

Remarks for the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Committee on the
Elimination of Discrimination against Women

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It is an honor for me to be here today to celebrate the efforts and accomplishments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women over the last twenty-five years. As an NGO working here in New York, I, and so many others, have had the intense privilege of cutting my baby teeth on the understanding of the complexities of the implementation and promotion of women's rights and gender equality, especially in the national context, by attending meetings of the CEDAW Committee.

The work of the CEDAW Committee has tried to unravel the multiple legal, economic, social, religious and cultural factors that prevent women from attaining equal rights and opportunity in each country reporting to the Committee and to suggest some critical interventions to move toward implementation of their CEDAW Convention commitments. Not infrequently one marvels at the Committee's judicious use of the carrot-complimenting State parties on progress made with the stick- firmly suggesting initiatives that need immediate attention.

The CEDAW Committee has not only provided NGOs with occasions to follow its work, but has offered many partnership opportunities to strengthen our mutual goal of advancing the status of women, empowering women and promoting women's rights.

The Committee has taken discriminatory laws and customs and practices right down to the ground level where women live. It has long enlisted the participation of women's and civil society organizations to document weaknesses and violations in their country's report. The opportunity for formal reporting during CEDAW Committee sessions was established in 2001 by Article 19, Rule 47. NGOs whose countries are presenting their formal report during that Committee session have eagerly taken advantage of separate meetings created by the Committee to present information on issues of concern. The institutionalization of this reporting from NGOs attests, I believe, to

the value that the CEDAW experts assign to the materials presented by national NGOs or their representatives.

Beyond the reporting itself, the CEDAW Committee's embrace of NGO participation is serving, an even broader purpose- It is empowering women to continued advocacy in their country, bringing them into the international dialogue for the advancement of women, introducing them to national and international partners for their efforts, and confirming that the United Nations is one of their staunchest allies in working to advance women's rights.

NGOs may also submit alternative or so-called "shadow" reports on issues relating to their country's implementation of its CEDAW commitments. This provides an organization such as my own, Zonta International, an international NGO with national affiliates, as well as national or local NGOs working on women's rights issues, the possibility to expand and strengthen their efforts by partnering to produce a "shadow" report on their country's compliance. The end result should be stronger national networks to support women.

The enhanced capacity of NGO networks created by partnering to produce a country "shadow" report can be used to greatest effect in on-going advocacy around the Concluding Comments issued by the Committee on each State party's report. It is imperative for women's rights advocates to widely disseminate these remarks to raise awareness in their country of the Committee Experts' evaluation. These Comments are a blueprint for needed changes to advance gender equality on the national level. Moreover, the Concluding Remarks may also help NGOs in establishing their own organizational priorities.

NGOs' continued advocacy for ratification of the CEDAW Convention, the removal of reservations to the Convention and the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention is an important way that we must support the work of the Committee. In this regard, NGOs can play a critical role in education about the Optional Protocol and its potential for investigating violations of Treaty obligations.

Here in New York, the Committee has generously shared its expertise and been open to suggestions from the NGO community. The NGO Committee on the Status of Women Sub-committee on Older Women followed country reporting for specifics on the situation of older women. When they found information provided to be sparse, they created questions concerning issues for older women relating to each

article of the Convention. These materials were enthusiastically received and incorporated by the Committee into questions on the status of women in Country reports.

We NGOs in New York are admittedly spoiled by our long exposure and association with the CEDAW Committee and ever in admiration of its hard work and dedication to building a holistic approach to achieving women's rights and gender equality. The role of the Division for the Advancement of Women and of UNIFEM in enhancing NGO participation in our partnership with the CEDAW Committee also deserves much praise.

Let us hope that in another twenty-five years we will have ended gender-based discrimination and achieved gender equality and if so, much of the credit will be to the diligent efforts of the CEDAW Committee. Thanks to each of you, your predecessors, and those who will follow in your footsteps.