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Treaty entreaty: How political leaders could get women's attention and support this fall

By AL.com
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By Terry O'Neill and Don Kraus

There is a lot of talk these days about the importance of the women's vote for the 2014 elections. Democrats and Republicans alike are courting women voters: Republicans are working as hard as they can to shed their anti-woman image stemming from the 2012 election cycle, while Democrats are working equally hard to shine as the party that fully supports women's equality.

President Obama is in full courtship mode, speaking out on issues like the gender wage gap, workplace discrimination and sexual assault on college campuses. As well, perhaps, he should: he arguably owes his 2008 and 2012 wins to women voters, and neglecting them may have cost Democrats the House in 2010. Numerous polls show overwhelming support for the Treaty especially among young women *and* men.

But with control of Congress again at stake, the president should do something bolder to get women voters' attention. One possibility is to call on the Senate to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or the Women's Equality Treaty.

Don Kraus

The Women's Equality Treaty is a landmark international agreement on fundamental human rights and equality for women everywhere. The United States helped draft the pact in the 1970s and signed it in 1981, but remains one of only seven countries that have not ratified it--along with Iran, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and the two small Pacific Island nations of Palau and Tonga. These are embarrassing bedfellows.

The United States has a long history of leading the global drive for women's rights. Eleanor Roosevelt helped ensure that the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights included provisions on gender equality. The State Department, especially under former Secretary Hillary Clinton, worked to empower women in development, economics, post-conflict resolution and more.

But it hasn't been enough. One in every three of the world's women has suffered violent assault at some point in her life, and women worldwide are denied equal rights to education, health care, work, legal status, and more.

Even in the United States, problems like domestic violence, sexual assault, and workplace discrimination disproportionately plague women. Ratifying this agreement will not fix these or any other inequalities by itself, but it will give women's rights advocates another tool to use in pressing legislators and employers to fix them, using our usual democratic processes.

And because we have not joined 187 other countries in ratifying the Women's Equality Treaty, America is blocked from many conversations about women's rights around the world.

The UN's committee on the Women's Equality Treaty, for example, oversees treaty implementation, issuing nonbinding recommendations for action toward gender equality. But committee members can only come from countries that are parties to the treaty. This means we cannot contribute our wide experience or our otherwise strong UN presence to promoting the rights of women.

Until we ratify this agreement, we can't use all the tools available to combat violence and discrimination based on gender. And the treaty is just that – a tool. Some argue that ratification would threaten U.S. sovereignty, but that's a red herring – the United States has ratified similar treaties under presidents of both parties with no such problem.

The real problem is that some senators flat-out oppose equal rights for women, and President Obama could galvanize women voters by saying so. In an election year, a ratification campaign would ignite instant controversy and excitement. But it might also generate bipartisan support in the Senate, where two-thirds of those present and voting would be needed for ratification.

As the president is routinely pointing out these days, U.S. women still are only paid an average of 77 cents for every dollar paid to a man, and they make up only 19 percent of members of Congress. We believe that voters deserve a clear opportunity to know which of their senators truly are willing to make women's equality a priority.

Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager shot by the Taliban for defending girls' education, said, "Some people only ask others to do something. I believe that, why should I wait for someone else? Why don't I take a step and move forward?" Calling for Senate ratification of the Women's Equality Treaty would be that step for President Obama.

(Terry O'Neill, President , National Organization for Women and Don Kraus, CEO, Citizens for Global Solutions.)



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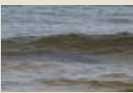
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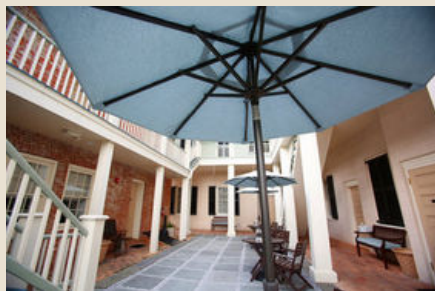
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