UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
TREATY BODIES

45 Years of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Standing Strong for Women and Girls:
45 Years of Law, Accountability, and Change



Celebrating 45 Years of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
CEDAW @45

45 Years of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW@45)

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), fundamentally strengthening the protection of women's rights and gender equality under international law.

September 3, 1981
Entry into Force.

Entering into force on September 3, 1981, just twenty months after its adoption, the Convention remains a vital engine for justice. It is a living framework that empowers women to claim their rights and guides nations toward implementing substantive equality.

Celebrating 45 Years of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. CEDAW @45

A snapshot of 45 years of progress (1981–2026)

- **UNIVERSAL REACH**

189 States Parties (98% of UN Member States).

- **BREAKING THE SILENCE**

In 1979, only a **single** nation had specific laws criminalizing domestic violence [1]; by 2025, that figure had surged to **165** countries [2].

- **STRENGTHENING NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

423 specific laws were passed or amended between 1997 and 2020 to harmonize domestic legislation with CEDAW obligations [3].

- **OPENING DOORS TO JUSTICE**

116 countries have ratified the Optional Protocol, granting the CEDAW Committee the power to examine individual complaints and undertake inquiries into grave and systematic violations.

- **LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP**

151 experts have served as Committee Members, acting as the global guardians of these rights.
Membership | OHCHR

Photo: HUMA / World Bank

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Pillars of Success & Impact

CEDAW functions as a **comprehensive international bill of rights for women**, establishing a legally binding framework to achieve substantive equality. It mandates that States parties move beyond formal legal recognition to eliminate all forms of discrimination, including systemic barriers and gender stereotypes. This mandate is operationalized across different sectors.



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Shaping Constitutions

CEDAW has shifted how nations define themselves at the highest legal level.

- Pre-1970: Only 54% of constitutions contained gender equality guarantees [4].
- Post-2000: 100% of constitutions adopted contain these provisions [5].
- Example of Tunisia (2014): Article 46 of the Constitution guarantees equal opportunities, informed by CEDAW provisions [6].

Commitment Growth: Between 1991 and 2012 alone, **43** specific religion-based reservations to CEDAW were lifted or modified, signaling a deepening commitment to the treaty's full mandate [7].

Legislative Action

CEDAW serves as a global blueprint, guiding legislatures to enact transformative national laws and dismantle systemic discrimination.

The "423 Laws" Benchmark

Research confirms that between 1997 and 2020, governments passed 423 laws in direct response to CEDAW, 85 of which specifically combat gender-based violence.

Establishing Global Norms

General Recommendation No. 19 (1992) (GR 19) was a turning point, formally defining gender-based violence against women as a form of discrimination. By 2017, the Committee concluded in General Recommendation No. 35, complementing GR 19, that the prohibition of such violence has evolved into a principle of customary international law, making it a binding global standard. Some examples include:

1. **Sierra Leone:**

   Adopted several Acts which led to raising marriage age to 18, establishing equal rights in inheritance, and including marital rape into the definition of domestic violence [8].

2. **Brazil:**

   Enacted the "Maria da Penha" Law (2006) to combat domestic violence, explicitly citing CEDAW compliance. [9]

3. **Turkey, Nepal, South Africa and the Republic of Korea:**

   Enacted groundbreaking domestic violence laws to protect women within the home [10].

4. **Nigeria:**

   Developed landmark law eliminating violence in private and public life, countering harmful traditional practices and protecting women and girls.

5. **Ukraine & Moldova:**

   Developed robust anti-trafficking laws to protect women and girls in vulnerable situations [11].

6. **Philippines:**

   The Magna Carta of Women (2009) was drafted based on CEDAW to protect the rights of women [12].



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Judicial Empowerment

Judges utilize CEDAW as a "living instrument" to deliver justice in local courts. Examples include:

01 Ending Child Marriage (Zimbabwe):

The Constitutional Court cited CEDAW to rule that marriage before age 18 is illegal [13].

02 Citizenship Rights (Botswana):

The landmark Unity Dow case used the treaty to dismantle discriminatory citizenship laws [14].

03 Workplace Safety (India):

The Vishaka judgment relied on CEDAW to create binding guidelines against sexual harassment where no local law yet existed [15].



