

INTRODUCTION

A major step towards the attainment of the goal of equal rights for women was taken on 18 December 1979, when the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The 30-article Convention sets out in legally binding form internationally accepted principles and measures to achieve equal rights for women everywhere. Its adoption climaxed consultations over a five-year period by various working groups, the Commission on the Status of Women and the General Assembly.

The comprehensive Convention calls for equal rights for women, regardless of their marital status, in all fields -- political, economic, social, cultural and civil. It calls for national legislation to ban discrimination; recommends temporary special measures to speed equality between men and women, and action to modify social and cultural patterns that perpetuate discrimination.

Other measures provide for equal rights for women in political and public life; equal access to education and the same choice of curricula; non-discrimination in employment and pay; and guarantees of job security in the event of marriage and maternity. The Convention underlines the equal responsibilities of men and women in the context of family life. It also stresses the social services needed -- especially child-care facilities -- for combining family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life.

Additional articles of the Convention call for non-discriminatory health services for women, including services related to family planning; and a legal capacity identical to that of men, with States parties agreeing that all contracts and other private instruments that restrict the legal capacity of women "shall be deemed null and void". Special attention is given to the problems of rural women.

The Convention sets up machinery for the international supervision of the obligations accepted by States once they have ratified or acceded to it. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), made up of 23 experts serving in their personal capacity and elected by States parties to the Convention, monitors progress made in its implementation.

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