

➤ Toolkit for MPs

How to use The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

On the UN day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Progressio continues to draw attention to two existing key international instruments: an international treaty and a mechanism, which can contribute to drive forward equality for women and girls.

The CEDAW

The adoption of CEDAW by the UN General Assembly in 1979 was an important milestone in the fight against discrimination against women and girls.¹ The CEDAW convention consists of a preamble and 30 articles defining what constitutes as discrimination against women. It is a blueprint for realising gender equality through ensuring equal opportunities for women in all areas of life.

The Commission of the Status of Women (CSW)

It was the work of the CSW, established in 1946, which led to the development of CEDAW, and the two continue to be closely linked.² The CSW holds annual sessions at the UN headquarters in New York; reviewing progress on women's rights and issuing agreed conclusions that are negotiated by all governments.

Taking stock on achieving women's and girls' rights

Although 189 parties have either ratified or acceded CEDAW, today the elimination of discrimination against women is still far from being achieved. A report from UN Women (2014) stated that 'no country has yet achieved gender equality and violence against women remains "alarmingly high".³

Up to seven in 10 women around the world experience physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime.⁴ One out of four pregnant women has suffered abuse during her pregnancy. Domestic violence is outlawed in 128 countries but one in three women are still victims of physical or sexual violence. Sixty million girls are assaulted for simply going to school.⁵ Misogyny is often disguised as conservative interpretations of religious and/or sacred texts expressed and reasserted through social and cultural norms, which limits women's rights.

1 <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

2 <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/our-work/human-rights/international-framework/un-convention-elimination-discrimination-against-women/how-cedaw-works-internationally>

3 <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/03/09/391915148/u-n-report-no-country-has-achieved-equality-for-women>

4 <http://endviolence.un.org/situation.shtml>

5 Violence against school girls http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadm792.pdf p 8

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Particularly in times of conflict and war, gender inequality generated by unequal power enormously affects women and girls, exposing them to sexual and other types of violence. Gender inequality is about power imbalances. Addressing this requires a multi-stranded approach that generates social and cultural transformation.

Social and cultural norms and the CEDAW

Recent years have shown an increasing commitment to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, namely discriminative social norms, rather than the symptoms.

While social norms and cultural values can often be positive, in many instances, women are confronted with negative and conservative attitudes towards their freedom, decision making and equality in comparison to men. Social expectations mean enormous pressure for women to behave according to what is expected from them and fulfil any social expectations that they face as a woman.

The UK government, and others, have emphasised that social norms define the value that is given to a woman in all areas of life. As a consequence of the recognition to tackle root causes of gender inequality, the Department for International Development (DFID) made a commitment to “increase its efforts to transform the social norms, including discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, that are at the root cause of violence against women and girls, and empowering women and girls to reduce their own vulnerability to violence.”⁶

Social norms in the CEDAW

Two articles in CEDAW are specifically relevant for tackling social norms, cultural traditions and religious beliefs and can be used further in the fight against discrimination against women, including tackling violence:

2(f) State parties to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing law, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women

5(a) States are required to take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of women and men, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for women and men.

“A woman’s pregnancy is a major issue when you get married. Even if she doesn’t feel the pressure immediately, she will be already stressed because she can imagine the upcoming pressure. Women define themselves as of value when they get married and have children. That is what society says and that is how they can define themselves. We just grow up knowing what is expected from us.”

**- Laurelle Mbaradza, 30,
Programmes Officer at Progressio’s
partner NGO DOMCOP, Zimbabwe**

How the UK can use CEDAW to achieve its strategic priorities on women's and girls' rights and tackle violence

The convention includes a strong international monitoring and reporting mechanism that is led by the CEDAW Committee. The Committee's main task is to monitor progress for women made in countries that ratified or acceded to the CEDAW. It accepts both government and civil society reports on progress on non-discrimination against women. The Committee consists of 23 experts on women's rights from around the world and holds regular sessions in which progress on the implementation of CEDAW is monitored. During the sessions, the Committee reviews reports from states that cover national actions taken towards improving the situation for women. States are due to submit their reports every four years.

The UK can take leadership in driving forward the prominence of Article 2(f) and 5(a), in line with DFID's priority to "tackl[e] the root causes of VAWG by transforming social norms is recognised as being of key importance, as is empowering women and girls to reduce their own vulnerability to violence".⁷

Policy asks

Progressio suggests that the key instrument for social change on women's and girls' rights, CEDAW is placed more prominently in international agreements such as the agreed conclusions of the CSW. In March 2016, governments will come together at the CSW again to take stock on progress towards women's and girls' rights. They will also negotiate agreed conclusions that act as a mechanism to implement the mandate of the CSW, which is to advance the implementation of CEDAW.

Progressio recommends MP's to ask ministers and the UK delegation attending the CSW to:

- Include a reference to Article 2(f) of the CEDAW, which states that all governments must "take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women". Alternatively the wording of the article must be included in the agreed conclusion of the CSW, which would send a strong message to all people and states. If appropriate, Article 5(a) can also be referenced. Governments should also insist that there is policy coherence across all their ministries in order to drive the implementation of this article.**
- Suggest that, at international level, all states exchange learning and best practices of implementing CEDAW Article 2(f), 5(a) and related policy agreements in order to ensure that neither cultural nor religious arguments are used to justify harmful traditions that are violating women's and girls' rights. Cultural and social practices must not impede and/or obstruct the flow of progress towards achieving sustainable development.**
- Suggest that governments and donor should invest in a research hub, which gathers information on social norms and harmful practices in relation to sexual and reproductive health, including family planning. Research should be context specific to ensure that targeted recommendations and policies are developed and coherent approaches are adopted, which eliminate discriminatory gender norms and harmful practices that affect women and girls.**

⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/368932/Map-DFID-VAWG-prog-2014b.pdf