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Celebrating CEDAW and Women's Rights

Today the National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ), and organisations from all over the world, celebrate the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) by the United Nations General Assembly 30 years ago.

CEDAW is an international human rights treaty dedicated to achieving gender equality, that when implemented effectively on a national level provides a blueprint for action against discrimination.

Over the last 30 years many countries across the world have ratified the Convention, including New Zealand in 1985, and are thus obliged under international law to respect, protect and fulfil women's human rights.

NCWNZ congratulates New Zealand, and all other parties to the Convention, for recognising the importance of ending discrimination against women, but reminds them that it is paramount that there continues to be a strong commitment to gender equality as a fundamental human right.

The last thirty years have seen great advances in terms of awareness of women's rights, commitments to advancing the status of women, and improvements in the everyday lives of many women worldwide. Progress has been made in the areas of education, life expectancy, labour force participation, and property and inheritance rights.

However, the global commitment to women's rights, through the near universal ratification of CEDAW, has not always been matched with concrete action.

There is no country where women and men enjoy full equality in social, economic, and legal rights. On average women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, and produce half of the world's food, yet only earn 10 per cent of the world's income and own less than one per cent of the world's property. Women also remain severely under-represented in political and decision-making positions, with the world average of women in parliament sitting at around 18 per cent.

"The improvements that have been made for women in the last 30 years are cause for celebration, but are by no means cause for complacency," says Elizabeth Bang, NCWNZ National President.

New Zealand has received mixed ratings in terms of gender equality. Although we are ranked fifth in the Global Gender Gap report, produced by the World Economic Forum, our Gender Development Index in the UNDP Human Development Report 2009 was much lower.

"In New Zealand many women face violence and discrimination every day. Increases in women's educational attainment have not translated into gender equality in earnings and women continue to be severely underrepresented in decision making bodies," according to Elizabeth Bang.

The 2006 CEDAW Report stated that:

"In many ways it is heartening to look back over that time and reflect on how much has been achieved, but, as this report shows, there is still much to be done. In some cases we are still trying to make changes that our foremothers tried to set in place. Compared with many countries, women in New Zealand are fortunate in that discrimination is no longer codified in law but the far-reaching effects of social and cultural discrimination can still be seen."

"The Government must take active measures to further improve the status of women, in particular women's safety, economic wellbeing, and status in New Zealand. Gender equality benefits us all," says Elizabeth Bang.

"Gender equality is an important focus not only for domestic, but also for foreign policy decisions. NCWNZ would like to see an increase in aid programmes that support initiatives to address the gender dimensions of health, violence and governance."

Having ratified CEDAW, the New Zealand Government is obliged to report regularly on the progress being made to ensure that the principles in the Convention are being applied.

The next report is due in 2010 and NCWNZ will be producing an NGO CEDAW Report, in collaboration with over a hundred other community organisations.

"We will be bringing women's and community groups together to discuss the Government's progress on addressing discrimination against women in New Zealand in law and the application of law," says Elizabeth Bang.

"In this way CEDAW, while providing a blueprint for gender equality, also serves to empower women to stand up in an international context and be heard, and in the process expand and strengthen the national network that exists to support women."

For more information on CEDAW see <http://ncwnz.org.nz/cedaw/>

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