

## Testimony of the United States Committee for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM/USA)

By: Sheryl J. Swed, President, UNIFEM/USA

On behalf of the United States Committee for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM/USA), I would like to thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

UNIFEM/USA is a voluntary committee that works to support the mission of UNIFEM, the Women's Fund at the United Nations. UNIFEM/USA, one of 19 National Committees worldwide, provides support to UNIFEM by increasing public awareness of UNIFEM's mission, and by fundraising in the United States for UNIFEM's programs.

UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, was created by a United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1976. It is an autonomous agency of the United Nations and is the only fund established specifically to support women. Since its inception, UNIFEM has established itself as a leader in the pursuit of human rights for women by funding innovative initiatives for women in developing countries. Currently, UNIFEM provides financial and technical assistance to programs and strategies in over 100 countries around the world.

UNIFEM/USA and UNIFEM share a vision: *a world where women live their lives free from poverty, violence, and inequality*. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is an essential and powerful tool to achieve this mission. CEDAW is a vital precondition to granting and protecting the basic human rights of women around the world.

The plight of women in Afghanistan is the most recent and visible example of why the world's women need the protection of CEDAW. The leadership that the Congress and the United States demonstrated on Afghanistan now needs

to be extended to CEDAW. Without the United States, the Convention lacks the necessary strength to effectively and positively defend women's status and security in nations around the world. Therefore, UNIFEM/USA urges the United States Senate to ratify CEDAW as a critical demonstration of support from the world's leader on human rights issues. To effectively ensure that CEDAW is taken seriously, the United States must be one of its chief supporters.

CEDAW includes provisions on areas of discrimination as varied as: political and public life; education; employment and equal pay; health care; financial benefits and property; equality in marriage and family; as well as issues of violence and trafficking. Just as gender discrimination can touch each area of a women's life, so too can CEDAW positively affect women's lives in each of these areas. In addition, CEDAW can be an extremely important resource for two key issues in today's world: ensuring women's human rights during the rebuilding of a nation's constitution and legislation, and effectively addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

As detailed in a UNIFEM publication "Bringing Equality Home: Implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women," CEDAW has been used around the world to benefit women by strengthening policies, enhancing women's legal protections, and moving us closer to our ideal of gender equality.

For example, if Afghanistan ratifies CEDAW, this essential and powerful resource can be utilized to make women's human rights an inalienable right in that nation as the new constitution and legislation is drafted and the civil society rebuilt. Women must be included as equals in the new Afghanistan. The women of Afghanistan need CEDAW to ensure that their human rights are protected. By ratifying CEDAW, the United States strengthens the Convention and will be in the position to urge Afghanistan to ratify as well.

As reported in a UNIFEM publication, "Turning the Tide: CEDAW and the Gender Dimensions of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic," just as CEDAW can be a critical tool in ensuring that women's human rights are protected under constitutions and national legislation, so too can CEDAW serve as a vital resource when addressing the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

At the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June 2000, there was overwhelming recognition of the fact that HIV/AIDS poses a greater threat to women and girls than to men. Gender inequality and discrimination greatly increase women's vulnerability to infection and results in heavy burdens on the family and the community. Women and girls have less access to HIV/AIDS-related information, prevention, treatment, and services.

CEDAW can help ensure that gender is a guiding principle in the fight against HIV/AIDS and that gender issues are included in all policies, legislation and allocations. CEDAW can help make this happen by providing a framework for advocacy on human rights, including issues of health care, care-giving, and women's leadership.

Women's inequality and disempowerment in the family and community, in education, in government, in cultural norms, and in the economy has resulted in the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. Women are not only more biologically susceptible to contracting HIV/AIDS, but are also socially vulnerable as well. Inequality in the family and community, as well as economic dependence and threats of violence, may lead to unprotected sex. Adequate care and treatment is inaccessible.

CEDAW can play an important role in each of these areas, as it specifically targets inequality in relation to health services, education, family, employment, violence against women, and harmful cultural stereotypes and practices. The United States' ratification of CEDAW can strengthen the acceptance and implementation of this Convention and can help "turn the tide" of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Ratifying and implementing CEDAW is a critical step in building a culture that respects and promotes women's human rights and women's equality. UNIFEM will continue working with women in developing countries to strengthen policies and programs that ensure *a world where women live their lives free from poverty, violence, and inequality*. We urge the United States Senate to ratify CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, to ensure equal access to their full human rights for women around the world.

I have included the two referenced documents and request that they be placed in the official record of this hearing.

On behalf of the United States Committee for UNIFEM, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, thank you again for this opportunity to submit testimony on this vital issue. I would be more than happy to answer any written questions you may have and look forward to an open dialogue with you on this issue.