

REMARKS

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Circle of Courage Award
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Thank you. I am very pleased to accept your Circle of Courage Award. It is a special honor because the Women's Intercultural Network has been a great partner in our campaigns at the United Nations. It is no exaggeration to say that organizations like yours are the source of the UN's strength.

Women's Equality day reminds us that in 1920 American women first won the right to vote. By the way, that was 29 years behind New Zealand—but when women got the vote may be less important than making sure that we exercise that right.

In all spheres—private and public—when we add our voices, we contribute innovative ideas. A few weeks ago, I met the mayor of Surabaya, Indonesia, Tri Rismaharini, named by the Huffington Post as “Indonesia's best kept secret” who accomplished the near impossible. She became one of the few women mayors in the largest Muslim country in the world. Soon after her election, she transformed the city's wastelands into public parks. Lights went up in dark and dangerous streets. Music filled the air at night. On a road by a river, I saw mothers with small children, old people and teenagers clapping for a popular band. One man confided to me: “We feel like we are living in a new era.”

I was in Surabaya for a meeting to prepare for Habitat III, the UN's conference on urban settlements and housing. During an interview, a youth leader asked me: Why do you think UN treaties are important?

That question made me think seriously about how we can make treaties more relevant and useful to ordinary people's lives. My personal experience with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, or CEDAW, has taught me one lesson: UN treaties are what citizens—not just governments-- make of them.

I have lived with CEDAW for more than 35 years. I first read its text in 1980 when I was a member of the Secretariat for the Second World conference on women in Copenhagen. I remember thinking, “Why do we need a new policy document, when this one has everything we want in it?” It was the most comprehensive women's bill of rights I had ever read. The articles covered women's political, social, economic and cultural rights. Article 7 guarantees women equality in voting, participation in government and in NGOs. Article 13 guarantees the right to family benefits, bank loans, mortgages and financial credit, as well as the right to participate in sports.

Most important, the treaty requires governments to be proactive in preventing discrimination and providing remedies.

In addition to the treaty, the CEDAW committee has issued 34 general recommendations to help clarify governments' obligations in reporting. This includes a very important one on violence against women. GR 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations elaborates on protections for groups like the girls of Boko Haram. The committee has also made an important statement on climate change that says:

“From CEDAW’s examination of State Parties reports, it is apparent that climate change does not affect women and men in the same way and has a gender-differentiated impact. However, women are not just helpless victims of climate change – they are powerful agents of change and their leadership is critical.”¹

At that Copenhagen conference, few government delegates shared my enthusiasm. They mostly ignored the treaty once they signed and turned their attention instead to word crafting the Copenhagen Declaration. A lot has changed since then. The once obscure treaty—along with the Beijing Platform for Action—have become the gold standards for gender equality and women’s empowerment. Today, 189 countries have ratified CEDAW. Among human rights treaties, it has the highest rate of compliance and empowered a vibrant civil society movement to help implement it on the ground.

By now, you can tell that I’ve become a quack lawyer. And I admit that I’m guilty of loving that role. In fact, I encourage you all to look at CEDAW through the eyes of a layperson. We need to ask: Has CEDAW affected our personal standard of conduct? Can CEDAW help guide the decisions we make in our communities and cities? And most urgent in this election year—can a woman become president of the United States?

What brought CEDAW to life? The answer is the feminist and women’s movements allied with governments and the members of the CEDAW committee. The really, really good news is that the Cities for CEDAW campaign is once again breathing new life into this treaty.

What is this campaign? Probably everyone in this room is familiar with the idea. Let me tell you what it means to me.

Cities for CEDAW can help us save our planet. We have to get gender equality right for more resilient, vibrant democracies in cities because our voices can shape the future of global warming. Why should we be hopeful? In 1998, in the wake of the

¹ CEDAW 44th session. *Statement of the CEDAW committee on gender and climate change*, New York 2009.

momentum created by the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, San Francisco adopted CEDAW as a city ordinance. It was a wonderful moment in UN history because it was the first time that a UN treaty had become legally binding at city level. Using that leverage, dramatic changes were made in how the city evaluated the impact of public spending on women's welfare and gender stereotyping in public works and transport, and greater gender balance in the fire and police departments became real possibilities.

As many of you know, between 1998 and 2013, other cities — including Los Angeles and Berkeley, as well as the State of Hawaii —enacted similar initiatives. Then, in 2015, the NGO Committee on the Status of Women/NY, in collaboration with the mayor of San Francisco and the San Francisco Department on the Status of Women and the Women's Intercultural Network launched a "Cities for CEDAW" campaign

As part of his commitment to the campaign, Los Angeles ' Mayor Garcetti issued an Executive Directive on CEDAW in 2015. A five-part report included demographics, leadership, veterans, education and workforce development, and public safety. For the first time, all of the city's databases were open to independent researchers. The Executive Directive on CEDAW also created a Gender Equity Coalition co-powered by the Commission on the Status of Women.

Here in California, other cities are moving. I congratulate Irvine, Santa Barbara, Santa Monica, as well as Orange County for your grass-roots work on this campaign. You join Ashland and Eugene in Oregon, Kansas City, Louisville, New York City, Pittsburgh, Sarasota, Washington DC, Miami-Dade County, Wake County and many more are interested like Reykjavik in Iceland and Port of Spain, Trinidad/Tobago. If I have forgotten a city, county or state represented in this room, please tell us. We need and appreciate you, all.

I love the campaign for three reasons. First, it proves that partnerships between city officials and women's movements can produce creative thinking about how to implement UN treaties. Second, it requires the feminist and women's movements to educate the public—and that means deeper thinking to answer tough questions. Finally—and most important-- it is a practical, legally binding instrument that can get real results—even in a country that has not ratified CEDAW.

My takeaway from my experience with CEDAW is that UN treaties are more than international law. They establish the floor for standards of governance, but they also provide ethical guidelines for corporations, and citizens like you and me. They bring the weight of global consensus with them and tie us to global review and accountability mechanisms. Making CEDAW legally binding at any level makes expert interpretations of legal mandates, like those provided by the CEDAW committee available to us, all. The naysayers complain that this is "interference in domestic laws". I say, it helps us to make good laws, even better.

There is also a political pay off in supporting Cities for CEDAW. At the national mayors' conference in San Francisco, one mayor asked me "Why should I support CEDAW"? I answered, "Because no woman will be mad at you". He asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "Every woman's issue is covered. Do you want more day care centers? Are you advocating for equal pay for equal work? Do you need better health care? Did you face discrimination because of your religion? You can say, 'Here's a place to start'. You are addressing everyone's demands. And you are leaving a legacy for future generations". He smiled and said, "You are absolutely right".

My friends, change is coming fast but we have to set our benchmarks higher. The challenge of climate change is an urgent feminist and women's issue. If the voices of women and girls are not heard from every small town and megacity-- in all corners of the world-- we will fail to save our planet. If we don't exercise our human rights to political participation and support this issue, we are not going to get the results we need to slow global warming.

We may be on the wildest roller coaster ride in human history because we cannot predict our common future. Deep breathing helps, but so does knowing that you are on this ride with really great people. Please stay the course together and with us. To start, I would like to invite you all to participate in a very special event—the Second Virtual National Conference on Cities for CEDAW in early October. The occasion is World Habitat Day—another wonderful opportunity for women's voices to be heard.

Thank you again—both for this award and especially your support for a cause that we all hold dear.