

**“United Nations efforts in promoting women's human rights”
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**Conference on: “Human Rights, An Endangered Concept:
The United Nations and the Advancement of Human Rights”**

**Organized by the United Nations Association of USA, North Carolina
West Triangle and Wake County Chapters
at the North Carolina State University Campus
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Distinguished participants,

I am honoured to be here at North Carolina State University to make this presentation on the United Nations’ efforts to promote and protect women’s human rights. I congratulate the West Triangle and Wake County Chapters of the United Nations Association in North Carolina for the initiative in organizing this conference.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent in the human person, and women and men are entitled to the protection and enjoyment of these rights and freedoms on a basis of equality and non-discrimination. Despite the global recognition of and support for this principle, women continue to face serious gaps and challenges to the full enjoyment of their human rights. Discrimination against women in law and in practice prevails around the world, as reflected in the persistence of violence against women, women’s under-representation in public life and decision-making, lack of access to education and adequate health services and disadvantages in the labour market, unequal access to land, property and inheritance, and the growing and devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on women. Stereotypes and traditional and cultural attitudes and practices which constitute discrimination against women exist in all countries in all parts of the world and perpetuate women’s position of inferiority in the family and in society.

Over the past six decades, the United Nations has played a significant role in the promotion and protection of women’s human rights, including through the progressive

Convention, and new laws have been adopted as a result of ratification. Women's groups and networks have effectively used the Convention and lobbied Government officials and lawmakers to improve legislative frameworks and public policies and programmes in support of gender equality. Courts in a number of countries, including Canada, India and South Africa, have directly relied on the Convention to eliminate discrimination against women and enhance women's access to justice.

Implementation of the Convention is monitored by a Committee of 23 experts, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which reviews reports that all States parties are obliged to present on a regular basis. The Committee provides country-specific guidance on further steps required to accelerate compliance with the Convention's provisions.

In addition to this general monitoring mechanism, the Optional Protocol to the Convention, adopted by the General Assembly in 1999, now provides an opportunity for individual women, or groups of women, to seek redress for alleged violations of their rights under the Convention, once certain admissibility criteria are fulfilled, including the exhaustion of all domestic remedies. The Optional Protocol also gives the Committee authority to initiate inquiries into grave or systematic violations of the rights enshrined in the Convention. These procedures offer an international recourse for women who have been denied justice at the national level. Most importantly, it provides an additional impetus for States to ensure that adequate and accessible domestic remedies for violations of the rights of women are in place.

Although the Protocol only came into force in 2000, the Committee already has highlighted through the use of the Protocol the need for more effective national remedies for women or to repeal discriminatory laws, policies and practices. The Committee has found violations of women's rights under the Convention in complaints involving domestic violence and forced sterilization. It carried out its first inquiry into the abduction, rape and murder of women in and around Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, which included a visit to the State party in the autumn of 2003, and gave detailed recommendations to the State party for eliminating discrimination and bringing to an end the violations of the rights of women.

Human rights instruments and treaty bodies, and other mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights

Complementing the standards and obligations under the Convention and the work of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

the Child is particularly pertinent to the situation of girls. The monitoring bodies under those treaties regularly address the rights of women within the mandates provided by those treaties, including discrimination against women in the areas of employment, education, health, housing, trafficking, or political life. They have also examined gender-related forms of racial discrimination.

Human rights violations suffered by women have also been the subject of cases considered by some of these bodies under their complaints procedures. In a recent case, for example, the Committee against Torture found that rape constituted torture and that by deporting the complainants back to their country of origin where they had been raped by State agents, the State party would be in violation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In another case, the Human Rights Committee found that the denial of a therapeutic abortion caused pain, distress and mental suffering amounting to a violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In addition, a series of mechanisms8kT06loration of02 5 -Tp0.3lainants bac0.0005 a-0.000orue2c0 7

the rights of women. Let me give you some examples of concerns that are now squarely addressed as human rights concerns, including violence against women and trafficking in women, and human rights abuses in armed conflicts and refugee situations.

