



**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
IN SUPPORT OF RATIFICATION OF THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION
OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), which represents a network of approximately 2,000 battered women's shelters and community-based programs, as well as individual battered and formerly battered women throughout the nation, submits this testimony in support of the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Treaty for the Rights of Women.

The International Consensus on Women's Human Rights

Discrimination against women infects societies and cultures, hurting women and children around the world. To eliminate this social disease, every nation must call upon its educational and legislative resources and commit to ending discrimination against women. Encouragingly, 169 nations have adopted CEDAW but unfortunately, although we helped draft CEDAW, the United States stands alone among industrialized nations as the sole holdout in ratification. We are among the company of nations such as Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan.

America's Commitment to Human Rights

The United States has always prided itself in being among the world's leaders in the promotion of human rights, both at home and abroad. But we cannot continue to maintain our stance of moral superiority if we continue to ignore the fundamental human rights of over half the world's population. By not ratifying CEDAW, we undermine the very goals we purport to advance. In addition, our inaction has resulted in a loss of credibility on issues pertaining to international human rights and has degraded our ability to comment on the mistreatment of women and to push for critical portions of our international human rights agenda. It is time for us to resume leadership in the international human rights arena. The time has come for us to adopt CEDAW.

Internationally, violence against women is not new, but in recent years it has received increased attention. The media has been inundated with images and stories of orphaned children forced into sexual slavery in Thailand, of rape camps in war torn Yugoslavia being used as a form of ethnic cleansing and sexual terrorism, and of the repression women faced under the Taliban in Afghanistan, including public executions and stonings. It is now more clear than ever that the effects of discrimination against women are beyond devastating, they are deadly.

We are now at a critical juncture. Afghanistan is in the process of re-building itself and it is in everyone's best interests that in the new Afghan society, women have a place alongside men as equal partners in their mutual future. Leaders in Afghanistan and throughout the world, often cite our lack of support for CEDAW as a reason for them to ignore the treaty and the rights of women. Furthermore, American diplomats have complained that whenever they attempt to address the issue of women's rights, they face criticism over the United States' refusal to ratify CEDAW. Although this is clearly done to evade the true issues, it has been an effective tool in

deflecting our criticism and has often frustrated diplomatic efforts to effectively discuss and address international human rights.

CEDAW's Usefulness

In addition to restoring our legitimacy as an international leader in the arena of human rights, ratifying CEDAW will also result in real gains for women throughout the world. For instance, the women of Nigeria, Christian and Muslim alike, are often subjected to the brutal procedure known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). This practice often results in infection and even death. CEDAW can provide relief for individuals who are subjected to this form of oppression, but without the United States joining the Convention, we have no say in how or even if it is enforced and whether or not these women's rights are protected. We have no representation on the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and are thus denied the most effective arena in which to share with the rest of the world, the benefits of our own experiences in eliminating discrimination against women in the United States.

The repercussions of our ratification will not always be as visible as ending gender apartheid in Afghanistan or combating FGM in Nigeria but the less visible advancements of the international women's rights movement are equally as important to concerned individuals around the world. While CEDAW does not dictate specific changes, it serves as a framework or guideline for policy making. CEDAW has been cited by many countries which have adopted it, as a reference for change. Since its inception, CEDAW's principles have been used to assist in writing new constitutions in Brazil and Uganda, and as of 2001, had resulted in twenty-two countries adopting laws to advance equal participation of women in decision-making. CEDAW has also been used to advance the interests of women in education. Pakistan recently introduced co-education in primary schools and as a result, there were sharp increases in female enrollment. Similar programs in India have increased the numbers of girls in pre-schools to be nearly equal to boys. These advancements are promising not only for the girls who directly benefit from these programs but also for all those who will be affected by the reduction in poverty that generally accompanies increased levels of education. Australian women have benefited on the employment front as a result of CEDAW. They now have national legislation against sexual harassment in employment. CEDAW has also been used to promote women's health. In Argentina, there now exists a program to prevent early maternity among teens, and when it does occur, to provide necessary pre-natal care. And in the Philippines, there is a new Maternal Health Care Program, and immunizations for newborns. CEDAW has also paved the way to economic improvements for women. For instance, in China, The Women's Act was passed guaranteeing equal rights to property inheritance. All these examples demonstrate that adopting CEDAW is not simply giving lip-service to human rights, the gains are real and measurable.

The Importance of Women's Human Rights and CEDAW

Now more than ever, it is imperative that the United States send a message to the world that human rights includes women's rights. We have seen what discrimination against women has done, and we have also seen what international cooperation can accomplish. By advancing the rights and interests of women throughout the world, we will increase access to education, health care, involvement in government, and employment opportunities. Advancements in these areas will also serve to combat poverty, malnutrition, and many of the other global ailments that serve to strengthen the forces of despair and extremism. Since September 11th, we have all become painfully aware that these issues are not just the problems of other nations. To advance the goals of peace, we must eliminate the seeds of despair and inequality that contribute to the perpetuation of terrorism; ratification of CEDAW is a clear starting point for the accomplishment of this goal.

Social, economic, and political discrimination against women in our society and culture all nurture an environment that accepts violence against women. When women are not empowered in these areas, their lives and the quality of life for them and their children is at risk. We have seen this throughout history, most recently in Afghanistan. Abroad and at home, discrimination and violence against women are closely linked. Statistics of violence against women are appalling, according to a February 2000 study conducted by the United Nations Report on the Commission on the Status of Women, internationally, at least one in three women and girls has

been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, in the United States, 1 in 6 women has experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault.

Congress and the Senate have often taken a leadership role in upholding human rights at home and abroad. Continuing in this tradition, we call upon the Senate to once again reaffirm its commitment to the values that it has time and again demonstrated dedication to. Ratifying CEDAW will not only prove our unwavering support for human rights and equality, it will disarm the true human rights abusers of their greatest ammunition in this international debate, our past inaction. **We urge the Senate to move to ratify CEDAW today.**

If you have any questions, please contact Reva Gupta, in our Public Policy Office at (202) 745-1211.