Commissioner of Cyprus and head of the delegation, said that Cyprus had ratified almost all international human rights instruments.

The promotion and protection of children's rights was on Cyprus' agenda. The State was continuously enacting laws and adopting effective policies and measures in all areas concerning children.

The main obstacle to the implementation and enjoyment of human rights in Cyprus remained the continued Turkish illegal occupation of over 36 per cent of Cyprus' territory since 1974. The Government was not in a position to ensure the respect of human rights treaties, nor to apply human rights laws and policies, in the areas not under its effective control.

Cyprus had continued preparing and enacting important legislation, thus strengthening the country's child-friendly justice system, child victims' rights, anti-bullying measures, sex education, migration, asylum, anti-trafficking, violence against women and girls and family violence. One of the most important recent laws was the 2021 law on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence. This law included provisions on all forms of gender-based violence, provisions for the protection of victims, awareness issues and also created a monitoring mechanism.

Other laws were also enacted in 2021 criminalising harassment and stalking, and establishing a child-friendly criminal justice system. Under the latter, the prosecution of children and especially detention were used as a last resort. Child offenders were tried by the Children's Court, which could impose alternatives to detention measures.

Amendments had been made to the law on violence in the family (prevention and protection of victims) and the witness protection law to ensure that witness children could testify from a room other than the court or in the Children's House. In 2021, the Cypriot sports organization law was amended to introduce provisions combatting bullying in sports. In 2022, an amendment to the maternity law increased maternity leave from 18 to 22 weeks for a second child and 26 weeks for a third child. Furthermore, a 2022 amendment to the protection of paternity law provided for two weeks paternity leave on the expiration of the maternity leave.

The Implementation Council "FONI" was created in 2018 to implement the national strategy for the prevention and combatting of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, while in October 2021, a new three-year national action plan was approved. Clear and targeted compulsory sex education was included in curricula from kindergarten onwards.

Cyprus had included childcare and support to children in the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Plan, including financing the establishment of multifunctional centres for children, enhancing the availability and affordability of childcare centres, public structures for hosting children under the care of Social Welfare Services, and new homes with the provision of daily services to adolescents with conduct disorders.

Specialised police units for investigating domestic violence and child abuse had been established in all police districts. In 2017, the Government had established the Children's House, which provided all necessary services to child victims of abuse. Further, the Government had founded in 2020 the Women's House, a crisis centre for women victims of violence and their children.

Professionals working with children received continuous training on domestic violence, gender crimes, violence against women, child abuse, trafficking, gender equality, and risk

assessment. The national strategy for preventing and addressing school violence, introduced in 2018, aimed to prevent and address bullying and violence in schools.

To further improve social welfare and the social services network, the Government had started restructuring and modernising the Social Welfare Services.

Parliament was reviewing amendments to the family law to ensure the equal treatment of parents after the dissolution of a marriage or partnership and full respect for the rights of children. In 2017, Parliament also passed a bill on family mediation.

The 2019 implementation of the Cypriot General Health System had ensured that all children, regardless of legal status, had access to health care services. Free access was provided to children who were non-beneficiaries, such as children of undocumented migrants. Cyprus promoted and supported breastfeeding via the multidisciplinary National Breastfeeding Committee, established in 2018. Any attempt to prevent a mother from breastfeeding in public was a criminal offence.

A screening programme for new-born babies was being implemented, which provided free of charge screening tests to all such babies. The School Health Service was mandated to ensure early detection, treatment and monitoring of children's health problems. It also aimed at early detection of child abuse, especially for children with disabilities, through health screening.

The Education Ministry's 2021-2023 Strategic Plan ensured the provision of learning opportunities to all pupils through the implementation of an educational policy, which embodied the values of equality, inclusiveness, creativity and innovation.

The 2019 amendment to the anti-trafficking law reinforced the prevention and prosecution framework of the law and victim protection. It increased penalties for the offences provided from 10 years to 25 years, and in case of child victims, the penalty was life imprisonment.

Screening of asylum seekers was carried out according to European Union guidelines. The interview of asylum-seeking unaccompanied children was conducted by specially trained officers in a child-friendly manner. Individual support was provided based on age, sex, environment and other factors.