Violence against women

Violence against women is now recognized as a pervasive violation of women's human rights and a major impediment to achieving gender equality. While the 1979 Convention does not mention violence against women, addressing this scourge has become a central focus of attention in the work of the Committee and in many of the intergovernmental bodies and entities of the United Nations system, working both at the global policy level and at national level.

Violence against women cuts across socio-economic, religious, and ethnic groups, and across geographic areas. Worldwide, it is estimated that violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among reproductive-age women as is cancer. It is a more common cause of ill-health among women than traffic accidents and malaria combined. Although global statistics are inadequate, a recent in-depth study by the United Nations indicates that, on average, at least one in three women is subject to some form of violence at some time in her life. Violence against women and girls undercuts the potential for achieving equality, development, and peace and security - the critical goals established over the past 60 years by the international community, and reaffirmed by world leaders in 2000 and 2005.

The 2006 in-depth study by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on all forms of violence against women presents a comprehensive examination of the pervasiveness and scope of different forms of violence against women, in all parts of the world, and of the gaps and challenges in providing an effective public response and in preventing such violence.

Among its contributions, the study establishes irrevocably that male violence against women and girls is a violation of their human rights. The study also clearly points to the obligations of States under the international legal framework to protect women and girls from violence, to hold perpetrators accountable, and to provide justice and remedies to victims. The failure to meet these obligations, especially the failure to hold perpetrators of violence accountable, creates a culture of impunity which, not only encourages further abuses, but also gives the message that male violence against women is acceptable and normal. The result is the denial of justice to the individual victims/survivors, as well as the reinforcement of the prevailing gender inequality.

The study seeks to strengthen political will to move forward and to increase the accountability of those responsible for action – particularly States, but also the United Nations. The study gives examples of a range of promising practices in addressing such violence through legislation, service provision for victims, and prevention efforts.

Drawing on the recommendations of this study, the General Assembly, in December 2006, adopted a comprehensive resolution to intensify efforts to eliminate all

forms of violence against women. This resolution now forms the basis for follow-up action by Member States at many levels. Similarly, entities of the United Nations system now have a strengthened mandate to coordinate their work and in particular to support the efforts of Member States at the national level to combat such violence, for example through the development and implementation of national action plans.

Trafficking in women and girls

One of the most corrosive forms of violence against women and violation of women's rights is trafficking in women and girls. It results in the gradual and total destruction of a woman's personal identity and her right to live as a free human being. Victims of trafficking are subjected to violence, humiliation and violation of personal dignity, which in many cases leaves them with the lifelong effects of mental and physical trauma. The trafficking of people for the exploitation of prostitution and forced labour is one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity. Evidence suggests that hundreds of thousands of women and girls are trafficked within and between countries every year.

The United Nations has elaborated treatie

Over the past 15 years, women and girls have become prime targets in armed conflict and suffered its impact disproportionately, particularly as gender-based and sexual violence have become weapons of warfare and defining characteristics of contemporary armed conflict.

communities owing to, inter alia, conflict and instability, without opportunities to work or

cross cutting nature. Women's human rights must be fully integrated into the work of the Council.

Millennium Declaration, the World Summit 2005 and the challenge of implementation

I have drawn attention to the role of the global conferences of the 1990s and the on-going work of intergovernmental processes in strengthening our attention to women's human rights. The momentum generated over the last decade clearly carried over into the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000 where global leaders at the highest level committed to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, combat all forms of violence against women, and implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Similarly, at the World Summit of 2005, global leaders acknowledged that "progress for women is progress for all" and recognized the need to pay special attention to the human rights of women and to bring gender perspectives into the human rights agenda.

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The work of the Division for the Advancement of Women

Let me also briefly mention the work of the Division for the Advancement of Women on women's human rights. The Division supports global policy-making on women's human rights and gender equalitr

Conclusion

We can look back at more than sixty years of standard setting and global policy development, and three decades of research, activism and innovation – since the first United Nations World Conference on women in 1975. Close collaboration among