

## **Women's International League for Peace and Freedom**

### **REFORMING THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODY SYSTEM:**

Focusing on enhancing its monitoring role

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The UN Treaty Body system achieved important developments for the promotion and the protection of human rights, providing an avenue for holding states accountable through reporting and communications procedures. The treaty body system, however, cannot monitor implementation effectively without the will of states to comply with their reporting obligations. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom has a concern with the effective, careful reform of the UN at large and with the improvement treaty body system in particular. Following, are some findings WILPF has identified regarding the principal weaknesses of the UN human rights Treaty system with particular focus on the issue of non-reporting and ratification.

It is important to acknowledge the positive role that reporting procedures have had in bringing national legislation in line with international human rights standards. Thus, the human rights treaty system must safeguard its continuation and address the problems and challenges it faces. In a commentator's words, after over thirty years of functioning, the system has developed so rapidly, "that it has problems of which human rights proponents in earlier eras could only have dreamed. Those problems are certainly considerable, but they must be viewed against the background of the historical evolution of the systems."<sup>1</sup> Our recommendations today are presented with the hope of strengthening the human rights treaty system and supporting this evolution process. We also welcome the efforts of the High Commissioner to enhance the effectiveness of the human rights treaty system; however, has a reserved view on the proposal to create a single, unified treaty body.

#### **Problems and Challenges:**

Currently the human rights treaty system faces four main challenges:

- a) The 'chronic' failure of State Parties to report (or report on time).
- b) The significant backlog of reports to be considered facing treaty bodies (hereinafter TB), which needs to be addressed in conjunction with the non-reporting problem; since the system would collapse if all State Parties complied with their reporting obligations.
- c) The lack of effective and harmonized follow-up procedures.
- d) The persistent failure of states to ratify human rights treaties.
- e) The question of unifying the system.

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<sup>1</sup> P Alston, "Beyond 'Them' and 'Us' Putting Treaty Body Reform into Perspective," in *The Future of UN Human Rights Treaty Monitoring*, ed. P Alston and J. Crawford (CUP, 2000), 522.

## A. Non-Reporting

1. Failure to report has been mainly attributed to the “strain that reporting requirements put on the financial and human resources”<sup>2</sup> of States parties.

2. While easing the reporting strain on State parties is a priority, a cautionary fact should be noted: The issue of non-reporting must be considered within context. Facilitating the reporting process for developing states will not solve all non-reporting problems. An average of 22% of overdue reports belongs to States parties that are from the high and upper-middle-income countries.<sup>3</sup> This means non-reporting is not only an issue of overall lack of resources.

### 3. Proposals:

The Secretary General’s reports<sup>4</sup> on the matter have focused on a) the standardization of the varied reporting requirements and coordination among committees; and b) the proposal for allowing each state to produce a single report on the implementation of the full range of provisions of the human rights treaties to which it is party. The High Commissioner has proposed the creation of a unified treaty body to replace the structure of single-standing treaty bodies.

Reactions to these proposals are varied. WILPF firmly believes that any action towards reform of reporting guidelines should safeguard the quality and in-depth examination of each committee’s rights mandates, but also respond to the reality of the existing cross-cutting and general issues such as gender and require that all data submitted be disaggregated by sex. Therefore, we favour the approach of harmonizing reporting guidelines and procedures within these parameters rather than centralizing the functions of the committees into a single treaty body. We think that the proposal for a unified treaty body is positive and would address other challenges to the system, but it is not justified or necessary to address the issue of non-reporting specifically.

Treaty Bodies have generally agreed on the concept of changing working methods in order to alleviate the reporting burdens on states, but there has been some controversy regarding the proposal of having a single report. Committee Chairpersons expressed opposition to this idea, mostly due to concerns that a) State parties would avoid in-depth reporting on the implementation of their obligations to specific treaties; and b) a single report may increase rather than alleviate the reporting burden on States parties.

Treaty Bodies have considered the alternatives and, as reported by Kamel Filali, designated rapporteurs of inter-committee meetings, “the question of a unified report had already been discarded and replaced by a report to be split in two parts.”<sup>5</sup> Such report

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<sup>2</sup> "Background Note on the Secretary General's Proposals for Reform of the Treaty Body System," (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2003). paragraph 15.

