

# WebMemo



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## CEDAW and the New U.N. Gender Office: The U.S. Can Do Better

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The 54th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) concluded last month at the United Nations, with even more feminist fanfare than in recent years. The CSW is a functional body that meets annually to discuss and review the situation of women and girls worldwide. This year the CSW commemorated the 15th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, at which then-First Lady Hillary Clinton led the U.S. delegation, and popularized the now familiar refrain, “Human rights are women’s rights, and women’s rights are human rights.” Now as Secretary of State, Clinton addressed the CSW meeting as it concluded, pledging broad support for its agenda.

Unfortunately, much of the agenda and activities that comprise the CSW are at best a distraction from the real threats to women’s human rights and at worst antithetical to the values and needs of women worldwide. To better elevate the status of women and girls, especially in places where they are most vulnerable, the U.S. should reject much of the CSW agenda and instead reinvigorate its efforts to promote and defend the universally accepted human rights of women and men around the world.

**Feminist Forum.** The official agenda for this year’s meeting, referred to as Beijing +15, was to review the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—the expansive documentation of women’s rights and related government responsibilities adopted at the 1995 conference—at the country level and share experiences and best practices among country delegations.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset of this year’s meeting, the CSW passed a resolution reaffirming the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, welcoming the world’s progress toward gender equality and women’s empowerment, emphasizing the importance of integrating a gender perspective in efforts to achieve the U.N.’s lofty “Millennium Development Goals”<sup>2</sup> by 2015, highlighting the importance of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and calling upon all U.N. entities, international organizations, and civil society to fully implement gender equality.<sup>3</sup> This expansive declaration will be sent to the U.N. General Assembly for its endorsement.

The annual CSW meeting has consistently been a major forum for feminist groups from around the world to lobby on behalf of their particular issues, most frequently increased access to and funding for family planning and abortion—often referred to as “reproductive rights and services”—and greater attention to sexual identity and orientation. This year was no different, with upwards of 6,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attending the two-week conference, hosting side events on a variety of subjects such as International Planned Parenthood Federation’s event on

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“Young Women and Abortion,” and “Homophobia within the Educational System” sponsored by the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

**U.N. Super-Agency for Women.** Many of the NGOs and activists attending CSW have long clamored for a new U.N. gender equality entity, recently uniting in their demands under the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign.<sup>4</sup> This proposed new agency would subsume the four U.N. entities that currently specialize in gender issues<sup>5</sup> and be led by an Under-Secretary-General who would participate in all U.N. decision-making bodies and bring an increased focus on gender equality to all U.N. undertakings.

During the CSW meetings, several member states, including the U.S. under the Obama Administration,<sup>6</sup> pledged support—financial or rhetorical—for the new gender entity. In remarks at the commemorative event for Beijing +15, U.S. delegate Meryl Frank declared, “The sooner the unified gender entity is up and running, the sooner all countries will benefit.”<sup>7</sup>

This new gender entity is projected to have an annual budget of at least \$500 million (NGO advocates had been pushing for a budget of \$1 billion<sup>8</sup>), of which the U.S. would likely be responsible for paying 22 percent, as it does with the U.N. regular

budget. In addition to the concern that such a hefty price tag should raise, the need for such an agency is unclear, as Heritage Foundation expert Brett Schaefer explains:

Although consolidating three institutions addressing the same broad issue to remove overlap, reduce unnecessary costs, and enhance accountability does make sense, it is unclear why this consolidated entity must be “enhanced” and elevated within the U.N. system. Gender inequity is certainly rampant among many U.N. member states, particularly those in the Middle East that deny women the right to vote or participate in society with the same privileges as men. However, the U.N. is [already] dedicated to “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion....” Gender equity should be a goal of the United Nations, but it would be better handled within the context of existing human rights institutions rather than as a new stand-alone organization that would actually work against mainstreaming the issue within the U.N. system.<sup>9</sup>

