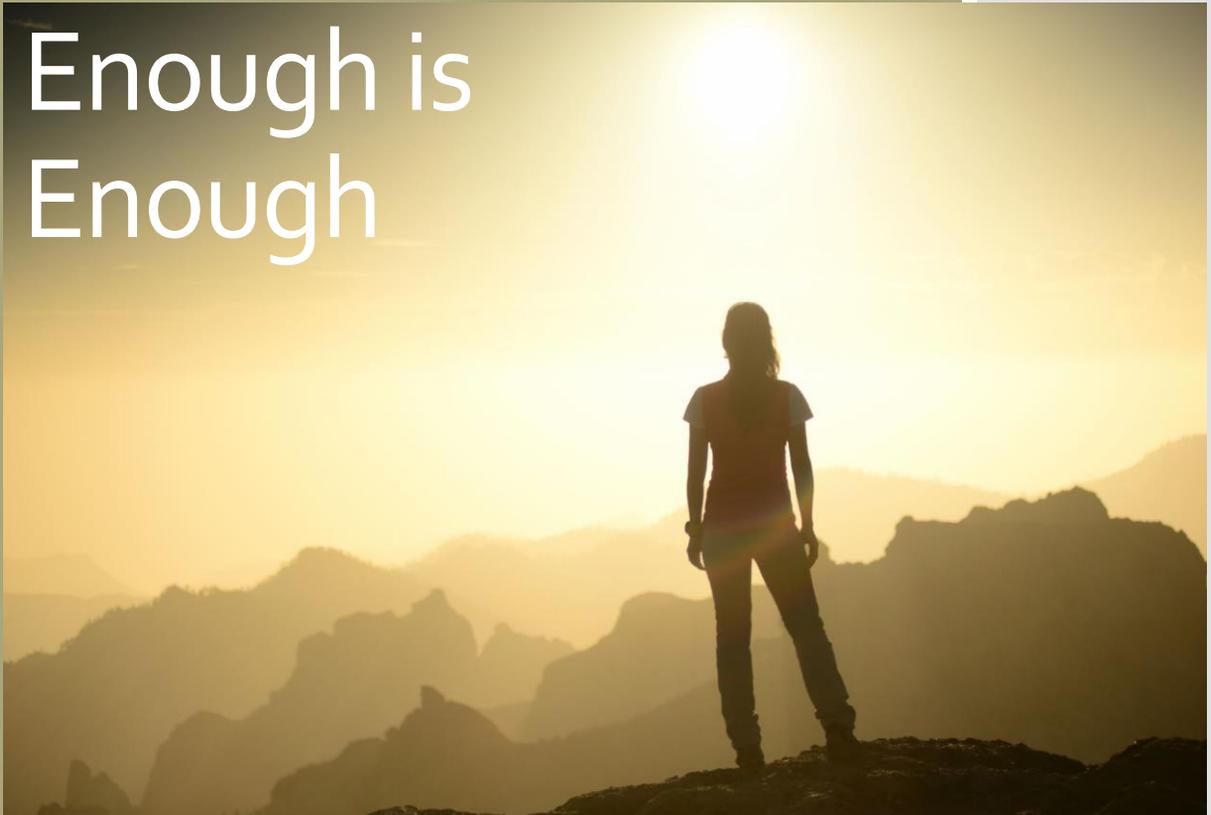




**UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Westchester Chapter

Enough is Enough



**An Intergenerational Perspective
and Call to Action
to Stop Discrimination
Against Women**

--Written by Dan Bena, September 2020

“Despite great strides made by the international women’s rights movement over many years, women and girls around the world are still married as children or trafficked into forced labor and sex slavery. They are refused access to education and political participation, and some are trapped in conflicts where rape is perpetrated as a weapon of war. Around the world, deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are needlessly high, and women are prevented from making deeply personal choices in their private lives.”

--[Human Rights Watch](#)

The troubling, but calibrating, statement at left comes from the website of Human Rights Watch, an organization founded in 1978 as “Helsinki Watch,” and which has been investigating and reporting on abuses happening in all corners of the world ever since. They describe part of their work as meeting with governments, the United Nations, rebel groups, corporations, and others to help ensure that policies are changed, laws are enforced, and justice is served.

