

INTERNATIONAL
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Discord likely over ratifying women's rights pact

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NEW YORK: A global women's rights treaty completed 30 years ago has a better-than-ever chance for U.S. Senate ratification this year, yet the hunt for the needed 67 favorable votes is likely to incur the wrath of activists on both the left and right.

Known as CEDAW (SEE-daw), the treaty's formal name is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Since its adoption by the U.N. General Assembly in 1979, all but eight of the 192 U.N. members have become a party to it the United States is one of the holdouts, along with Sudan, Somalia, Qatar, Iran, Nauru, Palau and Tonga.

This year, with CEDAW-supporting Democrats holding power in Washington, Sen. Barbara Boxer plans a concerted effort to seek ratification as part of her agenda for a new Foreign Relations subcommittee chairmanship overseeing global women's issues.

"We've waited long enough," said Boxer, D-Calif. "All these years later, there's no excuse for not ratifying this critical convention to shine a light on women's rights around the world.

"It's a shame that the U.S. stands with countries such as Iran, Sudan and Somalia in failing to ratify the treaty."

As the world observes International Women's Day on Sunday, scores of domestic and global human rights and women's groups are hoping that Boxer succeeds. However, the quest for ratification faces not only long-standing opposition from many conservatives, but also a relatively new challenge from a vocal faction of liberal activists who fear the treaty will be burdened with damaging, politically expedient exceptions.

From the right, U.S. opponents of CEDAW contend that ratification could lead to legalized prostitution, increased government interference in family matters, and abolition of remaining restrictions on abortion. They also question the value of joining a treaty that has been ratified by countries such as Saudi Arabia, where women cannot vote or drive.

"The treaty is worse than useless," said Wendy Wright of Concerned Women for America. "It gives legitimacy to regimes that are committing some of the worst abuses against women."

Wright promised a vigorous fight against CEDAW, which she depicted as "the Equal Rights Amendment on steroids."

On the left, there is growing apprehension that Democratic leaders in the Senate, who need Republican votes to get the treaty ratified, will be willing to add various reservations, understandings and declarations known as RUDs that some activists feel would be harmful.

"It would be an important signal to the world that we adopt this critical convention without limitations that exempt the U.S. from coverage and responsibility for the treatment of women," said Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women. "It sends a kind of 'ugly American' signal that we expect to hold other countries to a standard that we're not willing to accept for ourselves."

Boxer said her subcommittee will start hearings this year with a "clean" version of the treaty, but aides said it's almost certain some RUDs will be added as a step toward winning enough votes. The subcommittee is awaiting input on that subject from the Obama administration, which supports the

treaty.

In 1994 and 2002, when the treaty came before the Senate but failed to win ratification, a total of 11 RUDs were added. Among them were stipulations that CEDAW could not compel U.S. women to serve in military combat units, could not be used to interfere with private conduct, and could not force the United States to provide paid maternity leave.

One of the most contentious RUDs likely to be revived this year stipulates that nothing in CEDAW should be interpreted as creating a right to abortion.

Janet Benshoof, president of the New York-based Global Justice Center, called this provision "the most deceptive."

"This language is touted as neutral or benign but is not," she wrote in a recent essay. "This language can and has been used as an anti-abortion weapon."

Because of pressure to shy away from abortion, Benshoof said, U.N. and other agencies have even been unwilling to raise the idea of offering abortions to girls impregnated by rapists in Sudan's war-torn Darfur region.

Benshoof contended that a treaty encumbered by such RUDs "poses even more danger than continued U.S. isolation."

Another New York-based women's rights group, MADRE, has similar concerns and is launching a campaign to get a "clean" version of the treaty ratified.

"Most senators don't understand that the treaty could actually do harm" if accompanied by certain reservations, said Yifat Susskind, MADRE's communications director.

"The argument you'll hear is that it's better for the U.S. to at least be in the game, even with a weaker CEDAW," she said. "I don't buy that argument ... What you're compromising on is so integral that you really would be selling the principles of what you're trying to."

Opinions are sharply divided over the tangible impact that CEDAW has had internationally, in part because the committee that monitors treaty compliance cannot enforce its recommendations.

Nonetheless, CEDAW supporters say the treaty has been valuable in numerous countries in expanding property rights and political rights, developing domestic violence policies, and improving education for girls.

The treaty does not require legalization of prostitution, although the monitoring committee has recommended decriminalization in some countries so that women who are victims of sexual slavery and trafficking won't be deterred from seeking help from authorities.

If Boxer's subcommittee votes for ratifying the treaty, it would then advance to the full Foreign Relations Committee chaired by Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass.

Kerry is "extremely supportive of stronger international frameworks for promoting global equality and women's empowerment," said committee spokesman Frederick Jones. "He is looking at a number of draft bills and international instruments and will support the most effective avenues to accomplish his ideals."

On the Net:

U.N. treaty: <http://un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

Treaty opponents: <http://tinyurl.com/aknv77>

Treaty supporters: <http://www.womenstreaty.org/>

Correction:
