**TRAILBLAZING WOMEN IN DIPLOMACY: MEET CEDAW'S NEWEST APPOINTEE, DR. BRENDA AKIA**

Dr. Brenda Akia took oath as a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee Member in Geneva. She thanked all UN CEDAW Member States for this mandate.

1. **What exactly is the CEDAW Committee?**

The CEDAW committee is a United Nations treaty body mechanism comprised of 23 independent experts that monitor how Member States implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Convention). The CEDAW Committee sits in Geneva and the 23 experts are elected in New York by Member States to serve for a renewable term of four years. The CEDAW Convention, adopted in 1979 and ratified by 189 Member States gives the CEDAW Committee the mandate to scrutinize efforts of Member States in implementing the Convention by reporting to the body at regular intervals.

The CEDAW Convention is the international tool on women’s rights that puts legal obligations on the 189 Member States to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in all areas of life, ensure women’s full development and advancement so they can enjoy all their human rights and freedoms in the same way as men. This includes women having equal access to opportunities and services, including health care, education, reliable electricity and clean energy, employment, and decision-making systems.

1. **What inspired you to dedicate your career to advancing women's rights and gender equality and which specific responsibilities will you have as a CEDAW Committee Member?**

The desire to be part of the solution to address the numerous injustices, human rights abuses, international crimes, and discrimination in all spheres that girls and women face in peace time, conflict, post-conflict, and humanitarian situations. Throughout my life’s journey and work experience in different parts of the world, witnessing what discriminatory stereotypes and patriarchy can do to girls and women to curtail their full potential, right from denying them basic education, forcing them to get married at the age nine (9), seeing the disproportionate impacts of climate change, war or displacement on girls and women, to telling them that their voices or opinions do not matter both at home and in decision-making systems strongly motivates me to be part of the solution. This is what motivated me to study law, including pursuing a PhD in law just so I could use the law to join others in protecting women’s rights, closing gender gaps, pushing for accountability and justice, and working to get abusive and discriminatory laws and policies changed. I am also greatly inspired by many of my friends, mentors, colleagues and family that are doing their part in making the world a better place.

**Specific Responsibilities on the Committee:**

1. Country Rapporteur: As country rapporteur, I lead the country taskforce during the constructive dialogue with a Member State. In May 2024, I was the country rapporteur for Rwanda, in February 2024, I was country rapporteur for The Niger, and in the upcoming October 2024 session, I will be country rapporteur for Benin.
2. Alternate focal point on Follow-Ups: Together with the follow-up rapporteur and following the constructive dialogue with State parties, request the State parties to provide information within two years on steps taken to implement four specific recommendations provided in the concluding observations. When the State party provides the information in writing, we review and assess it to determine how the recommendations have been implemented.
3. Alternate focal point on climate change: Together with the focal point on climate change, engage in climate change and disaster risk management dialogues, training, and negotiations with committee members, other treaty bodies, State parties, conferences on climate change, UN agencies, civil society.
4. **You mentioned thanking all UN CEDAW Member States for this mandate. Can you elaborate on the significance of their support for your role?**

Under Article 17 of the CEDAW Convention, every State Party may nominate one person among its nationals to join the committee. The nominated candidates are elected by secret ballot by the State Parties. This means two things: one, without Uganda, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and Ministry of Foreign Affairs believing in my candidature, selecting me as the candidate, and strongly supporting my candidature all through the election process, including MOFA and Uganda’s Mission to the African Union seeking my African Union endorsement, I would not be on the committee. The team effort and the ability of MOFA and Uganda’s Mission in New York to rally the support we needed was beyond humbling.

Two, the State Parties voted for me to join the committee with the second highest votes out of twenty-three candidates gave me an opportunity to serve in a multilateral system — a system that still does not have many women. The election officers and the Ambassadors I had bilateral meetings with not only taught me about efforts their countries were taking to protect women’s rights and achieve gender equality but through their technical questions, challenged me into intellectual discussions with them that did not leave me the same. Therefore, if they had not seen my potential and value addition to the work of the CEDAW Committee, I would definitely not be on the committee.

