The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is an international treaty that commits governments to removing barriers to women’s equality. Adopted by the United Nations in 1979, this “Treaty for the Rights of Women,” is also known as “CEDAW” and addresses the areas of legal rights, education, employment, health care, violence against women, politics and finance. CEDAW does not impose any laws on governments that ratify the treaty. It does require governments to examine their policies and practices in relation to women and girls and to report periodically to an international committee on the status of CEDAW implementation.

As of March 2005, 180 countries have ratified CEDAW—including Afghanistan and Iraq. While only a few countries have incorporated CEDAW’s provisions into domestic policy, CEDAW is being used by women around the world to advocate for legislation that protects and improves their basic human rights. For example, women in Ukraine, Nepal, Thailand and the Philippines have used CEDAW to pass new laws to stop sexual trafficking of women and girls. In Nicaragua, Jordan, Egypt and Guinea literacy rates increased after CEDAW improved access to education for women and girls. Women in Colombia used CEDAW to make domestic violence a crime and to require legal protection for its victims. And in Rwanda women incorporated CEDAW into the new constitution, reserving 30 percent of seats in parliament for women—opening the door for women to gain 49 percent of all parliamentary seats in the 2003 election.

The U.S. remains the only industrialized country that has not ratified CEDAW. Ratification of CEDAW is essential if the U.S. is to continue to be seen as a global leader in human rights.

Ratification of CEDAW could help to advance political and economic equality for women in the U.S., as women in this country have not yet achieved full equality. Moreover, ratification of CEDAW is essential if the U.S. is to continue to be seen as a global leader in human rights.

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7. Ibid, 8.
T
he United States was active in drafting CEDAW in 1979 and 
President Carter signed the treaty in 1980. In order for the 
treaty to be ratified, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee 
must approve it, two-thirds of the Senate must vote to ratify and 
then the current President must sign it. Approval from the Senate 
Foreign Relations Committee was stalled for many years by then 
Chairman Senator Jesse Helms, but under new chair Senator Jo-


Status of CEDAW in the U.S.

Over 190 U.S. religious, civic and community organizations support 
the ratification of CEDAW, such as the AFL-CIO, the United Method-
est Church, and the League of Women Voters. Research shows that 
the American public, when informed of CEDAW, also supports U.S. 
ratification. Ratification of CEDAW could help to advance politi-
cal and economic equality for women in the U.S., as women in this 
country have not yet achieved full equality. U.S. women comprise 
only 14 percent of the Congress and 22 percent of state legislatures, are paid $.70 for every $1 a man makes for the same 
work and face repeated attacks on their reproductive rights.

Although the United States government has not yet ratified CEDAW, action has been taken in cities, counties and states 
across the U.S. For example, the city of San Francisco, California, enacted a local ordinance in 1998 based on the conven-
tion’s principles. The ordinance requires the city to protect women’s human rights, including the elimination of discrimi-
nation against women and girls. A CEDAW Task Force, made up of city officials and community leaders and housed in 
the San Francisco Department on the Status of Women, has been created to lead city implementation of the ordinance. 
Gender equity and equal access are promoted in the areas of economic development and employment, violence against 
women and girls, and health care. The ordinance also requires city departments to undergo gender analysis to monitor 
discrimination against women and girls in budget allocation, delivery of services and employment practices.

Advocates in San Francisco have used CEDAW to educate and influence the attitudes and behaviors of decision-makers 
towards women’s equality. By implementing the CEDAW ordinance, the number of women in higher paying, non-trad-
tional employment positions has increased, an effort to increase street lights has improved women’s safety, the city is 
monitoring the availability of flexible work hours for women, training on sexual harassment in city departments, and 
collecting data on women by city departments (useful for tracking women’s experiences of inequality).

New York City is currently working on a city ordinance based on the San Francisco model. However, New York is taking 
the ordinance a step further by combining the principles of CEDAW and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All 
Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which was ratified by the U.S. in 1994. City resolutions supporting the ratification 
of CEDAW have passed in 47 cities as diverse as Los Angeles, California and Louisville, Kentucky, as well as in 17 states 
and 19 counties. Such ordinances and resolutions come from concerned citizens and their desire to create positive 
change for women at the local and state levels. While ratification of CEDAW at the national level continues to stall, U.S. 
women can work to implement CEDAW at the city, county and state levels so as to advance women’s human rights here 
at home and stand in solidarity with the world’s women who are using CEDAW to do the same.

8. Ibid, 16.
9. Ibid.
12. Women’s Environment & Development Organization (WEDO). Beijing Betrayed: Women Worldwide Report that Governments Have Failed to Turn the Platform into 
(CEDAW).
For almost three decades, misconceptions and fallacies about ratifying CEDAW in the U.S. have curbed public support for ratification. It is time to dispel these myths and realize the benefits of CEDAW for women in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Fact</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Treaty encourages abortion by promoting access to “family planning.”</td>
<td>The Treaty intentionally does not address the issue of abortion. Many countries where abortion is illegal have ratified it, such as Ireland, Burkina Faso, and Rwanda. The U.S. State Department says the Treaty is “abortion neutral.” In 1994, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee added an “understanding” to the Treaty noting that it does not include a right to abortion.</td>
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<td>The Treaty will interfere in the proper role of parents in child-rearing.</td>
<td>The Treaty calls only for recognition of the “common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children” and “to promote what is in the best interests of the child.”[15] This is consistent with U.S. law.</td>
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<td>The Treaty is unnecessary in the United States because it defines “discrimination” too broadly and would lead to unwise laws and frivolous lawsuits.</td>
<td>The Treaty is non-self executing and would not authorize any lawsuit not already allowed under U.S. law. The Treaty would urge that the same “strict scrutiny” apply to U.S. claims of unintentional sex discrimination as now applies to claims of race discrimination. In fact, the Treaty terms resemble those of the U.N. Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which the United States ratified in 1994 with no resulting flurry of frivolous suits. There is no reason to expect them on this treaty either.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Treaty will destroy traditional families by redefining “family” and the roles of women and men.</td>
<td>The Treaty does not seek to regulate family life. It only urges governments “to adopt education and public information programs [to] eliminate prejudices and current practices that hinder the full operation of the principle of the social equality of women.”</td>
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The above text was created by the Working Group on the Ratification of U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and is available at www.womenstreaty.org.

15. CEDAW, Article 5(b).
Organizations

Amnesty International, USA www.amnestyusa.org/cedaw/index.html

Human Rights Watch, CEDAW Campaign www.hrw.org/campaigns/cedaw

UN CEDAW Committee www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw

Women’s Institute for Leadership and Human Rights (WILD) www.wildforhumanrights.org


Publications


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