

# Speaking for the Women Who Can't

By Ann Farmer

In her role at the State Department, Ambassador Melanne Verveer focuses passionately on the political, economic, and social empowerment of women, and the American Bar Association (ABA) has recently communicated its desire to team up with her and the United Nations (UN) in helping eliminate violence against women in combat zones.

Ever since she was tapped to be the first U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues in the State Department—signaling the heightened status that



*Melanne Verveer is the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues.*

President Barack Obama and his administration accord to international women's issues—Verveer has drawn attention to what she sees as a global epidemic of violence against women.

“The scale and savagery of human rights violations committed against women and girls is

nothing short of a humanitarian tragedy,” she said in November 2010, testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law to elicit members’ support for the ratification of CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Thirty years have passed since President Jimmy Carter signed CEDAW, which affirms women’s equality and the fundamental principles of human rights. But CEDAW, also known as the Women’s Treaty, has yet to be ratified by Congress, where it requires a two-thirds majority vote. Significant opposition and maneuvering by conservative Senate members have kept the treaty from being brought before the entire Senate for a vote. Consequently, the United States stands with just six other countries—Sudan, Iran, Somalia, and the three small Pacific Island nations of Nauru, Palau, and Tonga—in its refusal to ratify the treaty.

“Obviously, we never stop trying,” Verveer said in a recent interview. She considers the ratification of the Women’s Treaty a top priority of hers and a key instrument for reducing the level of violence perpetrated against women around the world. Speaking before the Senate subcommittee, she addressed the issues of sex trafficking, acid attacks, and “honor killings.” She described the neglect and mistreatment of girls and women in countries where they are treated as secondary citizens, not entitled to the same education or job opportunities as men.

“In some parts of the world,” she gravely explained to the subcommit-

tee members, “such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, and Sudan, women are attacked as part of a deliberate and coordinated strategy of armed conflict, where rape is used as a tool of war.”

Since 1994, hundreds of thousands of women in the Congo region have been raped by soldiers and rebels on both sides of the conflict. The rapes are viewed as a systematic effort to undermine and destroy the communities. UNICEF, which compiles information on these atrocities, reported at least 657 documented cases of sexual violence involving women and girls during September and October 2010 along the Congo/Angola border, when thousands of illegal Congolese were being expelled from Angola.

Victims who have survived the violations have talked publicly about their nightmarish assaults. The UN-sponsored program Breaking the Silence galvanized women to speak openly for the first time about how they were violently gang raped or ruptured by guns, knives, and bayonets thrust into them. Some women have been killed by gunshots into their vaginas. Survivors are often infected with HIV or suffer permanent fistulas in addition to the psychological scarring. Females from all age groups have been victimized, including babies and very young adolescents. Afterward, many are rejected from their own families as being “unclean.”

## **ABA Deepens Its Involvement**

The ABA, which officially endorsed the United States’ ratification of CEDAW in 1984, has now officially thrown its support behind

the movement to stop the state-sponsored sexual violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere.

During an October 2010 meeting, the ABA Board of Governors adopted a policy that permits the ABA to engage in discussions with the UN and other organizations about measures that would impose state responsibility for the gender-based attacks. The new policy also allows the ABA, which has long shared its legal expertise with the UN on different matters, to help create a system for making reparations to victims from offenders and develop a donor pool to fund the medical, psychological, and other needs of the victims.

“We are delighted to have a close, cooperative working relationship with Ambassador Verveer and Ambassador Rice [referring to U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice] to move forward on what the ABA thinks is an important fund to support research and the formulating of ways to deal with the situation,” says former ABA President Carolyn Lamm, of Washington, D.C., the current ABA representative to the UN who pushed for the adoption of this new policy.

“We think there should be state responsibility,” Lamm continues. “If the state directs this kind of violence as a weapon of war, then the state should make reparations.”

She adds that “if they stand by and let it happen,” the state may be culpable for the attacks under certain international treaties.

Judy Perry Martinez of New Orleans, who is the ABA’s alternate representative to the UN, says the ABA is currently setting up a fund to research what legal strategies have already been employed and to investigate what can be done next to resolve the situation. Her employer, Northrop Grumman Corporation, has already committed \$20,000 to the fund.

All of this sounds positive to Verveer, who looks forward to further discussions with ABA leadership on this matter. “It is really good news to know that the ABA will be that much more engaged at this level,” she

## What Is CEDAW?

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.

The Convention defines discrimination against women as “. . . any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

By accepting the Convention, states commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, including:

- to incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws, and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women;
- to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and
- to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations, or enterprises.

The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women’s equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life—including the right to vote and to stand for election—as well as education, health, and employment. States parties agree to take all appropriate measures, including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Convention is the only human rights treaty that affirms the reproductive rights of women and targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations. It affirms women’s rights to acquire, change, or retain their nationality and the nationality of their children. States parties also agree to take appropriate measures against all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of women.

Countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations.

Source: [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm).

says, noting how the ABA has already been involved in a number of programs sponsored by the State Department, including a law clinic based in the Congo, where ABA lawyers are helping usher rape cases through the judicial system using mobile courts.

Verveer says she makes a point of inviting ABA field workers to her office to share their experiences. “It’s always important to hear because it has such an impact on policy and on future programs,” she says. “The ABA has on-the-ground, first-hand, extremely important experience to bring to the table as these discussions are taking place and will continue to take place about the best kinds of

applications of intervention that need to happen,” she emphasizes.

In addition, Verveer says that at a recent meeting of the UN Security Council, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced steps toward a national action plan to incorporate all facets of the U.S. government in ensuring that women in areas of conflict are participating in negotiations, in the peace process, in conflict resolution discussions, and in reconstruction efforts.

“And obviously the role of the judicial system, the Rule of Law aspects, are really important to that,” Verveer says. “I can see the ABA as

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## Penny Willrich: Training a New Generation of Lawyers


Former Arizona Superior Court Judge Penny Willrich planned to stay on the bench for 20 years, but cut it short by a decade in 2005 when she was offered a professorship at the newly founded Phoenix School of Law.

Willrich, 56, has been in private practice, worked as a legal aid lawyer, and served as assistant director of Arizona's children and family services agency. What drew her to the school was its mission: graduating "practice-prepared" lawyers to work in underserved communities. Hired to teach contracts, she found herself running the school's legal writing program because "they needed someone to get

the program going," she says.

Although some might be disturbed by that kind of informality, Willrich finds it exhilarating. "Building an academic institution is one of the most exciting jobs I've had in my career," she exclaims, noting with pride that the school received ABA accreditation in 2010, soon after the graduation of its third class. "It's really rewarding to see [students] pass the bar and get sworn in."

Willrich is also working on a Ph.D. in criminal justice from Capella University in Minneapolis (an online school) and can't envision leaving academia except for what she calls a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "There's never been a black woman on our court of appeals or the Arizona

Supreme Court," she points out. Until then, "teaching is my home." 

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## CORRECTIONS

The article "The Difference Even One Woman Makes on an Appellate Bench" in the Summer 2010 issue incorrectly referred to the Infinity Project of the Center of Women and Public Policy at the University of Minnesota as the Omega Project.

The Lockwood Group LLC, referenced in the article "Consultants Have It All—Service to the Profession and a Human Connection" in the Fall 2010 issue, was founded by Karen Lockwood in May 2009 in Washington, D.C., not Camden, New Jersey.

*Perspectives* regrets the errors.

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## SPEAKING FOR THE WOMEN WHO CAN'T

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being real important to all of that because of its expertise. I think there are many ways for us to work together with the pool of talent that the ABA represents."

### Equality First and Last

Verveer has long advocated for women's equality. In 2000, she cofounded Vital Voices Global Partnership, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., that works internationally developing and unleashing women's leadership potential. Before that she served as executive vice president of People for the American Way, a civil rights and constitutional liberties organization based in Washington, D.C.

While serving as chief of staff to former First Lady Hillary Clinton, Verveer accompanied her to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, when Clinton stood before representatives from 189 governments and emphatically ran down a litany of abuses directed against women—from bride burnings in India to female gen-

ital mutilation in Africa—proclaiming each of them violations of women's rights and, therefore, human rights.


"As she went through each one of them," Verveer says, "the applause got louder and louder, and they were pounding on the table, until there was this incredible crescendo recognizing that, once and for all, it needed to be said that women's rights were human rights."

In her current post at the State Department, Verveer continues to work closely with the secretary of state. She says Clinton always takes time from her hectic schedule to outline new ideas and the kinds of follow-up she would like to see regarding the numerous projects aimed at advancing women and girls in the world—including increased access to health care, jobs, and education.

Many of the Obama administration's major global development initiatives—which include climate change, global health, and the enhancement of agricultural productivity—have a strong women's component. "Women are the majority of farmers around the

world," Verveer says. "So as we ramp up this initiative, we need to focus on the kinds of needs and considerations that women farmers have.

"There is much to be done," she continues. "But it's with recognition that we won't have the kind of outcomes we want to see around the world for men and women, and for boys and girls—and for a better world in general—unless we have this kind of focus and integration."

In her speeches, Verveer often reiterates that "no country can get ahead if half of its people are left behind." Gender equality, she adds, would also result in less violence against women. "They would have standing in their families so they wouldn't be violated either inside the home or outside the home," she says. "So it is gender equality, it is women's rights, and that is the heart of it all." 

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