

What is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women?

Adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is often referred to as the Women's International Bill of Rights.

Unlike domestic UK and European Community legislation on sex discrimination and equal treatment, the Convention is *solely concerned with the position of women* rather than discrimination faced by both sexes (which would include discrimination and inequalities faced by men).

The Convention places obligations on State parties (countries that have agreed to the Convention) to eliminate discrimination against women, which is defined as:

"...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

The Convention provides a framework for States to take responsibility for tackling (often embedded and historical) discrimination against women and achieving *substantive equality* for women in both the private and public spheres.

It outlines a comprehensive set of rights for women in all fields (civil, political, economic, social, cultural and other fields) is the only human rights treaty which affirms the reproductive rights of women and targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations.

By signing-up (i.e. 'ratifying' or 'acceding') to the Convention, States commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to:

- End all forms of discrimination against women;
- Protect women; and
- Promote equality within the legal system, public institutions and other organisations and amongst individuals.

Countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention are *legally bound* to put its provisions ('articles' and 'general recommendations' etc) into practice, except where they have Reservations (when the country's government cannot agree to implement a certain part of the Convention). State parties agree to take all appropriate measures, including legislation and *temporary special measures*, so that women can enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

There is also an 'Optional Protocol' attached to the Convention. This allows individuals to take their case to CEDAW Committee if all national options to resolve allegations of discrimination have been exhausted. The UK Government has agreed to the Optional Protocol and it came into force in 2005.

As of October 2006, 185 State parties (over 90% of UN members) were party to the Convention. The UK government ratified the Convention in 1986. Only a handful of State parties have not ratified the Convention, and include the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. (However, in the US, twelve states, including California, eleven counties and twenty cities have endorsed the Convention or have adopted it on behalf of their jurisdictions).

The Convention has a preamble (introduction) and 30 articles (clauses) which cover:

- Sex roles and stereotyping
- Trafficking and prostitution
- Political and public life
- Participation at the international level
- Nationality
- Equal rights in education
- Employment
- Healthcare and family planning
- Economic and social benefits
- Rural women
- Equality before the law
- Marriage and family law

There are also a number of General Recommendations attached to the Convention which cover a wide range of issues such as violence against women.

The Convention is overseen and implemented by a UN committee of 23 experts on women's rights from around the world, known as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

State parties who have signed-up to the Convention are obliged to report to the Committee who examine the measures implemented by the country to comply with its obligations under the Convention. The Committee meets twice a year and countries are examined on a rolling basis, approximately every four years. Alongside a country's written report, non-government organisations submit 'shadow' reports. The reports submitted by governments are frequently incomplete and tend to minimise problems and maximise their accomplishments. The Committee recognises this and invites direct NGO input via written reports and informal and formal meetings in order to bring women's real concerns to national and international attention.

To see the full text of the Convention:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>