That’s quite an impressive, and undoubtedly daunting, charge—changing policy, enforcing laws, and serving justice—but it runs the risk of being seen by some as too “removed” from a personal perspective, too overwhelming for many people to understand, internalize, and act upon. Each element is critically important, but I wanted to learn about this on a more individual level; I wanted to hear from people within my circle about their perspectives and experiences, so that the topic can “come to life,” hopefully in a way that brings hope to a world besieged by so many intractable challenges.

The title of this paper is about “Discrimination against women,” not about human rights, right? If you read that last line and are in agreement, that’s precisely part of why I am writing this: to reinforce a tenet now almost ubiquitous on social media of all forms, “Women’s Rights are Human Rights.”

I am fortunate to serve on the Board of the Westchester Chapter of the United Nations Association of the United States (UNA-USA). UNA-USA, at its core, is a movement of Americans who believe that our interests and values can best be advanced by standing with the Planet’s only truly universal institution: The United Nations. Over 20,000 members strong (60% under the age of 26) and with more than 200 chapters across the country, [UNA-USA](#) members are united in their commitment to global engagement and their belief that each of us can play a part in advancing the UN’s mission and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Soon after I joined the Board, I learned about something—an acronym—I never had heard before, and a corresponding program about which, I am embarrassed to admit, I had no knowledge whatsoever...but I learned quickly! It's called "CEDAW," and stands for the "Convention On the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women." CEDAW was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and is often described as an international bill of rights for women.

The Convention defines discrimination against women 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."

If you find the time—actually, make the time—to consider that definition, you will surely understand just how comprehensive it is, and how far-reaching its implications on our everyday lives. You can read all about the details of CEDAW at the footnote reference, including its specific commitments with which adopting countries are expected to comply. Sadly, the United States is one of only six countries in the world, along with Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Palau, and Tonga, which has not adopted CEDAW. As a side note, as of this writing, 12 States within the US have not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

That's a problem...and a big one.

To learn more, I chose three intergenerational fellow UNA-USA members—an interesting mix—to ask about CEDAW:



J. Yuhanna Edwards: A man of color who served and protected this country—and its ideals—during the Vietnam War. He continued his theme of public service as a Council Member for the City of Mount Vernon in New York State, and now serves as the esteemed President of the UNA-USA Westchester Chapter.

Marcia Brewster: A woman who served this country, and the world, during nearly four decades in various assignments within the United Nations, including serving as President of the Group on Equal Rights for Women in the UN. I came to know Marcia because of her passion for helping to solve one of the most intractable challenges we face as humanity—the challenge of water insecurity—which, perhaps surprisingly to many, sits squarely in the realm of gender inequity (women and girls are responsible for water collection in 8 out of 10 households with water off premises, so reducing the population with limited drinking water services will have a strong gender [impact](#).)



Raina Kadavil: a twenty-something woman of color and self-described author, activist, and adventurer—and I can emphasize the “activist” part! Among many other things, Raina serves as the Philanthropy Chair of the Women’s Leadership Network, and as a volunteer with Girls4Tech (both initiatives of Mastercard), and the CEO of Urban Refuge, a nonprofit that breaks barriers by mapping aid for refugees and immigrants living in large cities.

I started with Raina, since her cohort quite literally is inheriting the good and bad of the generation before. I asked about the priority of CEDAW, as a surrogate for women’s rights:

“CEDAW is—has to be—a top priority. There are two main reasons why I say this: (1) simply put, women represent the largest population of people discriminated against—more than any other group, and (2) due to intersectional discrimination, women take on an even greater burden. What I mean by this is that the discrimination of women of color, women who are LGBTQ, or women with disabilities, is amplified simply by the fact that they are women.”

Raina



"They are finding and using their voices, often at physical and emotional peril, but using them, nonetheless."

"Discrimination against women exists, in different ways, in virtually every corner of the world today, and is expressed in many different forms. Whether we talk about female infanticide, rape and sexual assault, or irrational and damaging standards for how we define beauty, there are so many examples of how the world has failed women and girls.

At the same time, there are examples of genuine, positive progress that is being made. Look at Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, who has shown the remarkable power of leading with empathy time and time again—whether she is fighting for women's rights and representation in government and business, or aggressively protecting public health in the face of COVID-19. Or Greta Thunberg. You talk about intergenerational. She has quickly become a force—globally—as a champion for women's rights, human rights, and the rights of the planet.

It's an exciting time for me, as a young woman of color, because it is so clear that women all over the world have had enough. They are finding and using their voices, often at physical and emotional peril, but using them, nonetheless. Social media has allowed us to learn from each other, connect with each other, and show solidarity for each other—and this has made us stronger than ever before!"

