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Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

March 2003

Zonta International's Commitment to CEDAW

At the 55th International Convention of Zonta International in 2002, Zontians passed a resolution promoting CEDAW and the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and called on clubs to take action in support of the treaty. In passing this resolution, Zonta International cited its commitment to promote justice and human rights and to improve the legal, political, economic, educational, health and professional status of women.

What is CEDAW?

CEDAW, also known as the Women's Treaty, was adopted by the United Nations in 1979 as a way to guarantee women's rights that were not previously subject to international standards, including rights in the political, social, economic, cultural and family life. To date, 173 countries have ratified CEDAW.

How does CEDAW advance the status of women?

CEDAW provides a universal definition of discrimination against women and establishes an agenda for national action to end this discrimination. Additionally, the Convention establishes a committee that reviews reports of Member States on progress made in implementing the conditions of the treaty.

Women's rights advocates have used their government's ratification of the CEDAW Convention to advocate for changes in their national constitution, to strengthen women's rights through the court system, to introduce and alter laws to promote gender equality and to improve government policies towards women. Following are just a few examples:

- ③ After ratifying CEDAW, Colombia made domestic violence a crime and required legal protection for victims.
- ③ India developed national guidelines on workplace sexual assault after the Supreme Court found that CEDAW required such protections.
- ③ In Australia, the Sex Discrimination Act was upheld when the court agreed with the Government that CEDAW ratification expanded its ability to pass national laws regarding women's human rights.

How is CEDAW Enacted?

After the UN formally adopted CEDAW, it was presented to member states for their signatures. Signing the treaty indicates a country's intent to ratify the treaty. Also, by signing, states generally indicate their willingness to abide by the provisions of the treaty even before its ratification.

By ratifying CEDAW, a country formally becomes a state party to the Convention and agrees to uphold the treaty's provisions. Ratification methods vary from country to country, but generally involve some form of parliamentary process.

When signing or ratifying the Convention, a country may state a reservation or understanding about CEDAW, or make a declaration. A reservation is a statement that modifies or limits the effect of part or parts of the treaty. A declaration clarifies certain matters of policy or principal, but does not interfere with rights or obligations of the treaty. An understanding is a statement meant to clarify a matter that is incidental to the operation of the treaty.

How is CEDAW Enforced?

The United Nations ensures that member parties are making progress under CEDAW through the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, a board of 23 experts on women's issues from around the world. The Committee meets twice a year and reviews national reports submitted by the States parties. States are required to submit an initial report within one year of ratification or accession with further reports following every four years. The Committee also makes recommendations on specific women's issues that it believes require more attention from the States parties.

What is the Optional Protocol?

The Optional Protocol, adopted in October 1999 by the UN General Assembly, allows the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to consider complaints directly from individuals or groups. A number of criteria must be met in order for a complaint from an individual woman or group of women to be considered by the Committee. Additionally, all domestic remedies must be explored prior to bringing a complaint to the Committee. The Optional Protocol also allows the Committee to initiate inquiries into systematic or grave violations of women's rights. However, states may choose to exclude the independent inquiry clause of the Protocol upon ratification. To date, 75 countries have signed and 51 countries have ratified the Optional Protocol.

Advancing the Status of Women Worldwide

For More Information about CEDAW go to the following sources:

Click on www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/

Especially useful items: Text (full text (10pp) of the Convention); History; Reservations; & Country Reports

Another excellent and informative site is www.womenstreaty.org

This is maintained by a working group of 195 national non-governmental organizations working for US Ratification of CEDAW. The coalition has been active since 1980.

You can download a 2004 booklet about CEDAW & suggestions for advocacy.

Additional Information prepared by Jean Bryant, Chairperson, Legislative Awareness & Advocacy chair, Zonta District 11