Cyprus had experienced increased migration flows in 2021 and 2022. Social services' officers and institutional officers had been placed in the First Reception Centre to support the minors accommodated. Following the screening phase, minors were transferred to a home specially designed for unaccompanied minors, to foster families, or to facilities supporting semi-independent living. Unaccompanied minors were immediately taken under the care and guardianship of the Social Welfare Services, safeguarding access to health, education, accommodation and leisure time.

Cyprus prohibited the detention of migrant children. Regardless of a parent's migratory status, children were entitled to their fundamental rights to health, education, and social care. Unaccompanied children or families with children were not held in detention.

Child asylum seekers or minor members of families, and minors whose parents had migratory status, benefited from integration measures. New reception centres were also established and assistance was provided by governmental and non-governmental institutions and international

organizations. The Education Ministry promoted the educational inclusion of asylum seekers and refugee children through its "School and Social Inclusion Actions" programme.

The Finance Ministry was in the process of reforming the budget structure to provide a separate budget allocation for children in each Ministry.

Questions by Committee Experts

BRAGI GUDBRANDSSON, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, said that it was interesting and exciting to learn about the new legislation being implemented in Cyprus to promote the rights of children.

Another Committee Expert welcomed the renewed commitment of Cyprus to ensure better follow-up and implementation of the provisions of the Convention. Cyprus had made amendments to legislation to ensure that it was in line with international standards, but there were two important bills on the well-being, care and protection of children that were still being deliberated. What measures were being taken to expedite the process of enacting these bills?

There was an inter-ministerial committee put in place to follow-up the implementation of the Convention and the Committee's recommendations. What progress had been made in implementing the recommendations of the Committee?

The Commissioner for Child Protection was an independent body, but it had drafted a national plan for the implementation of the Convention, which was within the purview of the Government. Did the Government intend to create a plan for implementing the Convention? Could the delegation provide information about its budget reform, and its budgetary allocation for children? How would the Government ensure that the budget allocated for children would not be cut?

There was a lack of detailed statistics on vulnerable children. What measures were in place to establish a mechanism for collecting statistics on children? What was being done to ensure that the Office of the Commissioner for Child Protection had sufficient resources to fulfil its mandate?

Cyprus had made concerted efforts to disseminate information about the Convention, but more efforts needed to be made to disseminate information to children and teachers.

What measures were in place to ensure that tourism operators protected the rights of children?

Another Committee Expert said that the opening statement was comprehensive and encouraging in a number of respects. Cyprus seemed to possess the political will to address discrimination head-on, but more could be done. The Expert noted that there was a special department within the police force for dealing with children, and commended the special training on children's rights offered to public officials.

A number of incidences of bullying within schools seemed to indicate bullying based on ethnicity. The Expert called for comprehensive legislation on discrimination of children, and a concrete action plan for eliminating discrimination. The Expert also called for awareness raising campaigns regarding anti-discrimination legislation. How could the State party

combat racism and hate speech against children, particularly against Turkish children, Roma children, religious minorities and migrants.

There was legislation that prevented the children of parents residing in the State without proper documentation from being recognised as Cypriot nationals. Were there plans to change this legislation?

How was the “child’s best interests” defined, and who decided on issues of best interests?

The establishment of the Youth Parliament and other measures encouraging youth participation were commendable. Were the findings of this Parliament taken into consideration by the Government?

Another Committee Expert congratulated the State party for its steps forward in protecting children’s rights. State legislation allowed for the marriage of children at 16 years of age provided that parental permission was given. Were there plans to change this legislation?

The State had tried to take statelessness into account regarding asylum request processing, but legislation did not provide a clear definition of statelessness. What was being done to change this? Children were unable to obtain nationality if either of their parents were staying in the State irregularly. What measures were in place to reduce statelessness?

BRAGI GUDBRANDSSON, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, welcomed the amendment of the children’s law banning corporal punishment. However, children aged 16 to 18 were not protected by this legislation. What measures were in place to change this?

