

# *CEDAW-Women and Children First*

by Toni Van Pelt

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If the world's hopes for the Obama administration are now sinking like the Titanic, let's draw a lesson from that story and put women and children first into the lifeboats – that is, on the agenda of the current Senate session.

The new crop of conservatives elected in November won't take power in Washington until January. They have made no secret of their plans to roll back Obama's gains for women and children when they do, cutting vital social programs. The current Senate can blunt some of those assaults by ratifying CEDAW, the global women's treaty.

CEDAW, formally known as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, is a landmark international agreement that affirms principles of fundamental human rights and equality for women and girls. Signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1979, it is among President Obama's top three treaty priorities after the START arms-reduction pact, which Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) already plans to bring to a vote this fall. He should add CEDAW to that urgent calendar.

When I travel the world, I ask the women I meet what would improve their lives. The answer is a living wage job. When I arrive in a country and see children in ragged clothing begging on the streets, I ask them what they would like to do with their lives. The answer? "I wish my family could send me to school." I have witnessed first hand the need for the United States to take a leadership role in helping to build a bridge worldwide from the reality of all women and children's lives to the promise of the American dream – a stable, happy, productive life.

CEDAW ratification would strengthen the United States as a global leader in standing up for women and girls. It would amplify the U.S. voice in defending women's human rights around the world, continuing that proud tradition. Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton ratified similar agreements on torture, genocide and race; the American public strongly supports the principles and values of education, equality, fairness and basic human rights that CEDAW embodies.

CEDAW is fully consistent with U.S. laws and would not require any appropriations or force any changes on U.S. citizens. Rather, CEDAW offers a blueprint that decision-makers in any country can choose to use to build equal rights for women and girls into law and policy. At a time when girls are denied education or forced into marriage in many countries, and when violence against women is at epic proportions, especially during conflict situations, women's advocates and legislatures have used the CEDAW model to argue for progress.

For example, Kuwaiti women gained the right to vote after calling on the government to live up to CEDAW terms. Morocco and Kenya approved laws against forced and child marriage and ensured women's inheritance rights; Bangladesh guaranteed women access to education and vocational training. Nepal and Mexico took steps to reduce sex trafficking and curb domestic violence. While U.S. women are far better off than women in many countries, they still earn less

than men for comparable work and know that in the corporate world, glass ceilings are largely intact. CEDAW ratification would strengthen their case for equal treatment.

World Bank studies have shown that promoting women's equality and human rights is fundamental to America's national security and economic interests worldwide. Yet the United States is one of only seven countries among the United Nations' 193 members that have not ratified CEDAW – along with Sudan, Somalia, Iran and the three small Pacific Island nations of Palau, Nauru and Tonga. This is a global embarrassment. Yet the situation for women worldwide will likely get worse, not better, after the new Congress takes office in January.

Now is time for the U.S. Senate to launch the lifeboats of its fall session, putting women and children first by ratifying CEDAW. The world's women are counting on it.