

As the first comprehensive treaty addressing women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provides a near-universally agreed-upon framework for defining basic human rights for women and girls, including equal access to education, health care, employment, ownership of property, and participation in all aspects of civic and political life. The American Bar Association has a long history of promoting women's rights, both in the U.S. and abroad, and strongly supports U.S. ratification of CEDAW.

The United States played an important role in drafting CEDAW but is now one of only a handful of countries – including Sudan, Somalia and Iran – that have yet to ratify it. Yet, CEDAW has wide-ranging and bipartisan support within the United States. More than 180 leading organizations representing millions of people across the country are united in support of U.S. ratification. CEDAW also has enjoyed bipartisan support in the Senate, but has never come before the full Senate for a vote. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has twice voted favorably – in 1994 and 2002 – with bipartisan support to send the Treaty to the Senate floor for ratification, but the Senate recessed each time before that occurred.

Ratification of CEDAW would enable the U.S. to reaffirm its leadership in international human rights and more effectively engage in the global struggle for women's rights. Although the U.S. has helped address the needs of women and girls around the world over the years, its lack of action on CEDAW has damaged its credibility in denouncing human rights abuses and inhibits our ability to help forge change through implementation of CEDAW in other nations. Some countries that have ratified CEDAW cite the United States' failure to do so as an excuse for ignoring or delaying their own efforts to meet their obligations under the treaty.

Ratifying CEDAW, and supporting its effective implementation around the world, is also in the economic and national security interests of the United States. Lack of gender equality and respect for women's rights is a major stumbling block to the rule of law and development around the globe. In many nations, the greater the gender inequality, the higher the rate of poverty, malnutrition, ill health, and educational deprivation of women and girls. These countries also experience slower economic growth and weaker governance. But the promotion and protection of women's rights, by contrast, lead to more stable, peaceful and prosperous societies. Ratification would amplify the U.S. efforts in support of women and girls in Afghanistan, Iraq, Congo, Haiti and elsewhere.

U.S. ratification of CEDAW would further support the work the U.S. is already doing to support women's rights worldwide – rights for girls and women to go to school, own and inherit property, take part in public life, and to eliminate domestic violence and trafficking. Doing so will also reassert the U.S. leadership role in promoting human rights and support our own economic and security interests. It is past time for the U.S. to demonstrate to the international community that it stands unequivocally for the rights of girls and women around the globe by ratifying CEDAW.