Mr. Gudbrandsson commended the establishment of Children’s Houses, which had beautiful buildings and wonderful staff. He also welcomed that children had been allowed to testify outside of courtrooms. However, children were still required to attend courthouses to participate in cross-examinations. Had the State party discussed changing this? Had the State party considered expanding Children’s Houses to welcome victims of domestic violence and other forms of violence, rather than just sexual abuse?

How did the Council for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse protect children against grooming and child pornography?

Could the delegation provide data on intersex children who had undergone irreversible surgical procedures, and what protections were in place to protect children from such abuse and provide redress to victims?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said that State legislation had been amended to fully prohibit corporal punishment in all settings. The Minister of Education had addressed all public schools and stressed that corporal punishment was prohibited.

All testimonies of children under 18 were videotaped and presented in court in a certain district, and the Government was working to facilitate videotaped testimonies in all courts across the State. The Women’s House provided integrated services for female victims of sexual and gender-based violence and their children. The Women’s House also included a

Child Advocate in line with the Istanbul Convention. The Implementation Council “FONI” held awareness campaigns regarding sexual abuse of children and child pornography.

New draft laws on children’s rights were being amended. The new law on foster care of children had been completed and would soon be considered by the Council of Ministers. Amendments focused on protecting children’s rights.

The inter-ministerial committee worked in cooperation with all Ministries to ensure the implementation of the Convention.

Budget classifications were conducted based on economic analysis, and it was difficult to assess the portion of the budget allocated to children. However, a project was underway to identify budget expenditure devoted to children.

The Statistical Service of Cyprus was responsible for Government data collection. There were gaps in data available on issues concerning children, but the Government was studying practices by other States regarding the collection of data on children, and hoped to increase its collection of this data in future.

The Government had created a policy document aiming to support the integration of migrant children in schools. The policy focused on strengthening Greek as a second language, training teachers on supporting migrant children, and promoting multiculturalism in schools. The Observatory for Violence in Schools had devised a three-year strategy based on the Convention that aimed to prevent discrimination of girls and migrant children. The national strategy and action plan sought to protect children from sexual abuse and child pornography. All schools were encouraged to prevent racism, and the Government provided schools with information on how to prevent and report racism. One hundred and twenty-four schools submitted their annual report of racist incidents in 2021, with 38 schools reporting around 120 incidents.

There had been internal consultations regarding legislation on statelessness, and a draft bill was still under consideration. The Ministry of the Interior had strengthened its protection of migrants and asylum seekers. It had carried out information campaigns on these groups’ rights. There had been an increase in migrants and asylum seekers, but the Government remained determined to protect the health of all migrants and asylum seekers, especially children. The best interest of the child was respected regarding applications for asylum and residence.

As soon as an unaccompanied minor applied for asylum, the individual needs of that child were considered, and authorities provided the minor with information in their own language. Interviews were conducted in the presence of a guardian, and in a child-friendly manner. Under State law, discrimination of migrant children was not permitted. Migrant children were granted the right to family reunion. Migrant children could acquire Cypriot citizenship after the acquisition of citizenship of one of their parents.

There had been several measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to protect migrant children and their rights.

The best interests of the child were determined by the Family Court based on the physical and psychological state of the child, the wishes of the child, the parents’ ability to provide care, and other relevant factors.

The Children's Parliament was regularly consulted regarding legislation affecting children.

A new bill concerning gender recognition had been drafted that prohibited irreversible gender realignment surgery for children. There were no complaints or ongoing court cases concerning intersex children.

Questions by Committee Experts

BRAGI GUDBRANDSSON, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, said that most child victims did need to attend court to be subjected to cross-examination, often a year or more after the incident. This was often traumatic for these children. Were there plans to change this? Did children receive trauma therapy in Women's Houses, or at other facilities?

Another Committee Expert said that a Ministry of Labour committee was responsible for drafting the report and coordinating with different ministries regarding the implementation of the Convention. What resources were provided to this committee?

One Committee Expert asked why Cyprus lacked a legal definition of statelessness.

A Committee Expert asked when the draft bill on statelessness had been submitted to Parliament. What were obstacles to adopting this bill, and what rules did it establish?

Another Committee Expert asked about the percentage of children who were not registered with the State. How long did it take for migrant children to be given a birth certificate? How did the Government promote breastfeeding?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said that child victims of abuse could receive treatment at Women's Houses. Child victims were presently able to participate in cross examinations from Children's Houses in a certain district only.