<sup>3</sup> "Background Note on the Secretary General's Proposals for Reform of the Treaty Body System," para 15.

<sup>4</sup> "Strengthening of the United Nations: An Agenda for Further Change," (UN Secretary-General (A/57/387)). paras.52-54. and " In Larger Freedom -- Towards Security, Development and Human Rights for All," (UN Secretary-General Report, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> UN Information Services, *Press Release: Human Rights Committee Discusses Possible Reform of Treaty Body Reporting Process* available from <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2005/hrct665.html>.

would be comprised of a core document and a treaty-specific section<sup>6</sup>. In considering the adoption of a core document, committees must define the precise content of core documents to prevent them from expanding into a single report or replacing treaty-specific content. As well, Committees should consider which issues should be streamlined while making sure there is a venue for in-depth consideration elsewhere (for example, gender would be mainstreamed, but also other issues affecting women must be considered in-depth in reports submitted to CEDAW). Core documents should contain general information about the reporting State and lay out its general framework for the protection of human rights; treaty-specific information must be reported in detail under the targeted section of the overall report.

4. Non-compliance procedures is an area where there is room for improvement and further exploration. Treaty bodies could:

- a. Establish automatic rescheduling of examination in the absence of periodic reports.<sup>7</sup>
- b. Schedule states with longest records of overdue reports.<sup>8</sup> This initiative must be paired with dialogues with states regarding the reasons for non-compliance and technical assistance for the drafting of reports if needed.
- c. Ensure that if a state is given technical assistance in producing reports, that it be automatically scheduled to report that same period.<sup>9</sup>
- d. Use inter-committee meetings as a forum to share experiences and best practices in order to discuss the creation of standardized procedures for dealing with non-compliance of reporting obligations<sup>10</sup>. Treaty bodies must harmonize procedures to review a State party in the absence of a report and develop parameters to determine the cases in which this action should be taken<sup>11</sup>. This will make States parties aware of potential consequences of non-reporting across treaty bodies. According to a CERD member, this committee has had a positive experience with applying review procedures; it has often resulted in prompting a report, a promise of a report or a reason for non-reporting.

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<sup>6</sup> WILPF encourages the Committees to adopt as soon as possible the “Draft Harmonized guidelines on reporting under the international human rights treaties, including guidelines on a common core document and treaty-specific targeted documents,” which emerged from the Fourth inter-committee meeting, Geneva, 20-22 June 2005 .

<sup>7</sup> Proposal already made by Asian Centre for Human Rights, *Strengthening the UN Treaty Bodies* available from <http://www.achrweb.org/Review/2004/25-04.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Proposal made by International Movement Against All forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), *Treaty Body Reform Following the UN Secretary-General's Proposals- NGO Non-Paper* available from [http://www.imadr.org/geneva/HR.treaty/ngo.non\\_paper.june.2003.html](http://www.imadr.org/geneva/HR.treaty/ngo.non_paper.june.2003.html).

<sup>9</sup> Recommendation in *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> CERD and ESCRC have reviewed States parties in the absence of a report; HRC started a procedure in 2001, CRC, CEDAW and CAT had not considered this procedure on 2001. Anne Bayefsky, *Comparative Summary of Working Methods of All Committees and Treaty Bodies* available from [http://www.bayefsky.com/methods/working\\_methods\\_summary.php](http://www.bayefsky.com/methods/working_methods_summary.php).

<sup>11</sup> Committees must consider for example, whether there is sufficient quality information on the State party and if concluding observations on this matter would be based on reliable facts.

5. Experience shows that States parties are more likely to respond to their international obligations when there is domestic pressure to do so<sup>12</sup>. National NGO's and NHRIs must be made aware of this role in order to follow states' intention to report. Perhaps the committees and the OHCHR could raise awareness among national NGO's about the scheduling of reports in each country through cooperation with UN field offices and issue reminders so as to prompt active civil society participation and pressure the state to report.