Raina



Raina's perspective reflects so much of the "hands-on" approach of her generation, informed by intellectual capability and wisdom beyond her years. But is this unique to her generation? Next, I spoke to Marcia Brewster, someone who has been truly iconic within the halls of the UN, and is now, as Vice President, equally an icon to the Board and membership of the UNA-USA Westchester Chapter (and has served as its President). Marcia's perspective focused on specific examples—hopeful and inspiring examples—of where she has seen positive change:

"I was at the UN working on a paper for Beijing +5 in 2000 and at the time was seconded to the Division for the Advancement of Women. The paper was on Domestic Violence against Women in Asia. I was surprised to learn that female lawyers in India were using CEDAW in their arguments in court when defending victims of domestic violence. Since India was a signatory, they could use the principles of CEDAW in court.

For someone who has spent most of her life at the United Nations trying to advance the right policies to have actual impact on the ground, this was a perfect example of it. It was so positive to experience. In one of the cases I used in the study, the argument was accepted by the court, and the husband was held to account. So, this is an example of where CEDAW wasn't merely a policy on paper; it was a policy that informed local laws, along with methods for enforcement.

During my tenure, there were a lot of other examples of domestic violence against women in many Asian countries, including Japan. Basically, women who are married have little or no protection against their husbands who, in all too many countries, are able to beat or even kill them with impunity.

CEDAW offered many women (and lawyers or advocates) a framework for defending themselves. I was surprised to hear that in Japan women were not at all protected against abusive husbands, simply because of the marriage license. This was back in 2000, so things might have changed—I certainly hope they have. Considering how prevalent domestic abuse and gender discrimination are in this country, CEDAW might provide women's advocates additional leverage against abusers and unequal situations in the workplace. But, of course, the U.S. has not signed it, and that's one of the reasons our advocacy is so very important. It would be interesting to see how CEDAW could be used in Mount Vernon and Westchester County."

Marcia's voice is one of experience, married with the unwavering passion of Raina's generation. She closed with mention of CEDAW in the city of Mount Vernon and the County of Westchester, which is a perfect segue into the dialog with the third person with whom I spoke, J. Yuhanna Edwards:

"In all candor, when I first came to UNA-USA, I knew nothing about CEDAW; I had never even heard of CEDAW. Thanks to UNA-USA Board members, Dr. Brenda Smith and Marcia Brewster, I was schooled—and quickly.

You know, there's a saying, 'once you see certain things, you can't un-see them.' That's how I think of CEDAW, actually of discrimination against women more generally. I spent most of my life knowing, at some level, that there were injustices...but to me, it was mostly about things like pay inequality, or female representation in the board room of many companies. Once I learned—or 'saw'—just how pervasive discrimination against women is, I surely couldn't 'un-see' it. In fact, once I was fortunate to have my eyes opened on the topic, I became an ardent advocate for women's equality, across the board."

Yuhanna

**The battle for
the individual rights
of women
is one of long standing
and none of us
should countenance
anything which
undermines it.**

Eleanor Roosevelt



"This 'self-awakening' coincided really well with my position at the time of Council Member for the City of Mount Vernon. Mount Vernon has a population close to 70,000 people, and a little more than half of them are women. So, I thought I had a pretty good chance of support for any advocacy that would be supportive of women. At the same time, I learned about a small movement, called Cities for CEDAW. They [describe](#) themselves as a grassroots effort that provides tools and leadership to empower local women's organizations and municipalities to effectively initiate CEDAW within their city, county, or state.

So, why not use my political influence to have Mount Vernon adopt CEDAW? I did. And, I'm honored to say that it passed easily in 2015. I believe we were the first city in New York State—mind you, a state with almost twenty million people—to do this. My one regret...maybe regret is too strong a word...one thing I wish I could have done differently before I left the City Council was to have CEDAW elevated from a resolution, which is how it was officially adopted in Mount Vernon, to an ordinance.

Don't get me wrong, a resolution is a great first step to drive awareness and visibility, but resolutions have no enforceability. Ordinances, on the other hand, are laws, and can be enforced. I will certainly keep trying, since it's so important that these kinds of commitments by governments bring with them the 'teeth' to make them stick. It's also heartening to see how CEDAW is gaining momentum across the State, and across the Country. I was honored to recently attend, with Dr. Smith, a meeting of the Westchester County Board of Legislators where a CEDAW resolution was put forth and signed by Committee. It was officially passed at the County level, and the City of White Plains issued their own CEDAW Proclamation. The momentum is building, and we are working hard at UNA Westchester to help make this happen."