**Praising CEDAW.** Another perennial component of the CSW meetings is CEDAW.<sup>10</sup> Supporters

1. For a comprehensive review of these Beijing documents, see Jennifer Marshall, Melissa Pardue, *and* Grace Smith, “Beyond the Words at Beijing +10: How U.N. Policy Falls Short of Women’s Best Interests,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1829, February 28, 2005, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2005/02/Beyond-the-Words-at-Beijing-10-How-UN-Policy-Falls-Short-of-Womens-Best-Interests>.
2. For a discussion of the Millennium Development Goals, see Ambassador Terry Miller and Brett D. Schaefer, “The Global Poverty Act: The Wrong Track for U.S. Aid Policy,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1878, April 1, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/04/The-Global-Poverty-Act-The-Wrong-Track-for-US-Aid-Policy>.
3. Draft resolution submitted by the Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women on the basis of informal consultations, “Declaration on the Occasion of the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women,” UN Economic and Social Council E/CN.6/2010/L.1.
4. See the GEAR campaign statement at <http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/March-2010-GEAR-Statement.pdf> (April 5, 2010).
5. These existing gender entities are the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women, the Development Fund for Women, and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.
6. Prior U.S. Administrations, including the Bush Administration, have resisted efforts to create this gender entity.
7. Ambassador Meryl Frank, Deputy U.S. Representative to the Commission on the Status of Women, statement at the commemorative event for Beijing+15, March 2, 2010, at <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2010/137682.htm> (April 5, 2010).
8. Terrence McKeegan, “Women at Beijing +15 Agitate for More Funding of New UN Gender Super-Agency,” C-FAM, March 4, 2010, at [http://www.c-fam.org/publications/pub\\_detail.asp?id=1583](http://www.c-fam.org/publications/pub_detail.asp?id=1583) (April 5, 2010).

point to the full implementation of CEDAW—which the U.S. has not ratified—as the single greatest step toward achieving gender equality.

In previous years, CSW delegations from the U.S. have made the case that the U.S. Constitution is a far better guardian of the rights of American women than any international treaty could ever be. They have pointed to the long list of policies and aid programs that the U.S. has undertaken to improve the status and rights of women around the world. Furthermore, under previous Administrations the U.S. delegates have pointed out that many of the signatories to CEDAW have deplorable human rights records, and these countries have not advanced women's human rights any faster after joining the convention.

Now, however, the Obama Administration has (albeit somewhat cautiously) jumped on the CEDAW bandwagon. Ambassador Susan Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the U.N., pronounced, “The Obama Administration strongly supports this landmark treaty, and is committed to United States ratification.”<sup>11</sup> To great applause at CSW, Secretary Clinton promised, “The Obama Administration will

continue to work for the ratification of CEDAW... because we believe it is past time, to take this step for women in our country and in all countries.”<sup>12</sup>

**Resist the Radical Feminists.** Since 1980, no U.S. Senate has found a compelling case to ratify CEDAW, and every U.S. Administration since President Carter's has declined to submit it to the Senate—and with good reason: Becoming a party to CEDAW would mean ceding authority to an unelected committee comprised of foreign gender “experts” and would do nothing to advance the rights of American women.

The U.S. can be proud of its record in upholding human rights for men, women, and children at home and worldwide and its work to protect the rights of women in particular wherever they are threatened. Congress should withhold U.S. funds for the new U.N. gender agency, whose stated mission would more appropriately be addressed by U.N. human rights institutions.

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9. Brett D. Schaefer, “Enough Reports: More Action Needed on U.N. Reform,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1988, December 8, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2006/12/Enough-Reports-More-Action-Needed-on-UN-Reform>.
10. For more on the dangers of CEDAW see Grace Melton, “CEDAW: How U.N. Interference Threatens the Rights of American Women,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2227, January 9, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/01/CEDAW-How-UN-Interference-Threatens-the-Rights-of-American-Women>; Ambassador Terry Miller, “Economic Freedom: Revolutionary Empowerment for Women,” Heritage *Lecture* No. 1073, April 3, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Lecture/Economic-Freedom-Revolutionary-Empowerment-for-Women>.
11. Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, statement on the 30th anniversary of CEDAW, December 18, 2009, at <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/133840.htm> (April 5, 2010).
12. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, remarks at the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, March 12, 2010, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/03/138320.htm> (April 5, 2010).