

## **International Affairs Report January 2011**

On January 1<sup>st</sup>. 2011, a momentous occasion took place. The UN officially opened UN Women., an agency dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. The UN Women's Executive Director is former Chilean president, Michelle Bachelet. A minimum of \$500 million has been set aside to run this organization, which is a merger of four different strands: Division for the Advancement of Women, International Research and Training Institute, Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement, and Development fund for Women. During the recent Cancun Climate Change Conference, UN Women succeeded in getting 8 gender mainstreaming issues included in the Cancun Agreements. These covered issues affecting daily lives, such as: adaptation, climate finance, technology transfer, capacity-building and policy approaches.

In November, the US Senate agreed to have a Judiciary Committee hearing on the ratification of CEDAW. This is the first time in eight years that it will have a hearing. One hundred and eighty-five nations around the world have ratified this Human Rights Treaty. The U.S. is the sole industrial nation not to do so. The six other nations that have refused to sign are Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Nauru, Palau and Tonga. In a world where 70% of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty are women, our agreement would add strength to this treaty.

At the Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> TED Women Conference (technology, entertainment, design), designed to spread ideas, Hillary Clinton spoke about the need to empower women and girls and stated that this is a central tenet of American foreign policy. She discussed the facts showing that when a nation does not have equal rights for women, there is increased instability and violence against women. She spoke about different technologies that the State Department uses to empower women; including one that allows raped women in the Congo to record and transmit their testimony using mobile phones.

Another positive note is that Iran has raised the marriageable age of girls from 9 to 15. However, Iran's president, Mr. Ahmadinejad has said that the best age for girls to marry is from 16 to 18. In October, the Afghanistan women's soccer team beat NATO 1-0. This would not have been possible under the Taliban. The women had to struggle with money issues and societal attitudes, yet fought to be allowed to play. Nepal has also lifted its ban on female domestic workers traveling to the Gulf States. This acknowledges the fact that women facing desperate poverty have had to deal with unscrupulous middlemen who put them in dangerous situations, where they have been exploited sexually, physically, financially, and emotionally. Some have been sold by their recruiters. Now they can have some protections, although the problems will still exist.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, the U.S. Senate passed the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act, stating that child marriage is a human rights violation and communities need educating. The House of Representatives voted this down, claiming it could encourage abortion and that there were too many costs involved. However, in the bill there was no mention of family planning or abortion. Costs could have potentially been up to \$67 million over 4 years and would not affect direct spending or revenues. Money would have been moved from elsewhere.

In a world where more than 67 million girls under the age of 17, some as young as 10, and some even younger, are forced into marriage with older men, this bill would have had the potential to help them and assist them in getting an education and having a productive life. Domestic violence and abuse occur often with girls who married too young and are considered to have no value. Many die

in childbirth or develop fistulas (cure is a \$250 operation) that cause them to be outlawed and left to die by their society. Additionally over 800,000 girls are sex-trafficked across international borders, often sold by their parents for survival money. Education and becoming economically valuable are the best choices to change this situation.

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