6. Because non-reporting states are most often 'non-Western' states<sup>13</sup>, treaty bodies should consider holding their meetings in different regions of the world, using already-existing UN regional centres as a venue. This may enhance domestic NGO participation in developing countries and address the perceived notion of treaty bodies as a 'western club'. As Christof Heyns and Frans Viljoen note, "treaty bodies need to travel and meet in different parts of the world. They should engage in dialogue with people where they live, not merely with the few government officials and well-endowed NGOs... [this] will give the treaty bodies unprecedented visibility and exposure in those countries and regions."<sup>14</sup> The issue of bringing the UN human rights treaty system closer to the most marginalized and vulnerable is a pressing one, as well as making human rights relevant to non-Western states. While this effort would require a significant amount of resources, it provides an excellent opportunity to create partnerships with State or regional groups to host treaty body committees and schedule the consideration of reports by states of that region. If this is not possible, providing live webcasts, television or radio broadcasts of the Committees' sessions may allow for a broader participation of civil society.

7. Some NGO's and commentators have suggested that a solution to the non-reporting problem would be to suspend the voting rights of State parties with consistent patterns of breach of the reporting obligations or to expulse them from the treaty regime<sup>15</sup>. WILPF opposes this approach, since we find it unhelpful to meeting the ultimate objective of improving human rights implementation. To suggest this would be to take the role of the human rights treaty system out of context; WILPF agrees with Philip Alston in that "an excessive emphasis on the condemnatory or punitive aspects of the treaty supervisory process only serves to obscure the fact that a large part of the overall human rights regime [such as the UNGA and UNSC] is far better equipped than the treaty bodies to undertake such activities."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this would further marginalize the people from countries that need human rights implementation the most, leaving them in an 'outer darkness.' This would be detrimental to the system; it would reduce the size of its membership and negatively affect the related goal of universal ratification. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> For example, NGO's in Romania wrote the government to complain with respect to late submission of the second CRC report. Christof Heyns and Frans Viljoen, "The Impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the Domestic Level," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2001): 523.

<sup>13</sup> In CERD, for example, see Annex V CERD Annual report to the General Assembly.

<sup>14</sup> Heyns and Viljoen, "The Impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the Domestic Level," 531.

<sup>15</sup> This was also suggested in Anne F. Bayefsky, *The UN Human Rights Treaty System : Universality at the Crossroads* (The Hague ; London: Kluwer Law International, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Alston, "Beyond 'Them' and 'Us' Putting Treaty Body Reform into Perspective."

we propose that any initiative to improve the treaty system and ratification must positively engage States parties rather than alienate them.

## **B. Treaty Body Backlog and Consideration of Reports**

**8.** Significant initiatives to improve reporting levels must be paired with reforms to prepare treaty bodies to consider a larger amount of reports. Some treaty bodies already have a backlog of reports awaiting consideration and if all states were to comply with their reporting obligations, the system would collapse. In view of this, we welcome the initiative of increasing the working capacity of two treaty bodies as they begin to function in two chambers. WILPF recommends that there be an examination of what the benefits and problems arising of this initiative are so as to determine best practices in the use of split chambers within the treaty bodies.

**9.** Committees should place more emphasis on focusing periodic reports by drawing up lists of issues drafted in a pre-sessional working group to be identified before the scheduling of reports and harmonizing these lists to avoid duplication,<sup>17</sup> as well, information about the scheduling of pre-sessional working groups should be made publicly available in advance so as to ensure that there is sufficient time for NGO input in the drafting of lists of issues. The issues should be based on recommendations of preceding concluding observations and Committees could work with NGO's to identify new areas of concern. This will make reports less lengthy and will facilitate reporting, follow up and examination of reports. Further, lists of issues should be drafted with consideration of areas that must be mainstreamed and avoid duplication with the 'core' document.

**10.** In practice, all treaty bodies consider that the submission of a report satisfies a state's reporting obligation if more than one report is overdue at the time of submission.<sup>18</sup> Committee chairs should discuss options for institutionalizing a temporal moratorium on late reports with time and use limitations so as to prevent abuse of this option. This would serve two purposes: a) it may prompt a new wave of reports from States parties for which the backlog of overdue reports weighs on their reasons for not reporting, and b) it will lessen the burden on treaty bodies for consideration of long-overdue reports.

**11.** In order to prevent overloading the Committee with country information and avoid single-issue shadow reports, it would be positive to advise NGO's to present joint shadow reports in a succinct manner, focusing on the list of issues mentioned above as well as with recommendations on new issues. The option to submit shadow reports; however, should be completely voluntary for NGO's.

