

## Women and Children First

The ANA, nurses work to promote ratification of two UN treaties.

The ANA and its state-based constituent members associations (CMAs) have a shared history of fighting for the basic rights of vulnerable populations. And nurse leaders renewed their commitment to this fight when they approved two important resolutions this June while serving on the House of Delegates, the ANA's broad policy-setting body.

One resolution aims to improve the lives of women and children throughout the world by promoting the U.S. ratification of two United Nations (UN) conventions. Another is intended to stop the execution in Libya of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian physician who were wrongly convicted of spreading HIV at a hospital there.

"As nurses, we need to understand how important the ratification of the UN conventions is," says Cheryl Peterson, MS, RN, senior policy fellow in the ANA's Department of Nursing Practice and Policy. "For nurses and women in developing countries, these conventions become positive, concrete tools that they can use to persuade their governments to adhere to certain basic standards in their treatment of women and children. But when the richest country in the world does not ratify a convention, it sends a message to governments around the world about our country's commitment."

Abuses of women and children are routinely reported in newspapers and are detailed on the Web sites of several human rights organizations:

- As many as 300,000 children—some as young as eight years old—are forced to serve in government forces or armed rebel groups. Many are easy targets for recruitment because they're often orphans or refugees, uneducated, and live in extreme poverty, according to Human Rights Watch.
- In developing nations, an estimated 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work in often dangerous conditions. Human Rights Watch reports that child labor runs the spectrum, from "four-year-olds tied to rug looms to keep them from running away, to 17-year-olds helping out on the family farm."
- Women make up 70% of those living in extreme poverty, and two-thirds of those 15 years and older are illiterate, according to the International Council of Nurses (ICN).
- While covering the recent international AIDS conference in Thailand, National Public Radio spotlighted the rise of AIDS among particularly poor, rural women in India. These women are blamed when they become infected with HIV after being forced to have unprotected sex with their husbands, who've been away from home for months as migrant workers.

### TAKING ACTION

Long interested in the welfare of children, Winnie Kennedy, RN, wanted to reach beyond her efforts at work and within her community. After learning more about a UN treaty promoting children's rights worldwide, she

developed a resolution that she took to the floor of the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) convention in the fall of 2003. That measure, which NYSNA members approved, called on the state organization to urge the U.S. government to ratify the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

That convention, unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, spells out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. Countries that ratify it commit themselves to protecting and ensuring those rights. Currently, 192 countries have ratified the treaty; the United States and Somalia are the only holdouts.

NYSNA then submitted a broader measure to the national House of Delegates, which mainly comprises representatives from the ANA's state nurses associations. Almost unanimously approved by the house of delegates, the resolution calls on the ANA to support U.S. ratification of the children's rights treaty, as well as the UN Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The latter is a comprehensive treaty that establishes rights for women in areas not previously subject to international standards. It covers a large range of issues, including affirmative action, sexual harassment, reproductive rights, and economic empowerment. Again, the United States is one of only a handful of countries that has not ratified the treaty. (The United States has signed both conventions but has not taken the crucial step of ratification that would hold them accountable to the stan-

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dards. Ratification of a treaty requires a two-thirds majority vote in the U.S. Senate.)

## **EFFORTS AND EXPLANATIONS**

This is not the first time the ANA and nurses have tried to influence U.S. lawmakers to take a global position on women's and children's rights. For example, in 1998, the ANA's House of Delegates discussed a wide range of issues when considering a resolution on the international health rights of women and children. It subsequently asked, among other recommendations, that the ANA work for the ratification of CEDAW.

"While working with the Clinton administration, we were really close to having enough support in the Senate to get CEDAW ratified," Peterson says. "But with the current administration and much of the Senate, this issue has fallen off the legislative radar."

Several explanations have been bandied about as to why U.S. ratification of CEDAW and the children's rights treaty stalled.

Karen Ballard, MA, RN, director of special projects at NYSNA, says that, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, the United States couldn't consider the children's rights treaty because it can act on only one treaty at a time. (The treaty they were still pondering was CEDAW.)

NYSNA also received a letter from the U.S. Department of State in June that contended that ratifying the UN convention on children's rights could interfere with the rights of states to determine how they address juvenile justice, access to education, and health care services.

Kennedy says the states' rights issue has fueled some opposition to the treaty. The convention on children's rights, for example, speaks against the death penalty

for children, who are defined as those below the age of 18 years. Yet there seems to be a growing trend in the United States of treating juvenile offenders more like adults, she says. Treaty opponents also have suggested that the convention could interfere with parental control over children.

"But the convention can't change laws in individual countries," Kennedy says. "It does, however, set important standards."

Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez, RN, who also pushed for approval of the children's and women's rights resolution at the House of Delegates and the children's rights resolution in NYSNA, believes the current administration is blocking the ratification of the treaties for both ideological and economic reasons.

"Corporate interests are served when the cheap labor of vulnerable women and children is exploited in sweatshops," Sheridan-Gonzalez says.

She adds that although the UN conventions aren't end-all solutions to human rights abuses against women and children, they are deterrents and serve as important stepping stones toward a more humanitarian international community.

Sheridan-Gonzalez and Ballard also say that nurses can play an important role in educating their colleagues, policymakers, and the public about human rights abuses and the need for ratification of the UN treaties—considering the level of trust that the public has in nurses as a group.

"The United States should be at the forefront of social justice, and social justice has always been an inherent part of nursing," Ballard says.

Peterson adds that the international nursing community—primarily through the ICN—has been extremely active in

researching, educating and campaigning for the rights of women and children.

For example, the ICN currently is promoting an international campaign called "The Girl Child Project: Mobilising Nurses for the Health of Urban Girls." A major goal of the project is to encourage nurses to help develop strategies and guidelines for policies, programs, and services that reduce health risks of young girls and promote health public policy. (More information on ICN activities is available at the [www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch).)

## **AN INTERNATIONAL CRISIS**

The ANA's House of Delegates also passed a resolution that asked the association to continue urging U.S. government officials to maintain pressure on the Libyan government not only to repeal the death sentences of five nurses and a physician but also to set them free.

Prior to the House of Delegates meeting, the ANA called on both President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell to intervene on behalf of the six health professionals, who were arrested in 1999 and falsely accused of spreading HIV in a children's hospital in Benghazi, Libya.

World-renowned HIV expert Luc Montagnier testified during the trial that the HIV outbreak began before the six started working at the hospital and was more likely caused by poor hygiene and the reuse of infected equipment, such as needles.

"The ANA urges you to immediately communicate with Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi and other officials within the Libyan government to speak out against this injustice," says ANA president Barbara A. Blakeney, MS, APRN, BC, ANP, in letters to Bush and Powell. ▼