

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AFFECTED BY LEPROSY IN ETHIOPIA

Submitted for the consideration of the periodic report of Ethiopia during the 72nd Session of the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 18

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Submitted by:

Ethiopia National Association of Persons Affected by Leprosy (ENAPAL)

And

The Leprosy Mission, Ethiopia

(The submission may be posted on the CEDAW website)

1. Ethiopia is typically a patriarchal society and women affected by leprosy are amongst the most marginalized and disempowered population on account of stigma that the disease carries resulting in pervasive discrimination against them. Discrimination against women affected by leprosy has led to denial of equal opportunity to participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life and leaving them in a perpetual state of disempowerment which occurs in certain areas of the country.

2. Women affected by leprosy in remote area have no or little knowledge about the early signs and symptoms of leprosy and about treatment that is freely available through Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT). Lack of awareness about the disease and its consequences often prevents women affected in seeking medical intervention at an early stage thereby resulting in late detection leading to physical deformities.

It is therefore important for the government at all levels to ensure that women affected by leprosy have access to health information, health services and counselling in accordance with article 14 of the convention.

3. Due to stigma attached to the disease, majority of women affected by leprosy try to hide their disease from their spouses because of the fear of divorce or separation. This has led to late diagnosis resulting in deformities. Traditionally, it is men who decide on behalf of women and the decision whether women affected by leprosy should access medical services is often decided by their husbands or men in the household which again leads to late diagnosis as women have to wait until their husbands felt it was

necessary to go to medical facilities for treatment which may result in delayed detection leading to disabilities. The committee may please ensure that women affected by leprosy have timely access to health services and health care as enshrined in article 12 of the convention.

4. Stigma and discrimination is acute amongst women affected by leprosy and they often face desertion and abandonment by their spouses when the disease is diagnosed. Women affected by leprosy continue to face humiliation denying them the right to family relations and forced to seek divorce. There is a greater chance of women affected by leprosy to engage in prostitution for their livelihood and this increases their vulnerability to contract sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS which further jeopardizes their health. Women affected by leprosy are often shunned and find it difficult to re-marry due to stigma prevailing in the society about leprosy. Moreover, undesired divorces degrades women's status in the community which adversely impacts her socio-economic status within the family. Lastly, women affected by leprosy often become victims of sexual exploitation and other gender based violence and this is largely due to their state of helplessness when their spouses abandon them leaving them to seek livelihood through prostitution. **It is therefore necessary for the government to take appropriate measures in accordance with article 16 of the convention to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters related to marriage and family relations and especially equality amongst men and women.**

5. Women affected by leprosy who are deserted by their spouses have no legal recourse to justice. Due to low literacy rate and especially in rural areas, they have no knowledge or information about legal remedies that are available to seek justice. It is in the best interest of women affected by leprosy that they have information about free legal aid that is available and have access to justice without any kind of discrimination. Further, as a vulnerable group they should enjoy of waiver of court fee in the case of litigations. **The government of Ethiopia may pay special attention to include women affected by leprosy in accordance with article 2 of the convention and initiate necessary action to legal protection for women affected by leprosy while creating special legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men.**

In the Ethiopian society, leprosy is considered as hereditary disease and this misconception further makes women affected by leprosy more vulnerable due to the false belief that children who are born to them will contract the disease. **It is therefore necessary for the government to take all appropriate measures to raise awareness about leprosy and to combat stereotypes by abolishing existing customs and practices that discriminate against women affected by leprosy and enable them to enjoy fundamental human rights on equal basis with men as enshrined in article 5 of the convention.**