**12.** In view of the limited financial and human resources when considering such lengthy reports, the OHCHR should explore enlarging the teams servicing the treaty

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<sup>17</sup> According to a 2001 report only CEDAW, HRC, ESCRC and CRC have procedures to prepare list of issues in advance of the dialogue for the state party. Bayefsky, *Comparative Summary of Working Methods of All Committees and Treaty Bodies*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

bodies and Committee members could consider enhancing the work of interns and volunteers in the area. It would also be interesting to consider strengthening the links with National Human Rights institutions by running an exchange programme with members of NHRI's, by which NHRI officials gain a perspective from the side of the OHCHR and become acquainted with the work that goes into considering reports.

### **C. Follow –Up Procedures and making concluding observations matter**

13. Treaty bodies should institutionalize follow-up procedures such as those used by the CAT, where the Committee may identify in their concluding observations some issues on which it would like to “receive information from the State party, within one year, on measures taken towards their implementation. The Committee [can] appoint a rapporteur to follow-up on the State Party’s compliance with these requests.”<sup>19</sup> Similar arrangements have been adopted recently in CERD.<sup>20</sup> Within our network, some NGO’s expressed concern over the difficulties States parties experience in reporting and that follow-up obligations may add to their reporting burden. However, it was agreed that the work of coordinators and rapporteurs would offset this strain and that without a proper follow-up procedure, reporting would lose an important implementation role.

14. States have also suggested that concluding observations should be drafted in language with concrete recommendations<sup>21</sup> and phrased in such a way that they facilitate verification of compliance, by indicating the concrete steps that need to be carried out. This would not only benefit follow-up for States parties, but also for NGO’s and NHRI’s.<sup>22</sup>

15. An area of concern is the overall impression that the human rights treaty system seems far removed from making an impact in the daily lives of those it seeks to protect. In addressing this problem, Treaty bodies should explore the full potential of national human rights institutions (NHRI’s) as described in the Paris Principles<sup>23</sup>.

- a. The OHCHR should hold more regional workshops with the purpose of supporting the work of NHRI’s and their role in reporting and follow-up. It was reported that Government officials, UN country teams, National Human Rights Institutions and NGOs have had very positive outcomes from the ones held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and Swaziland.<sup>24</sup> These should be similarly offered in regions where reporting and follow-up require them.

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<sup>19</sup> CAT, *Committee against Torture - Working Methods* available from <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/workingmethods.htm#a4>.

<sup>20</sup> See CERD A/59/18 (2004), Annex III cited in Patrick Thornberry, "Confronting Racial Discrimination: A CERD Perspective," (*Draft Paper*).

<sup>21</sup> "Pilot Workshop for Dialogue on the Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee," (Quito: HRI/TB/FU/1 (Concluding Observations/Comments)).

<sup>22</sup> Heyns and Viljoen, "The Impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the Domestic Level," 522.

<sup>23</sup> Endorsed by the UN Commission on Human Rights (Resolution 1992/54 of 3 March 1992) and the UN General Assembly (Resolution 48/134 of 20 December 1993)

<sup>24</sup> "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the General Assembly's 28th Session," (UN GA A/58/36).

- b. When providing technical assistance, engage NHRIs as mediators between the UN and the key governmental role players and work together to establish special national procedures to ensure follow-up. Encourage NHRIs to do their own follow up of concluding observations.<sup>25</sup>
- c. Emphasize the importance of translation and dissemination of reports and concluding observations, which could be done through the work of NHRIs.

**16.** Similarly, treaty bodies could do more to benefit from the work of NGO's and the media in the follow-up process. The success of follow-up depends largely on public interest in the issue and in developing countries; NGO's seem to be most effective at stimulating that interest. Treaty bodies should strengthen their relations with NGO's based in developing countries and make efforts to enhance media coverage of reports and concluding observations. The public image of reporting must be changed from a procedural, for-the-record state activity, to an excellent opportunity to identify and mend what is lacking in domestic human rights implementation before the eyes of the entire international community. Perhaps links with local, national media outlets as opposed to transnational ones would prove to be a good strategy in gaining visibility at the domestic level.

**17.** The role of NGO's in the human rights Treaty Body system must be enhanced in order to make treaty body concluding observations matter to those people it aims to protect.

