

Statement of
The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin

United States Senator
Maryland
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Opening Statement for the Record
of
Senator Benjamin L. Cardin

Women's Rights Are Human Rights: U.S. Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

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The elimination of discrimination against women is a priority issue both at home and abroad.

In the U.S., we have made great strides in advancing women's human rights and as a result many of our laws are in accord with CEDAW - the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; however, there is much more progress to be made because American women still confront issues such as lack of equity in pay, threats to economic security, inadequate maternal health care, human trafficking and violence against women.

Abroad the issues women confront are much more immense. One out of every three women worldwide will be physically, sexually or otherwise abused during her lifetime, with rates reaching as high as 70 percent in some countries-- ranging from rape to domestic violence and acid burnings to dowry deaths and so-called honor killings. In Kenya, 95 percent of the women who had experienced sexual abuse in their workplace were afraid to report the problem for fear of losing their jobs. We are all aware of the horrific instances of mass rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where each year, up to 15,000 women are victims of brutal sexual violence. Women around the world are working desperately to change the laws and battle outdated customs in their countries that routinely allow women and girls to be raped, beaten or deprived of any legal rights, even the ability to see a doctor or leave the house alone.

But gender inequality goes far beyond those issues. Women are much more likely to be among the world's poorest, living on a \$1 a day or less; this prevents them from getting an education, going to work, and earning the income they need to lift their families out of poverty. And lift their families is indeed what happens when women are given opportunities for education. They are the drivers for bettering their families and communities. Educating and empowering women has a well-proven economic multiplier effect. CEDAW is a key part of this fight around the world and it should become a symbol that the U.S. stands for women's rights everywhere.

The U.S. has always been a committed and active leader on human rights. The promotion and protection of human rights has become a core value in our society. The U.S. has ratified similar

treaties on genocide, torture, race and civil and political rights. Despite this positive track record, we have failed for 30 years to ratify the only comprehensive international human rights treaty concerned solely with the rights of women. With 186 of 193 countries having already ratified the treaty, we are the only industrialized democracy who has not done so. It is time for us to stop holding international governments to a higher standard than the one we proscribe to.

Finally ratifying this treaty will help open the lines of communication at home and abroad. We will be able to discuss how best to promote healthier and more secure lives of women at home and abroad. In the international forum, we can gain insights from countries like Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain or the U.K., which have all improved maternity leave and child care for working women. Best practices from their experiences can serve as a blueprint on how to further progress towards the total realization of the human rights for U.S. women.

We will also be able to more legitimately engage in the discussions which highlight where more attention is needed, how to develop strategies to move forward, and lend our expertise to other countries. These actions will send the strong signal to other governments that women's human rights are a global priority to which the U.S. is wholeheartedly committed.

For many women around the world, severe gender inequality is deeply enshrined in law, whether it's the lack of protection from violence, or the lack of secure property rights. In the U.S., we have yet to fully integrate gender considerations into our foreign assistance programming so that we take into account both women's and men's roles in solving today's global challenges. Ratifying CEDAW would be a powerful step in that direction.

My interest in and commitment to human rights, civil rights and, therefore, women's rights, has been long-standing. In the many decades I have committed to this cause, I believe that no one has succinctly described the issue as well as then-First Lady and now Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton when she stated to the Beijing World Conference on Women 15 years ago that: "Women's rights are human rights."

For all of these reasons, and on behalf of all of the women in the U.S. and around the world, as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, I am fully committed to the ratification of CEDAW and urge my colleagues to allow a long-overdue vote on this treaty.