

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

...because Women's Rights are Human Rights

What is CEDAW?

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is a landmark international agreement that affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women around the world.

It offers countries a practical blueprint to promote basic rights and open opportunities for women and girls in all areas of society. Around the world, CEDAW has been used to ensure primary education for girls; improve health care services, save lives during pregnancy and childbirth; address human trafficking; pass laws against domestic violence and female genital mutilation; and allow women to own and inherit property.

There is a worldwide consensus that the CEDAW principles are important goals: to date, 186 of 193 countries have ratified the treaty. The United States is one of only seven countries—including Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Nauru, Palau and Tonga—that have not yet ratified CEDAW.

Support CEDAW for Women and Girls

Advancing women's human rights is fundamental to America's national security interests and a cornerstone of our foreign policy. Yet, because the U.S. has not ratified CEDAW, it cannot participate in the CEDAW Committee, the one global forum dedicated to women's human rights.

Ratification would allow the U.S. to lend its expertise to other countries that seek greater equality for women and girls and to benefit from experiences elsewhere. Women of the world are calling for U.S. ratification of CEDAW as a strong signal to their governments that promoting rights of women is a priority.

American women enjoy opportunities and status not available to most of the world's women, but few would dispute that more progress is needed at home in certain areas, such as closing the pay gap and ending domestic violence.

While ratifying CEDAW does not automatically result in changes to U.S. law, it would provide an opportunity for national dialogue on how to address persistent gaps in women's full equality. It would be a catalyst for the United States to engage in systematic analysis of discrimination against women and develop strategies for solutions.

Promoting and protecting human rights is fundamental to America's core values. Under the leadership of Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton, the U.S. ratified similar treaties on genocide, torture, race and civil and political rights.

Ratifying the CEDAW treaty would continue that important bipartisan tradition. Ratification of the CEDAW treaty requires 67 Senators to stand together for women and has no financial cost.

CEDAW Works: Invest in Women, It Pays

Providing opportunities for women and girls to learn, to earn and to participate in public decision making helps reduce violence, alleviate poverty, build democracies and strengthen economies. In countries that have ratified CEDAW, women have partnered with their governments to engage in a national dialogue about the status of women and girls, and as a result have changed laws and policies to create greater safety and opportunity for women and their families. For example:

- Pakistan introduced co-education in primary schools in 1996-97 after CEDAW ratification and saw sharp increases in girls' enrollment.
- Mexico responded to a destabilizing epidemic of violence against women by using CEDAW terms in a General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence. By 2009, all 32 Mexican states had adopted the measure.
- Kenya has used CEDAW to address differences in inheritance rights, eliminating discrimination against widows and daughters of the deceased.
- Kuwait's Parliament voted to extend voting rights to women in 2005 following a recommendation by the CEDAW Committee to eliminate discriminatory provisions in its electoral law.

Role of the CEDAW Committee

Although the CEDAW Committee has no enforcement authority, it makes recommendations highlighting areas where more progress is needed in a particular country. The role of the CEDAW Committee is to engage in a "constructive dialogue" to review and assess a country's progress. The Committee is comprised of 23 independent experts nominated and elected by ratifying countries to serve a four-year term. Countries that ratify CEDAW agree to take all "appropriate measures" to implement the treaty's provisions, leaving it to each country to decide how best to achieve implementation. Ratifying countries submit a report on how they are implementing the treaty one year after ratification, then every four years thereafter.

The United States and CEDAW

The Obama Administration strongly supports ratification, and has included CEDAW as one of five multilateral treaties it has identified as a priority. The U.S. played an important role in drafting CEDAW, which the United Nations adopted in 1979. The Carter administration signed the treaty on July 17, 1980, and submitted it to the Senate in November 1980.

President Clinton called for CEDAW's ratification with certain conditions known as reservations, understanding and declarations (RUDs). CEDAW has been voted favorably out of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee twice, in 1994, with a bi-partisan vote of 13-5; and in 2002, with a bi-partisan vote of 12-7. It has never been brought to the Senate floor for a vote.

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For more information, contact Selene Kaye, Advocacy and Policy Strategist, ACLU Center for Liberty at 212-549-2645 or skaye@aclu.org or Vania Leveille, Legislative Counsel, ACLU Washington Legislative Office at 202-715-0806 or vleveille@dcacclu.org.