1. **It is often claimed that Women in Africa face a lot of discrimination in a number of ways. Is this true and what are your immediate priorities during your work with the CEDAW Committee? Are there particular areas of discrimination against women that you aim to focus on during your tenure?**

From my global work experience on women and human rights and with my current role on the committee making international jurisprudence on women’s rights, I have the unique opportunity to have a 360 view of the global context of women’s rights and gender equality. So globally and not only in Africa, women continue to face a lot of discrimination in all spheres, both in public and private. The CEDAW Convention is forty-five years old but today more than ever, we are witnessing a growing backlash against gender equality and women’s rights. For example, statistics are showing us that gender-based violence, including digital violence continues to rise, that in current conflicts and humanitarian situations, women continue to be excluded from peace processes and conflict resolution, and that girls and women are still not accessing science and technology education and services equally as men which also could lead to artificial intelligence algorithms being discriminative against women. In the case of Africa, although we have seen some improvements in women’s rights, including political participation and enactment of progressive women’s rights legislation, gender gaps remain and women continue to face discrimination and unequal access to education, health care, including sexual and reproductive health care services, employment, property ownership, access to justice, energy, technology, and participation in decision-making systems. Different factors explain this, including weak enforcement of legislation on women’s rights and gender equality and patriarchy that perpetuates gender inequalities and stereotypes that limit women from fully enjoying their rights. It is therefore important that we all do not relent to the cause of getting women reclaim their 50:50 access to opportunities to enable them fully to enjoy their rights and reach their full potential.

Priorities and focus on during tenure

On the committee, our priorities are shaped and guided by the CEDAW Convention, General Recommendations passed by the committee and the concluding observations and recommendations. In October 2024, the committee will launch CEDAW General Recommendation (GR) 40 chaired by H.E Nicole Ameline on women’s equal and inclusive representation in all decision-making systems. This GR is critical because it recognizes that women continue to be excluded from decision-making and that the targets for thirty percent representation of women in decision-making conveys a message that inequality between men and women is justifiable. It therefore calls on State parties to make 50:50 parity between women and men as a starting point and universal norm in all decision-making systems at all governance levels, including private and public spheres. We also have an upcoming GR on stereotypes chaired by H.E Marion Bethel and H.E Bandana Rana whose development will begin in January 2025.

However, as the alternate focal point for climate change, one of my priorities is to bring visibility to the need for State parties to take concrete steps to increase climate financing to meet the specific adaptation and mitigation needs of women and girls and to take concrete steps to ensure equal and universal access to reliable and adequate electricity and clean energy particularly in rural and agricultural areas. This is because half of Africa lacks access to electricity in their homes yet reliable electricity is fundamental for economic growth and achieving gender equality because it helps African countries to eradicate poverty, achieve women’s economic empowerments, improve health care, education, security, and utilization of technology, reduce air pollution, ensure food and water security, and support women-led businesses and livelihoods.

1. **What do you perceive as the most pressing challenges in the fight against discrimination against women globally and what effective ways do you plan to address these challenges within the framework of CEDAW?**

Challenges in the fight against discrimination against women globally differ from region to region. However, some of the pressing challenges in the fight against discrimination, include the lack of women’s equal and inclusive representation in all decision-making systems in both private and public spheres, including in peace negotiations and conflict resolution which means that half of the world’s population (women) do not get the opportunity to develop solutions that meet their specific needs and those of the community/citizens. Another challenge common to most regions is the lack of financing to effectively support technical, administrative, judicial, programmatic, and legislative measures to address and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. In some regions, it is patriarchy, a system of power that is deeply embedded in existing political, social, economic, and cultural structures perpetuates intersecting discriminatory social norms and practices that hinder women’s equal and full enjoyment of their fundamental rights.

