

Women's Rights are Human Rights

David Sweet

Early last month people everywhere celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In Santa Cruz there was a day-long Human Rights Fair at Loudon Nelson, where hundreds of people enjoyed music, stage shows, food, tabling, an essay award ceremony, and talks by representatives of forty organizations on how they are bringing human rights to life locally. That exhilarating day, following Obama's election, seemed to me a harbinger of great things to come for both county and country.

The Declaration, drafted by a commission of the then-new United Nations under the guidance of Eleanor Roosevelt, was a beacon of hope in a war-torn world most of whose people still suffered the hardships and deprivations imposed by colonialism. Affirming the dignity, worth and equality of all persons everywhere, it specified basic economic, social and political rights to which all are entitled. Like the American Bill of Rights that partly inspired it, UDHR changed nothing right away. Rather, it invited decades of struggle and deliberation to broaden and consolidate those guarantees.

Since then, under UN auspices and with US participation, the Declaration has been elaborated through the drafting, signing and ratification of additional treaties, into an impressive body of international human rights law. Throughout that process, sadly, the US has more often been a stumbling-block than a leader or facilitator. The reason is that UDHR, and the UN itself -- feared at first as threats to our system of racial segregation -- have been "framed" by opinion-makers over the years as a Communist-inspired assault on national sovereignty, private enterprise, and "traditional family values".

Presidents have wielded UDHR to denounce foreign governments; they've browbeaten the UN into supporting American initiatives abroad. But they've been less than

wholehearted in joining with other nations to create the more just and peaceful world that Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt envisioned, and the UN was established to ensure. They've also been slow to admit that egregious violations of human rights sometimes occur here at home. This attitude of "American exceptionalism," never more evident than in President Bush, has left Team Obama with lots of unfinished diplomatic business to attend to. Fortunately, they seem to be planning decisive moves on that front from the get-go.

One key objective is Senate ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. CEDAW, signed by President Carter in 1980, has been signed and ratified by all but seven UN member states (Iran and Sudan the leading holdouts). We alone have signed but not yet ratified this treaty. Disdained by Presidents Reagan and Bush Sr., it was forwarded to the Senate by President Clinton, considered by the Foreign Relations Committee in 1994 and 2002, and stalled twice by Sen. Jesse Helms who added "reservations, understandings and declarations" that would undermine its promise of full equality.

CEDAW, like the Equal Rights Amendment, has been vigorously opposed by the Christian Right and its corporate sponsors. Passed overwhelmingly by Congress in 1972, ERA was ratified by 35 state legislatures including California's, but failed to achieve the required 38. Credit for that belongs to Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum and other "pro-life" groups formed in reaction to Roe v. Wade in 1973. They organized tens of thousands to agitate against ERA, alleging that equal rights for women meant "abortion on demand," family planning, legalized prostitution, same-sex marriage, federally mandated childcare and the "denigration of motherhood." CEDAW has been opposed for the same reasons, and because it might encourage passage of the ERA, subject Americans to decisions by international bodies, and mandate full equality in the military and workplace.

While Washington dithered, progressive grassroots activists persuaded San Francisco in 1998 to enact an ordinance implementing CEDAW there. No catastrophes ensued;

women's status continued to improve incrementally, as it has (perhaps more slowly) in other enlightened communities. But the dignity and worth of women and girls are far from established, even in "blue state" America. Pay equity is rare; rape and domestic violence are increasing; single mothers are badly up against it. Images of women advertise merchandise; women's bodies are merchandise themselves. As citizen, and as relative or friend of many women, I find that reality unacceptable. Maybe you do too.

Ratifying CEDAW won't solve those problems. Its provisions will still need to be enacted into US law. But joining the world in seeking to remove all impediments to the fulfillment of women's human potential will be a huge step. It will re-establish the credibility of our leadership in the defense of women's rights, and it will provide sharp new tools for those who strive to expand and defend them here at home.