



What is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)? And Why Should the U.S. Ratify CEDAW?

The 2008 presidential election brought with it a mandate for change. It affirmed a commitment to reengage the United States in a positive manner with the international community, lead on global human rights issues, and deliver on commitments for rights for women at home and abroad. The Obama administration has cited CEDAW ratification as a treaty priority. Now is the time to press for laws and policies that enable women to be equal partners and fulfill their potential, and to mobilize across the country for rights that are long overdue. There has never been a more opportune moment to press for ratification of CEDAW, a crucial treaty that is a hallmark for the rights of women globally.

What is CEDAW?

CEDAW is often referred to as the “Treaty for the Rights of Women” because that’s what it is. The treaty is regarded as the most important international mechanism for women’s equality. It addresses physical, sexual, economic, and political abuses against women and promotes women’s equality of rights and well-being. This treaty holds that basic human rights for women should be universal across cultures and religions.

CEDAW calls on governments to ensure women have the same access as men to education, employment opportunities, legal redress against violence and access to health care. It aims to ensure women receive equal pay for equal work and to encourage policies that support women and families through maternity leave and options for child care. It calls for women to have the same access as men to legal protections, property rights, and family planning resources and services so that they are able to determine the number and spacing of their children.

The creation of this treaty in 1979 was the first step in developing a global standard for women’s rights. Now, 186 countries have ratified CEDAW. Because of CEDAW, millions of girls around the world receive primary education; countries have taken measures against sex slavery, domestic violence and trafficking of women and girls; women’s health care services have focused on saving lives during pregnancy and childbirth; and millions of women now have the opportunity to secure loans and the right to own and inherit property.

Why Ratify CEDAW?

CEDAW is critical as the United States redoubles its efforts to support women’s human rights globally.

- Over the past 30 years, CEDAW has provided a vehicle for ratifying countries to overcome barriers of discrimination. CEDAW consists of standards that most world nations have agreed to uphold, affirming that women’s human rights must be respected universally and countering arguments that such rights are “Western” ideals that are forced upon other nations.
- U.S. failure to ratify the treaty allows countries which have weak human rights records to justify neglecting and undermining human rights for women. Until the U.S. ratifies the Treaty for the Rights of Women, our country cannot credibly demand that others live up to their obligations under the treaty. Lack of U.S. ratification allows other countries to divert attention away from their neglect of women.
- U.S. voters across political parties consistently and overwhelmingly support human rights for women. Over the years, a working group for CEDAW ratification has organized to build mainstream support for CEDAW across the United States. The working group consists of over 200 leading national and local organizations that represent millions of women, men, girls, and boys in this country of different religions, ethnicities, professions, and interests, all of whom support U.S. ratification of CEDAW. The working group comprises women’s advocacy groups, human rights and humanitarian groups, religious institutions, and professional and civic associations, among other groups.

For more information visit www.womenstreaty.org

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- CEDAW provides a useful framework for improving human rights and the rule of law. In countries where the treaty is ratified women have partnered with their governments to change inequitable laws and improve policies to help girls receive primary education; enable women to get micro-loans and set up small businesses; stop sex slavery; improve health care services; secure the right to own and inherit property; and protect women and girls against trafficking and other forms of violence.
- The U.S. Supreme Court in recent years has cited international human rights treaties as moral frames of reference (while not recognizing them as legally binding), and in public statements Justice Ginsburg spoke about the potential of CEDAW to frame issues relating to child care and work-family balance.
- CEDAW has never come before the U.S. Senate for a floor vote even though it enjoys bipartisan support. This unfinished business puts the United States in the company of only a handful of nations that have not ratified the treaty, including Iran, Sudan and Somalia.
- Once the United States ratifies CEDAW, it can participate fully as a member of the CEDAW Committee that reviews country reports on their actions to enforce the treaty's provisions. This forum will allow the United States to spotlight the best practices and contribute to the international discourse about how to improve women's lives around the world.

Exactly how does the treaty work?

Like all human rights treaties, CEDAW sets benchmarks for improving relevant human rights conditions. In the case of CEDAW, nations strive to prevent discrimination against women in education, employment, health care, politics, finance and legal rights. Like other human rights treaties, CEDAW depends on the ratifying governments to implement and enforce its provisions. When ratifying CEDAW, governments can record "reservations, understandings, and declarations" where domestic laws may diverge from the treaty or to clarify or underscore their interpretation of specific treaty provisions.

After the United States ratifies CEDAW, the Congress must enact legislation to give any treaty provision the weight of law. Like other human rights treaties, ratifying governments are obliged to report periodically on their progress to implement the treaty provisions in the form of a report they submit to the CEDAW Committee at the United Nations. This committee then offers recommendations for further progress on treaty provisions to protect women's human rights. The committee's recommendations are advisory in nature and thus it is up to each government to act on any of the recommendations.

What you can do:

Join advocates from around the country and contact your Senators to ask them to actively support ratification.

Sample Letter:

Dear Senator,

I am writing to urge your support of the promotion of human rights of women by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The treaty for the rights of women provides a universal standard for women's human rights. It addresses discrimination in areas such as education, employment, marriage and family relations, health care and reproductive health, politics, finance and law. To date, 186 countries have ratified CEDAW. The United States is the only industrialized nation that has failed to do so, and as such is in the company of countries such as Sudan, Iran and Somalia.

I urge you to work to ensure immediate ratification of CEDAW, the treaty for the rights of women.

Sincerely,