

Testimony of Geena Davis

Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law

Senate Judiciary Committee

November 18, 2010

Chairman Durbin, Senator Coburn and Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be invited to testify at this hearing on CEDAW – the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This treaty has already done a great deal to help improve the lives of girls and women around the world, and it can do much more.

I was amazed to learn that the United States is one of only seven countries that have not ratified CEDAW, putting us in the company of Iran, Somalia, Sudan, and three small Pacific Island nations. As a long-standing global leader and supporter of women's rights and human rights, it is critical at this time for the United States to join the community of 186 countries that have ratified the treaty.

I have spent most of my adult life advocating for women and girls. For ten years I served as a trustee with the Women's Sports Foundation, advocating for girls' rights and equal participation in sports. As a Commissioner for the California Commission on the Status of Women, I work with the Governor, the legislature and other policymakers to promote equality and justice for all women and girls. And as a board member of the White House Project, I strive to advance women's leadership in business, politics, and media.

Five years ago, while watching children's entertainment with my then two-year-old daughter, I discovered a stark gender inequality in media aimed at children. That led me to launch a research institute to help rectify these issues. Media images are a powerful force in influencing how women and girls are perceived and valued around the world, and for shaping cultural beliefs and behaviors.

This is why my partnership with UNIFEM, now UN Women, is very important to me. UN Women is helping to make the voices of women heard and to encourage more coverage of women's issues around the world.

As an active member of the media, I have had many opportunities to portray diverse and strong female characters. And as an American, I have enjoyed the freedom to participate in sports – at the young age of 41 – and encourage my three children to engage in sports and any type of interest or activities they may want to pursue.

I envision a world where all women and girls are valued and have the freedom to pursue and achieve their dreams with the same possibilities and opportunities as our children in the United States.

The United States has provided opportunities for women and girls to progress because of its longstanding commitment and effort with respect to human rights. This is why it is so important that the United States continues its global position as a leader on women's rights and acts now to end discrimination against women and girls so they can pursue education and employment; acts now to empower women with the right to vote; acts now to prevent more women being victimized by violence; and acts now to support the health of women and girls.

CEDAW has forwarded this vision in many countries throughout the world. For example, women in Kuwait recently obtained the right to vote for the first time, a long overdue and major victory. As a result, in 2009, four women were elected to the Kuwaiti parliament, just four years after women were extended voting rights. In Bangladesh, CEDAW has been instrumental in increasing girls' primary school attendance to reach gender parity. And in 2007, Nepal enacted a new law on human trafficking that contained improved measures for prosecuting traffickers, provides justice and appropriate services to survivors of trafficking and raises awareness of the consequences of human trafficking. All of this was a result of CEDAW recommendations.

However, so much work still has to be done. For example, at least two million girls "disappear" every year because of violence, neglect and inequality. Ratification of CEDAW would demonstrate the United States' continuing efforts to ensure that our daughters, and women and girls worldwide, need never settle for second best.

The time for change is now. We cannot wait to see if real gender equality happens in the natural course of time, when all evidence tells us it doesn't. The lives of too many women and girls are at stake. We must act, and one important action we can take is to ratify CEDAW now. I ask you for your support to help us achieve that goal.