Preventing a mother from breastfeeding in public was a criminal offence. A provision in legislation required that all employers provided spaces within workplaces for employees to use when breastfeeding. The National Policy of Breastfeeding in Cyprus had been launched, and an awareness campaign to promote breastfeeding had been conducted.

The draft bill on statelessness had been submitted in 2020. Issues had arisen related to this bill's compatibility with the Cypriot Constitution.

The Ministry of Labour committee in question coordinated actions of different Ministries in implementing the provisions of the Convention, but did not have a dedicated budget.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert asked whether the State party provided sufficient support for child victims of domestic abuse. What support did it provide? Social services for children deprived of a family environment were underfunded and had a lack of staff. What was being done to strengthen these services? There was also a lack of monitoring of social support institutions and foster families for children deprived of their families. How did the State respond to this?

Why was there a lack of support programmes available for children in care? How were inter-State adoptions monitored?

BRAGI GUDBRANDSSON, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, said that there was a medical approach to disability in legislation and practice. Each Ministry had its own definition of disability. This led to an imbalance in the provision of services and caused distress for children. Were there plans to adopt a more human rights focused definition of disability and harmonise definitions? There was a high rate of institutionalisation of children with disabilities. What was being done to address this?

What support was provided for children in Children's Houses? Were there plans to support children's access to mental health care in the context of the pandemic? What measures were in place to reduce child poverty and social exclusion of poor children.

An Expert said that Cyprus had made great efforts to promote compulsory education and the education of migrant children. What measures were in place to reduce the number of children forced to repeat a school year, and promote inclusive education for children with disabilities? What measures had been taken to improve the quality of vocational training programmes? What measures were in place to prevent racial discrimination in schools? Was religious education compulsory? Was there any education on children's rights and the environment? Were children involved in the governance of their schools? What was the State party doing to ensure that children had access to leisure and cultural activities?

Another Committee Expert said that a lack of clarity in legislation regarding children's best interests caused confusion amongst the general public. The Expert welcomed the Juvenile Justice Court and expressed hope that the Committee's recommendations regarding juvenile justice and juvenile detention would be enacted. There were no specified limits regarding pretrial detention.

The Expert stated that the rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers had caused difficulties for authorities. There were reports of refugee camps being overcrowded, with children sleeping on floors, and there were allegations of sexual violence occurring in these camps. The Expert called on the State party to investigate these allegations and address the situation. The State had embarked on medical assessments to determine asylum seekers' age. The Expert called on the State party to use more child-friendly means to assess age. What happened when an application was rejected? What was the situation regarding allegations of pushbacks of asylum seekers leading to refoulement?

The Expert welcomed the amendment to legislation that increased penalties for human trafficking. However, the national action plan against trafficking had now expired. What was being done to update it? What was being done to identify and reduce victims of trafficking, and what services were available to them?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said that 5,800 new applicants for asylum had been received in 2021 and 2022, many coming from Lebanon. Cypriot authorities faced an additional challenge due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under a bilateral readmission agreement, Cypriot authorities had returned migrants from Lebanon that did not apply for international protection. All applications for international protection were duly processed. There were no allegations of misconduct from police personnel. Irregular arrivals from Lebanon had been effectively

curbed. The Government was fully committed to respecting the principle of non-refoulement and the rights of asylum seekers.

The national action plan against trafficking had been renewed for two more years, adopting the same goals of the previous plan. Due to the pandemic, some of the targets of the plan could not be achieved and were extended.

The mission of the Child Commissioner was to oversee the Government's implementation of the Convention, disseminate information about children's rights, represent children within courts, promote studies on children's rights, and coordinate with non-governmental organizations. However, the Commissioner did not draft the national plan on promoting children's rights. Ministries took into account the Commissioner's recommendations, and the Commissioner was invited to participate in parliamentary discussions related to children.

The harmonisation law was enacted to establish an Ombudsperson's Office charged with protecting human rights, particularly those of children and minorities. This law also prohibited all forms of discrimination against all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, ethnicity or religious belief. The law ensured that all persons were able to access housing and social services without discrimination. The law also contained provisions preventing indirect racial discrimination. The Criminal Code was also amended to penalise discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, religious belief and gender.

