



washington view

by Emily Robinson, Government Relations Fellow

Women's Treaty on Table

One of the most memorable images from the War Against Terrorism was Afghan women shedding their burqas and singing in the streets, finally free of the deadly oppression of the Taliban.

Both President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush eloquently spoke about the importance of improving the quality of life for women in Afghanistan as a part of rebuilding the war-torn region. Secretary of State Colin Powell proclaimed, "We, as a world community, cannot even begin to tackle the array of problems and challenges confronting us without the full participation of women in all aspects of life."

After such statements, it would seem logical that the United States would finally ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), also known as the Treaty on the Rights of Women. Yet, a full year after September 11th—and with the end of the Taliban's reign—the U.S. is still one of only 22 countries, and the only industrialized nation, that has not ratified the treaty. By failing to ratify, the U.S. has chosen to remain in the company of some of the world's most egregious human rights abusers, like Syria and Sudan.

What is CEDAW?

CEDAW, adopted by the United Nations in 1979, is the most comprehensive international agreement on the basic human rights of women. The treaty requires that states take steps to incorporate women into the political and economic realm; provide women with adequate healthcare, including family planning services; provide girls with the same education as boys; and end exploitation and violence against women.

This treaty can make, and has made, a difference in women's lives. After India ratified the treaty, women pressured the government to live up to its commitment to educate all children, and girls now account for more than half of pre-schoolers. The Colombian Ministry of Public Health modeled much of its "Health for Women, Women for Health" policy on the treaty, including the right to modern and safe contraceptives and the right to accurate and appropriate medical counseling. In Uganda, public officials created programs against domestic violence after signing the treaty.

Unfortunately, conservative politicians and right-wing organizations in the U.S. have made blocking the treaty a high priority. And the Bush administration seems to be bowing to the demands of the extremists—yet again! In February, the State Department listed the treaty as "generally desirable" but the White House has since effectively withdrawn that designation and sent the treaty to Attorney General John Ashcroft for further review.

CEDAW Today

Despite administration stalling, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted 12 - 7 to send the treaty to the Senate Floor for a ratification vote. In order for the treaty to be ratified it needs a two-thirds majority or 67 votes. The strenuous opposition of the right makes such a result difficult, but if the White House were to publicly endorse the treaty, that could make the difference.

The real question now is: whose side is the President on? The extreme right in the United States or the women around the world who are struggling every day for justice, for dignity and, indeed, for their very lives?



What You Can Do: Please call your U.S. senators at 202-224-3121 and urge them to vote in favor of the CEDAW Treaty.