The Evolution of Global Jurisprudence

The Optional Protocol's procedures (the communications procedure and the inquiry procedure) have redefined state accountability and generated robust women's rights jurisprudence. They enable individual claims (with potential interim protections) and confidential investigations into systematic violations. Crucially, they enforce the "due diligence" standard, requiring states to actively prevent, punish, and remedy abuses by all actors.

This transformative approach is also evident in the realm of property law, where the Committee's jurisprudence reframes ownership not merely as a financial asset, but as a "multiplier right" that serves as a gateway to health, education, and agency. Landmark rulings establish that property rights must yield to a woman's right to be free from violence, providing a framework for national courts to dismantle discriminatory customs and secure property as a foundation for liberty [16].



Photo: UN Women/Daniel Donald

The Scope of Protection: Ensuring Inclusivity

The framework addresses the intersection of race, class, and gender. Some examples include;

CANADA:

The Commitee advised tackling health and poverty challenges specifically facing Aboriginal women [17].

BRAZIL:

The Committee recommended addressing the wage gap disproportionately affecting Afro-Brazilian women [18].



Photo: UNDP/Tiago Zenero

Parity-Based Leadership

CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 (GR 40) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems illustrates how, in addition to CEDAW Articles 7 and 8, a joint reading of the Convention clarifies women's right to 50:50 parity in all decision-making systems in all sectors.

50
50

Tangible Reality: As of 2025, Rwanda, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Andorra, and the UAE have achieved 50% or higher female representation in parliament, proving that parity is not just an ideal, but a tangible reality [19].

Women, Peace, and Security (WPS):

CEDAW provides a legal framework for UNSC Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, mandating parity in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. CEDAW's approach to WPS also addresses newly emerging threats and places attention on building gender-sensitive resilience to crises.



Photo by Pasqual Gorriz/UN

A Forward-Looking Agenda

CEDAW continues to evolve, applying legal reasoning to contemporary global challenges through its General Recommendations (GRs) & other initatives.

Regulating the Digital Sphere (GR 35) & Beyond

Updated in 2017, this recommendation addresses "technology-mediated" violence and serves as a primary legal standard for holding tech and governments accountable for digital abuse.
The Committee is now collaborating with stakeholders to address gaps in AI and algorithmic safeguards. By integrating CEDAW principles into digital policy, they aim to develop a Guidance Note and General Recommendation that ensures accountability and protects the rights and safety of women and girls in the digital era.

Confronting the Climate Crisis (GR 37)

The first Treaty Body tool to address the gendered risks of climate change. It ensures women are recognized not as victims, but as essential **agents of change** in disaster risk reduction.

The Evolving Conflict and Peace Landscape (GR 30 Addendum)

The recently adopted **GR 30 *addendum*** addresses among others the transition from "traditional war" to automated conflict, expanding the framework to cover modern warfare's impact on women.

Health Frameworks (GR 24)

Work is currently underway to update **GR 24** to reflect the evolving landscape of global health and reproductive autonomy.

Dismantling Root Causes (GR 41)

The forthcoming **GR 41 on Gender Stereotypes** focuses on eliminating entrenched, deep-rooted biases, providing a roadmap for tackling gender bias in **AI algorithms, digitization** and social media.

Cascading CEDAW to the grassroots (Cities for CEDAW)

Work is currently ongoing to make CEDAW practically applicable to the day-to-day lives of women by cascading CEDAW provisions, guarantees and standards in City Ordinances, Municipal laws and local edicts to enhance safety for prosperity, sustainable development and an inclusive future through the Cities-for-CEDAW(C4CEDAW) Global Coalition.

Photo: UN Women/David Snyder



Photo: UN Women/Christopher Herwig

The Path Ahead

The road forward is steep, paved with systemic hurdles and evolving complexities. These challenges do not signal a standstill; they define our next directive. The CEDAW Committee works in close cooperation with State Parties, alongside a diverse range of grassroots and institutional partners, bringing together frontline experience and multidisciplinary expertise.

Through the rigorous application of CEDAW's standards, the Committee provides the essential tools to harmonize legal frameworks with international obligations. By utilizing the Convention's normative framework, it will continue to provide guidance to State parties to achieve substantive equality through legal rigor and the progressive realization of human rights.

Resources

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