The Government planned to abolish the clause within legislation allowing the marriage of children aged 16 to 18 with parents' permission. A bill on parental custody had also been drafted that penalised the defiance of court orders by parents. The State party was interested in the recommendations of the Committee regarding legislation defining the best interests of the child.

COVID-19 prevention measures had been introduced based on advice from health authorities. A committee had been established to provide information on the pandemic to the public, and make decisions on changes to prevention measures. Health protocols had been implemented in schools to curb the spread of the virus. Special information had been provided for schools, and videos were provided to convey information to young students in an easy-to-understand way. The Government had implemented distance education and provided digital resources and training for students and teachers to support the digital transition. Alternative assessment methods had been developed for distance education, and online learning materials and platforms had been created. Educational psychologists had been actively involved in assessing COVID-19 prevention measures in schools to help students to achieve a healthy emotional state. When schools had opened, these psychologists had helped to provide counselling and support for students and teachers returning to school.

The Cypriot Children's Parliament met regularly, and their views were disseminated to the Government and considered in the decision-making process. Members of the Children's Parliament were allowed to participate in the work of the National Parliament once a year.

Measures had been implemented to reduce violence in schools, including the establishment of a bullying observatory. Students and teachers were provided with educational materials on preventing bullying, promoting diversity and mediation skills. There were discussions underway on criminalising bullying in schools.

When court orders were violated, arrest warrants were issued. The penalty for violating court orders was two years imprisonment. A new law had been adopted on the rights of children within the justice system. Under this law, information on children's rights was provided to children who were in conflict with the law. Community work was used as an alternative to court hearings in the case of minor offences. Minors who were involved in drug use or sale were processed according to a dedicated protocol that promoted drug treatment rather than incarceration. The files of children who completed treatment in drug treatment centres were disposed of so that these children would not have a criminal record. New detention centres for children were also being constructed.

Cyprus had well exceeded its capacity for housing asylum seekers, with camp capacities at over 300 per cent. The situation had worsened in 2022, with almost double the number of arrivals compared to the same period in 2021. This influx posed difficulties for public authorities. Hotel facilities had been secured to house unaccompanied minors. A roadmap had been developed to expedite the processing of asylum seekers. The European Commission had provided increased financial assistance to Cyprus to speed up processing and construct new reception centres for refugees. Social workers acted as guardians for unaccompanied minors within reception centres.

Asylum seekers who had been infected with COVID-19 were transferred to a health centre, and people in close contact were transferred to hotels. The capacity of the Pournara reception centre had been expanded during the pandemic. Prevention and hygiene measures had been implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within Pournara.

A master plan for expanding the Pournara reception centre and improving facilities was drafted in 2021, and a new centre had also been constructed. A special area had been established for unaccompanied minors, and a significant number had been transferred to hotels. A roadmap for processing the applications of unaccompanied minors and improving facilities had been drafted.

Social services had reported cases of child sexual abuse of asylum seekers occurring before arriving at the Pournara reception centre. Investigations of these cases were underway, with police respecting the best interests of the child victims in all cases. There was an early identification system in place within the Pournara reception centre to identify cases of abuse of minors. Families with children were transferred to a dedicated reception centre.

Age determination procedures were carried out when there were doubts about an applicant's age. Non-medical methods were used first, but when these were inconclusive, medical procedures were carried out with the permission of the applicant. If medical procedures were inconclusive, the applicant was assumed to be a minor.

Cyprus had made significant efforts to combat trafficking. The national action plan against trafficking set a framework for combatting trafficking and strengthening identification, prevention and training. An office for combatting trafficking had been established. Investigators were well-trained in dealing with children. The number of interviews was limited to reduce their impact on children. There was a focused plan to detect and prevent trafficking of children across Europe.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert said that many measures had been implemented by the Ministry of Education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What measures had been taken in

response to the digital divide, and what support had been given to children returning to schools when they were reopened? Were children involved in decisions taken in response to the pandemic?

The measures taken to combat violence in schools were very positive. Had the Government assessed the strength and weaknesses of the bullying observatory?

