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Thirtieth anniversary of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is an international bill of rights for women.

It goes beyond the traditional scope of formal equality, pioneering the concept of substantive equality, that is, equality in real life.

CEDAW provides a roadmap for transforming gender relations within States, communities and families. This is an ambitious undertaking. But we all know that it is possible, and CEDAW is our guide.

This Convention enjoys wide acceptance from States from all regions of the world: 186 have now ratified it. Only eight States have still to ratify it: the Holy See, Iran, Nauru, Palau, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga and the United States of America. On this 30th anniversary occasion, I encourage those eight States to become party to the Convention.

But ratification is not implementation, and indeed some States maintain reservations to the Convention which may be incompatible with its object and purpose. I urge those States that maintain reservations to reconsider their position.

The challenge before us is how to effectively promote implementation of CEDAW, how to promote concrete change in the lives of women and girls everywhere.

There are many examples of the impact of the Convention. Today we are going to highlight some of them. The champions of CEDAW are the gender equality advocates around the world – the NGOs, lawyers, judges, academics, and of course the members of the CEDAW Committee itself, who have all taken the words of the Convention and given them life.

Indeed, thanks to their activism progress is undeniable. The Convention has been used to challenge discriminatory laws, interpret ambiguous provisions or where the law is silent, to confer rights on women. Development policies have been formulated using its principles.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Convention has been its capacity to empower individual women to recognize their human rights and seek to claim them. But there are profound challenges to women's rights, including the resurgence of ideas that women's rights, and human rights more generally, are not necessarily universal, but should be interpreted through a lens of culture, custom, tradition and religion. The Convention provides us with a powerful tool to emphasize the universality of human rights, while respecting diversity.

As we celebrate this anniversary and how far we have come, let us also reflect on how far we still have to go. I hope together we can accelerate the implementation of CEDAW so that it reaches every woman and girl in every corner of the world.

Thank you.
