

Title: Celebrating Women's History Month with International Human Rights

Dear IAOHRA Members,

We write in celebration of Women's History Month to provide additional ways that you can continue to raise awareness of human rights and act upon your commitment to use international human rights to advance and promote equality and opportunity.

March 8 was International Women's Day, a great opportunity for us to reflect on how human rights treaties promote women's rights and gender equality. And, in 2009, we marked the 30th year anniversary of an important human rights treaty focused on promoting equality between men and women in all spheres of life and eliminating discrimination: [the Treaty for the Rights of Women](#) (known as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, or CEDAW).

The fundamental objectives of CEDAW are to protect women from discrimination and to promote women's human rights. CEDAW calls for policies that promote equal participation, equal access, and equal opportunity and that result in equality. It also places obligations on governments to implement appropriate measures to advance the rights of women. CEDAW is widely praised for setting standards for gender equality, discrimination, and steps the government must take to address existing inequality.

The United States played an important role in drafting CEDAW. The U.S. signed CEDAW in 1980, but it is not part of domestic law until the Senate ratifies the treaty and the U.S. becomes an official party. Currently, the United States is one of only seven countries who are not parties to CEDAW. The others are: Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Nauru, Palau, and Tonga.

It is important that the United States ratify CEDAW. Women living in the United States face unique challenges, which CEDAW can help address. For example, the treaty could help the United States measure progress toward goals such as ending violence against women, ensuring equality in the workplace (such as equal pay) and in educational institutions, and improving maternity and child care benefits. Ratification of CEDAW can not only improve the status of women in the U.S., it can increase the government's credibility when it speaks as a world leader in human rights. In December 2008, President Obama cited CEDAW as one of four human rights treaties he would support ratifying.

While the federal government ultimately decides whether to ratify treaties, state and local governments and commissions can and do play an important role in supporting and adopting CEDAW's standards as well as educating the public about CEDAW. Many state and local governments have demonstrated support for the rights enshrined in CEDAW—over a dozen state legislatures and numerous cities and counties have passed resolutions supporting the treaty.

San Francisco has incorporated the treaty into binding local law and adopted guidelines that were used by San Francisco's Commission on the Status of Women. The guidelines are a tool for city departments to evaluate where and how discrimination is taking place and to create action plans to improve equality. As a result of the self-evaluations, policy changes have been made including: instituting workplace flexibility, creating girl-specific programs in juvenile probation and taking steps to enhance safety in

public places. For more information on that project and how the city implemented it, please see the report issued by IAOHRA and Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute, available [here](#).

Below are a few examples of how you can use CEDAW to advance human rights in your community:

- **Adopt CEDAW Principles.** Like San Francisco, you could use CEDAW to:
 - **Improve Safety.** Conduct an assessment of how safe your local area is for women by examining such issues as sufficiency of lighting and police patrols, placement of phone booths, and lighting of bus stops, and propose ways to make the local area safer.
 - **Promote Gender Responsive Budgeting.** Advocate that your local officials adopt budgeting practices that examine funding allocations and their impact on men and women in order to identify biases. This type of budgeting encourages officials to collect disaggregated data and take into account who programs and policies serve and whether services are being delivered effectively, efficiently and equitably. It also provides a tool to assess the impact of any budget cuts and to identify potential discriminatory impacts of changes in policy.
 - **Conduct a Gender Analysis of Your Services.** If you do not already do so, begin to collect data regarding the race and gender of individuals who use your commissions' services. This will allow you to assess whether your services are reaching a diverse population.

- **Raise Awareness About CEDAW.** You could designate March as Women's Human Rights Month to educate your constituents about women's human rights as well as violence against women, which has received special attention from the CEDAW Committee. The Committee's recommendations can be downloaded [here](#), and materials relating to advocacy and implementation can be found [here](#).

- **Support Ratification of CEDAW.** State legislatures of Iowa, Massachusetts, Illinois, California, South Dakota, New York, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Guam, North Carolina, Philadelphia and Vermont, amongst others, and numerous counties and cities have passed resolutions supporting CEDAW ratification. You, too, could advocate that your state or local legislature support CEDAW. (A sample resolution is attached.)

We hope that these ideas will help you act on your commitment to incorporate human rights as you work to encourage and ensure fairness and opportunity in your communities. Please keep us informed of any actions you have taken to this end by emailing us at IAOHRAoutreach@law.columbia.edu. We look forward to hearing about your work and to continuing to support you in your efforts.

Sincerely yours,

Risa E. Kaufman
Executive Director
Columbia Law School
Human Rights Institute

Leon Russell
President
International Association of
Official Human Rights Agencies

Robin S. Toma
Executive Director
Los Angeles County
Human Relations Commission

APPENDIX I: Sample Resolution

RESOLUTION ON UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

WHEREAS, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), an international human rights treaty, provides a universal definition of discrimination against women and brings attention to a whole range of issues concerning women's lives, and

WHEREAS, Countries that ratify CEDAW are mandated to condemn all forms of discrimination against women and to ensure equality for women in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural arenas, and

WHEREAS, The United Nations General Assembly adopted CEDAW in 1979 and President Carter signed the treaty on behalf of the United States in 1980, but the United States Senate has not yet ratified CEDAW, and

WHEREAS, On the local level, adherence to the principles of CEDAW would especially promote equal access to health care, employment, economic development and educational opportunities for women and would also address the continuing and critical problem of violence against women, now, therefore

BE IT RESOLVED, That the [City/County or State and name of your specific state, county or city human rights/human relations/community relations commission] hereby supports local implementation of the underlying principles of CEDAW, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the [City/County or State and name of your specific state, county or city human rights/human relations/community relations commission] hereby urges the United States Senate to ratify CEDAW, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the [Position] of the [City/County or State and name of your specific state, county or city human rights/human relations/community relations commission] is requested to transmit a copy of this resolution to our representatives in the United States Senate with a request that they take all action necessary to carry out the intent of this resolution.

Enacted by the [City/County or State and name of your specific state, county or city human rights/human relations/community relations commission] – [DATE].