BRAGI GUDBRANDSSON, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, noted that both parents needed to give consent for children to access support services. It was important for children to be able to access these services independently.

Were there any measures addressed to the business sector, particularly the tourism industry, regarding children's rights?

Another Committee Expert asked for more details on how children in conflict with the law were dealt with. What training was provided for medical officers who assessed these children?

A Committee Expert said that the concept of parental alienation was controversial. Was this concept used by the courts in custody cases? Was there an age limit for children who were asked to participate in court procedures? Who listened to their statements? What was done in response to children under the age of criminal responsibility who committed an offence? The Expert noted that the creation of more detention centres to accommodate children was counter to the Convention, which promoted the reduction of the number of children in detention.

What care was provided for unaccompanied minors staying in hotels? Was there a legal remedy available for asylum-seeking children who did not agree with assessments of their age?

Another Committee Expert asked about measures being taken to prevent female genital mutilation within Cyprus? What punishments were given to perpetrators?

A Committee Expert asked for details on the law against bullying. Did it penalise bullying of children by other children? The Committee did not wish to criminalise children for such actions.

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said that there was a discussion underway on the criminalisation of bullying. The aim of the legislation was not to criminalise the acts of children, but to provide appropriate protections for child victims and penalise offending adults.

The interests of children in custody cases were heard by social service officers. The judge decided whether to hear the statement of a child based on the maturity of the child.

Children were allowed to marry at age 16 when parents provided consent. If the child had no parental guardians, a court was able to grant the marriages of such children. The Government was in the final stages of discussing a bill that eliminated provisions allowing for the marriage of children aged 16 to 18.

There was access to judicial remedy for asylum seekers in response to any decisions made by authorities, including on age.

Pushbacks of asylum seekers were a serious violation of international law. In all cases, authorities investigated whether boats contained persons seeking international protection before ordering the return of boats.

Female genital mutilation was not a legal practice in Cyprus. Awareness raising campaigns on female genital mutilation had been carried out. There had been no convictions related to female genital mutilation because there had been no reported cases.

Migrant children born in Cyprus were issued with birth certificates. Statelessness was decided upon as part of asylum processing procedures, and persons determined to be stateless could apply for Cypriot nationality. If such applications were rejected, stateless persons could apply for special residency permits. Stateless persons' social rights were upheld and respected.

Only around 10 per cent of mothers did not breastfeed.

Existing detention centres for children would cease to operate once new centres were constructed, so the number of detention centres for children would not be increased.

Judges had been trained on children's rights in the school of judges, particularly focusing on preventing sexual violence against children and providing support for child witnesses.

Children in the care of social welfare services continued with education and extracurricular activities. State homes were provided for unaccompanied minors. Minors over the age of 16 were able to participate in a semi-independent living programme. A new programme was being piloted to provide psychological support for minors who used drugs or other substances. Income support was provided to asylum seekers' families and children. An action plan was in place ensuring that all children living in poverty had access to basic services.

There was a small number of enlistments in the army of children below 18. Volunteers for military service had to be aged 17 or above, and their numbers were very low.

Social workers were stationed in hotels housing unaccompanied minors so that support could be provided to these minors 24 hours a day.

The Ministry of Education provided tablets to students who did not have access to digital technologies, and financial support for students to purchase laptops.

Closing Remarks

BRAGI GUDBRANDSSON, Committee Expert and Coordinator of the Country Taskforce for Cyprus, thanked the delegation for its informative answers and wished the State party well in its ongoing work protecting the rights of children.

LOUIZA CHRISTODOULIDOU ZANNETOU, Law Commissioner of Cyprus and head of the delegation, said that it was a great honour to appear before the Committee, and expressed appreciation for the Committee's thorough questions. The delegation shared the Committee's concern and care for children. The Committee's review and concluding observations would contribute to further enhancing Cyprus' implementation of the Convention. The Cypriot

Government and all stakeholders would continue to do their utmost to promote and protect the rights of children.

MIKIKO OTANI, Committee Chair, said that the Committee had learned more about the situation of the rights of the child in Cyprus through the dialogue, and expressed hope that the recommendations of the Committee would contribute to further strengthening those rights.

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