

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
Twenty-fifth anniversary of its adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations
Commemorative Round table
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The 25th anniversary of the adoption of CEDAW by the General Assembly provides an important opportunity to reflect on the significance and impact of this unique Convention. While the Convention focuses on the rights of women, the realization of these rights extends far beyond the woman herself, to her family, her community, her nation, and humanity as a whole. As many studies have shown, the advancement of women is linked with improved living standards, health, education, increased entrepreneurship and foreign investment. Indeed, the full emancipation of women is no less than a prerequisite for the social and economic conditions capable of bringing about global peace and prosperity.

I want to take this opportunity to applaud the dedicated work and courage of the CEDAW committee, in addressing the challenges of the governments before them. Members of the committee have shown tremendous patience and encouragement towards member states working to bring their laws into compliance with CEDAW. I would particularly like to commend the Committee for the way they have reached out to and welcomed the contributions of NGOs. The Committee has invited NGOs to consult with them, has supported their extensive work on the ground, and has urged member states to work with and draw on NGOs' expertise in their efforts to advance the position of women. I would also like to recognize the Division for the Advancement of Women and UNIFEM for their instrumental role in facilitating NGOs' contributions to CEDAW, through financial, technical, and capacity building measures. With CEDAW as the cornerstone of its programs, UNIFEM has forged important partnerships between women's NGOs, governments, and the UN, most recently starting a major four-year program to strengthen the implementation of CEDAW in Southeast Asia.

CEDAW has been critically important for NGOs. It has provided NGOs with a recognized standard and a framework for articulating specific rights, which have empowered and emboldened NGOs in their work with governments. NGOs have taken an active role in the reporting process, providing alternative reports and comments on the reports of their respective countries, advocating for the withdrawal of their country's reservations, monitoring provisions for gender equality in national constitutions and pushing further for their full implementation.

In the 25 years since its adoption, 178¹ countries have ratified the convention and many have taken the necessary measures to condemn and eliminate legislative discrimination against women. Others, because of reservations or by failing to ratify the convention, have regrettably delayed the advances necessary to bring about the emancipation of fully half of their nations' citizens. The time has come for governments to recognize the universality of this law and of human rights in general and, in keeping with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CEDAW, remove their reservations and move quickly and confidently towards full ratification and implementation. The question of women's

¹ As of October 5, 2004. [<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm>]

rights is not only a legal and political one – the recognition of and accordance of rights to women is a moral imperative. Countries have no less than a moral obligation to recognize the rights of women as equal citizens and bring about the necessary conditions for their equal participation in all facets of society.

Whereas the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognized over half a century ago, the “inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family,” the road to the realization of these ideals has been marked by numerous political and ideological obstacles. Violent human rights abuses against women continue around the world – often unreported and without legal redress. Women continue to be subjected to cruel abuses in the name of political, cultural and religious values. The recent case of Mukhtaran Bibi, a young woman from the village of Meerwala, Pakistan is only one example. Sentenced by her village’s tribal council to be gang-raped for a crime she did not commit, following her callous punishment – she was forced to walk home naked in front of 300 villagers.² Although she obtained legal redress through intervention from the highest political levels in Pakistan, members of her own tribe, including women were unsupportive. In the eyes of society Mukhtaran Bibi was totally disgraced and it was expected that she would commit suicide, as many victims in similar situations do. There is much work to be done. CEDAW alone is not enough. Indeed, the realization of CEDAW’s objectives requires profound changes in values, behavior as well as the modification of the dynamics of power and organizational structures.³ Nothing less than the overhaul of obsolescent laws and institutions is urgently needed to reflect the growing recognition of the inherent equality of men and women.

There is today nearly universal agreement that the advancement of women is of paramount importance, not only for its own sake but also as a precondition for the achievement of other development priorities. Those who oppose full rights for women imply that, somehow, it will threaten the social order and, even, retard social progress. Such assertions are blatantly false, and contradicted by virtually every study. The principle of equality, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and elaborated on in CEDAW, is an integral element of a just domestic, economic and community life. The full expression of this principle is indeed foundational to the continued social and spiritual evolution of humanity. Its realization requires nothing less than the creation of human systems and institutions, which better reflect growing recognition of the oneness of humankind. It is only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavor that the moral climate and social institutions capable of ushering in international peace will emerge.

² Kristof, Nicholas D. (September 29, 2004). “Sentenced to be Raped,” *New York Times*.

³ Khan, Janet A., and Peter J. Khan. (1998). *Advancement of Women*. Baha’i Publishing Trust: Wilmette: Illinois.