As Yuhanna mentioned, the County of Westchester, one of the most affluent in the Country, has recently [adopted](#) a resolution by their Board of Legislators to implement CEDAW, working closely with the County's Commissioner of Human Rights. On September 8th, 2020, the Mayor of the City of White Plains issued an official Proclamation in support of CEDAW. This is great news and sets a strong example of leadership for other cities, municipalities, and counties to follow. Indeed, a ground swell of interest is percolating across the Country.

In 2019, the Columbia University Law School Human Rights Institute convened a symposium of stakeholders to discuss strategies for advancing gender equity at the local level using CEDAW. During the symposium, attendees learned that the treaty is increasingly influencing local advocacy and government action. At the time, nine cities and counties across the country had adopted CEDAW into local law and others were noted as incorporating CEDAW's principles into decision-making, including through the implementation of gender analysis tools and assessments. At the conference, Soon-Young Yoon, Chair of the Board at the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), UN Representative for the International Alliance of Women, and former Chair of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, [stated](#), "The activism to advance women's rights at the local level demonstrates how the Beijing Platform and the Sustainable Development Goals can be put into practice."



As of this writing, according to Cities for CEDAW, 41 cities or counties across the US either have a CEDAW resolution or ordinance, with many [more](#) exploring the topic. So, are the proverbial planets finally aligning? Is the groundswell of interest and activism to support, enact, and implement the principles of CEDAW growing?

Is this merely a glass-half-full or glass-half-empty situation? What I do know is this: the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare so many inadequacies in the country's and the world's infrastructure for the public good, the ability of processes and systems needed for communities to flourish, and—even more basic—has brought into question the foundational values on which our society is based. One of the singularly most important of these values is equity for all. By continuing to advance and amplify CEDAW using many ready-made tools already [available](#), the US can lead by example, and show that we believe in those, and other, values so important to our shared humanity.

Call to Action:

Hopefully, it has become clear that the principles of CEDAW should be “a given,” with every city and county across the United States adopting them—preferably as enforceable ordinances, but resolutions, as a minimum. Raina talked about the power of women using their voices. **We all need to use our voices.** In 2020, as we mark the beginning of a new decade, there simply is no rational or acceptable reason for anyone to argue against the equality of people who represent 50% of our population--women. We need to make up for lost ground and preserve our credibility and respect in the eyes of current and future generations. When I was an executive at PepsiCo, I had a manager who would routinely say, “*if you want people to do something, make it easy for them—remove the obstacles.*” In that context, the list below is intended to help myriad stakeholder groups remove obstacles to advocating for, and advancing, the principles of CEDAW.

<p><i>If you are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of Congress • State, County, or City Legislators • Other policy makers or those who influence them 	<p><i>This is what you can do:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start by reading this two-page summary of the principles of CEDAW • Introduce and/or support the introduction of legislation which aligns with the principles of CEDAW, informed by this Resolution from the US Conference of Mayors • Introduce and/or support the introduction of local ordinances, following this template of provisions
<p><i>If you are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of not-for-profit organizations • Trade or civic organizations • College/university academics or campus organizations • Middle or high-school educators or their students 	<p><i>This is what you can do:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start by reading the two-page summary cited above • Watch select instructional videos on the Cities for CEDAW Youtube Channel • Start a campaign, informed by this Toolkit and 10-Step “Nuts and Bolts Action Plan” • Implement the free Human Rights curriculum at RockYour World
<p><i>If you are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An individual who cares about treating women equitably and with the rights that all human beings deserve 	<p><i>This is what you can do:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use any or all of the resources above to become informed, then use your voice • Engage your local law makers at all levels (call, email) • Start a campaign to support CEDAW at change.org or another citizen activism site

About the author:

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About UNA Westchester:

We are the Westchester Chapter of The United Nations Association, a membership organization dedicated to inform, inspire, and mobilize the American people to support the ideals and vital work of the United Nations. For 77 years UNA-USA has worked to accomplish its mission through its national network of Chapters, youth engagement, advocacy efforts, education process, and public events. UNA-USA is a program of the United Nations Foundation.

Learn more about UNA-USA's programs and initiatives at

www.unawestchester.org or www.unausa.org.

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