

On the Agenda: Women's Human Rights

The issue: The denial of women's human rights touches every aspect of women's lives. Rights violations occur whenever women are denied access to property or employment, face violence within their own homes or cannot claim fair representation within their government. Other violations involve customary practices or social barriers that prevent girls from going to school or women from receiving appropriate health care. Some human rights violations are a matter of tradition and practice; others have been written into formal laws. And different violations may be intertwined—for example, a woman who cannot secure decent employment may be unable to leave the spouse who beats her. Protecting women's rights starts with appropriate legislation that must then be upheld in practice.

Women's rights have been repeatedly defined in international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action, and while much progress has been made, a continued emphasis needs to be made on keeping these promises. One of the most important references is the legally binding Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, a milestone series of commitments to protecting and advancing women's rights in all spheres of life that is widely known as the women's international bill of human rights. By the second half of 2005, 180 governments had become party to the convention. The Millennium Declaration, product of the 2000 Millennium Summit, calls upon governments to implement CEDAW.

UNIFEM takes action: The CEDAW principles, as well as those enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, infuse all of UNIFEM's work on women's human rights. UNIFEM makes consistent connections to rights across its programmes, including by ensuring that attention goes first to the most marginalized groups. Some programmes focus specifically on CEDAW as a human rights tool, one deployed by women in every region, and used by signatory governments to shape compliant laws and policies.

In Mexico: Too often, violence against women, one of the gravest rights violations, is ignored because there is little official data to define its scope. This tendency has shifted in Mexico, where the Ministry of Health agreed to launch a comprehensive state-by-state survey of domestic violence in 2003, building on UNIFEM's technical support and advocacy. The results helped identify those regions where the problem is most endemic, and allowed the ministry to design protocols and health-care services to respond. The Institute of Women and the National Statistical Institute subsequently conducted a follow-up studying revealing the vulnerability of specific groups of women: those between the ages of 15 and 19 who are married, migrants and female workers. The National Statistical Institute presented the findings to the Mexican Senate, which is now considering targeted investments and stronger legislation.

Other UNIFEM work in Mexico focuses on advancing women's economic rights. A statistical system that integrates data based on gender will help form public policies to reduce women's poverty. And as Mexico and its neighbours move towards trade liberalization, UNIFEM has backed a series of studies and consultations between women's ministries, universities and other UN agencies to instill gender equality and rights into a women's agenda for regional economic integration.

In Ecuador: The CEDAW provisions cover the use of special temporary measures such as affirmative action or quota systems in cases where women are clearly unequal to men—as is the case in most political systems worldwide. In Ecuador, despite a law guaranteeing women 30 per cent of elected seats, the political parties who were supposed to uphold this began backsliding. Partnering with the European Union, UNIFEM organized an international team to monitor proper implementation of the law, a step that encouraged Ecuadorian women's groups to raise their own voices in defense of their rights. Subsequently, in several municipal elections, Ecuador has sent the largest number of women in its history into elected offices.

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In Kazakhstan: UNIFEM helped build coalitions of non-governmental groups and government officials to draft a domestic violence law; the national Commission on Women and Family Affairs has recommended the draft law for inclusion in the Government's 2006 plan for introducing new legislation. Advocacy for the alignment of indicators from CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and the MDGs has convinced the Government to adopt a new gender equality policy that specifies investments in development priorities linked to women's equality and rights.

In Africa: In a number of African countries, UNIFEM has aided women's efforts to insert gender equality in the most basic national legal document—constitutions—and then to ensure that these laws actually help improve women's lives and uphold their rights. A project in Rwanda supports women parliamentarians to assess progress on gender equality in different regions of the country and assist newly decentralized public institutions in carrying out constitutional provisions. UNIFEM helped women in Kenya lobby to safeguard gains in a new draft Constitution, which include allowances for affirmative action and the constitutional review of customary laws. In Burundi, UNIFEM partnered with women's organizations to advocate the integration of gender equality protections into a new Constitution and electoral code; the Government has now adopted a National Gender Equality Policy. Under a separate initiative, UNIFEM is piloting a mechanism in Nigeria that would introduce CEDAW monitoring and implementation across all government ministries.

In the Arab States: A regional project aims to build awareness of CEDAW. With the Syrian Women's Union, for example, UNIFEM has reached out to ministry officials, lawyers, journalists and non-governmental groups to deliberate national applications of the convention. A new manual on CEDAW and women's human rights is being used to train a cadre of experts within Syria and in other Arab states. Already, heeding the concerns of the CEDAW Committee and with UNIFEM assistance, Morocco has amended its family law to emphasize the equality and joint responsibilities of husbands and wives. UNIFEM is now assisting family courts to use the law to protect women's human rights and combat gender-based violence.

In South Asia: Courts in Nepal and India are now paying increasing attention to decisions that respect women's rights, in part through the efforts of the Asia Pacific Advisory Forum on Equality Education for

Judges, a UNIFEM-backed initiative. Training for judges uses CEDAW as a guide to increase their understanding of women's human rights. In Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, legislative reviews have helped strengthen efforts to staunch trafficking in women, in part by defining gaps in the implementation of laws. Nepal has already tabled a stronger bill in Parliament, and its Supreme Court has knocked down a provision fostering discrimination against sex workers.

In Southeast Asia: UNIFEM is working with governments and non-governmental organizations in seven countries in the region to integrate CEDAW into national laws and policies. In Cambodia, after a survey revealed the extent of domestic violence, the Prime Minister publicly called for expediting the passage of draft domestic violence legislation. Women parliamentarians in Thailand have become committed advocates for a series of proposed laws grounded in the convention.