The most effective ways to address these challenges within the CEDAW framework is through joint efforts and continued dialogue with State parties, the African Union, and partners working to implement the CEDAW Convention. By being on the committee, continue to work closely with my colleagues on the committee, other UN treaty bodies, and the African Union mechanisms that advance women’s rights to ensure that State parties effectively adopt measures required for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Also, through engaging and working closely with the private sector entities, civil society, UN agencies, women, and women rights defenders on how best to utilize the CEDAW Committee to have State parties account as to how they are giving effect to the provisions of the CEDAW Convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

1. **In your view, what has been the most significant impact of the CEDAW since its inception and how do you envision CEDAW evolving to address emerging issues related to women's rights?**

The CEDAW Convention is referred to as the international bill of rights for women mainly because of its significant impact on women’s rights since it was adopted in 1979 to date. This is because most of the advancements in women’s rights and the rights and freedoms that all women enjoy today in our daily lives is because of the CEDAW Convention and the work of the CEDAW Committee. Many women can go to school, see a doctor, join politics, own or inherit property, possess mobile phones, computers or access the internet, and seek justice or legal remedies because the Convention puts legal obligations on State parties to ensure that they take all measures to ensure women enjoy all their rights. Judges, prosecutors, human and women’s right practitioners cite the CEDAW Convention in their work to enforce women’s rights and fundamental freedoms. Women around the world are enjoying their rights and having avenues to demand for justice in cases of violations because the CEDAW Convention has given them a legal basis to hold their governments accountable and to demand better. This has resulted in many countries reforming or adopting national legislation to strengthen protection of women’s rights and ensure elimination of discrimination against women. Since I began my mandate in January 2023, I have seen first-hand how State parties have implemented the recommendations of the committee. In a nutshell, to mention country specific impacts of the CEDAW Convention and the Committee’s work would not do justice to the monumental impacts the Convention and the Committee have had on women’s rights globally.

Addressing Emerging Women’s Rights issues:

Based on the rules of interpretation in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the CEDAW Convention remains relevant as a legal basis and tool to address emerging and contemporary issues related to women’s rights and discrimination, including digital violence or technology/artificial intelligence related rights violations and the gendered impacts of climate change. So, through our constructive dialogues with State Parties, the Committee tasks the 189 State parties to demonstrate how they are implementing the Convention to address emerging and contemporary issues on women’s rights and how they are working to bring positive change in women’s daily lives. Through our concluding observation and recommendations and General Recommendations, we recommend to State parties possible concrete measures that they can take concerning the articles or themes in the Convention to advance women’s rights, gender equality and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women in peace time, conflict, post-conflict, and humanitarian situations and in both public and private spheres. To also address emerging issues on women’s rights, the Committee based on the Optional Protocol to the Convention initiates inquiries into situations of grave or systematic violations of women’s rights and receives communications from individuals or groups of individuals who claim that their rights under the Convention have been violated.

1. **How important is collaboration with other UN bodies, NGOs, and member states in achieving CEDAW's goals and can you share any specific plans or strategies for enhancing such collaborations?**

Collaboration with other UN bodies, the African Union, women, women rights defenders, NGOs, and Member States is the foundation of the CEDAW Committee’s work. This is because the Committee recognizes that the effective implementation of the CEDAW Convention to achieve gender equality, protect women’s rights, eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and to meet the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Africa Vision 2063 targets is based on collaboration. That is why before every constructive dialogue with a State party, we have physical or virtual meetings with different partners, including women, women rights defenders, UN agencies, national human rights institutions, and civil society.

1. **What are your long-term aspirations for gender equality and women's rights beyond your tenure with the CEDAW Committee?**

I have worked to document, investigate, and monitor human and women’s rights abuses, injustices, and international crimes and push for their accountability and justice for victims/survivors since I was in third year of law school at Makerere University. Having the opportunity to do so right now in a multilateral system that enables me to be part of making international jurisprudence on women’s rights reinforces to me that working to advance women and human rights and accountability for rights abuses and international crimes is what I am called to do. So, I will continue to do the same beyond my tenure on the CEDAW Committee.