- a. Treaty bodies should facilitate NGO access to committees and regulate this access by following CRC's initiative to adopt guidelines for NGO reports. Committees would further benefit by soliciting input from NGO's insofar as their relevance applies to the Committee's work, inviting NGO input when preparing lists of issues (if applicable) and establishing procedures to allow NGO's to address the committees during formal sessions, allowing for short hearings<sup>26</sup>.

**18.** Treaty bodies must also establish links to other UN specialized agencies and promote cooperation. IMADR has suggested that it would be positive to mandate field UN officers to monitor national implementation of the concluding observations in consultation with local and international NGO's and UN specialized agencies working in the country being monitored.<sup>27</sup>

**19.** Finally, an initiative for the compilation of 'good practices' in the area of follow-up and implementation of concluding observations should be brought up in the next inter-committee meeting.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See recommendations in Heyns and Viljoen, "The Impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the Domestic Level," 529.

<sup>26</sup> As of 2001 CESCR, CEDAW, and CRC were formally hearing from NGO's. See Bayefsky, *Comparative Summary of Working Methods of All Committees and Treaty Bodies*.

<sup>27</sup> (IMADR), *Treaty Body Reform Following the UN Secretary-General's Proposals- NGO Non-Paper*.

<sup>28</sup> For a lead on how this could be done and how it can affect implementation positively, see the best practices list in Heyns and Viljoen, "The Impact of the United Nations Human Rights Treaties on the Domestic Level."

## D. Non-Ratification

20. WILPF agrees with Amnesty International in their recommendation that the OHCHR could play a major role in stimulating efforts to achieve universal ratification by, for example, “initiating a global campaign for ratification which is designed to mobilize states, civil society, intergovernmental organizations and resources.”<sup>29</sup> If initiating a global awareness initiative is not permissible, treaty bodies, together with the OHCHR can increase support for (or create a partnerships with) ratification campaigns both at national and international levels. The experience of the global campaign for the ratification of the Rome Statute for the ICC proves this is a valid approach to achieve universal ratification. This would bring the UN human rights treaty system back to the spotlight and improve general knowledge of the system. A final initiative would be to facilitate a “ratification conference” of state parties similar to that held among State parties to the CTBT<sup>30</sup> so as to strategize on how to achieve universal ratification as a goal.

21. Treaty bodies should take advantage of international human rights events to prompt ratifications by making the presence of their work felt.<sup>31</sup> Events of this kind are often followed by new waves of ratification (for example, after the Vienna Conference) as noted in the Background Note on the Secretary General's Proposals for Reform of the Treaty Body System.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, campaigns arising from themed General Assembly resolutions declaring the “year of” or “decade of” specific issues could be used as an opportunity to bring about new ratifications that are linked to these themes.

22. It would be useful to implement several of the recommendations outlined in the preliminary report on universal ratification prepared by Special Rapporteur Emmanuel Decaux,<sup>33</sup> particularly to identify ways to create a “constructive dialogue with States concerning legal, political, social or other difficulties encountered in the ratification, entry into force, interpretation and application of the treaties.” In cases in which non-

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<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International, *Proposals to Strengthen the Human Rights Treaty Bodies* available from <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGIOR400182003?open&of=ENG-393>.

<sup>30</sup> State Parties to the Comprehensive nuclear Test-Ban Treaty gather in Entry-Into-Force (Article XIV) Conferences held every two years so signatories to and ratifiers of the CTBT can strategize about how to facilitate the CTBT's early entry-into force. See <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/ctbt/ctbtindex.html#2005>

<sup>31</sup> Heyns and Viljoen list a number of cases in which international human rights events have prompted ratification: “This is evident from the case of Japan (the CEDAW process was set in motion after the Mexico World Conference on Women in 1975; CESC and CCPR, 1979, after NGO pressure surrounding the thirtieth anniversary of UDHR; CRC after the World Summit for Children in 1990 and the Vienna Conference in 1993); Mexico (CRC after the World Summit for Children); and South Africa (CRC, CCPR, CAT and CERD, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of UDHR in 1998; CRC after the World Summit for Children in 1990). This is especially visible with respect to the countries that host such events: for example, Iran (ratifying CCPR and CESC before and CERD after it had hosted the Tehran International Conference on Human Rights in 1968) and Mexico (CEDAW after hosting the World Conference on Women in 1975).”

<sup>32</sup> "Background Note on the Secretary General's Proposals for Reform of the Treaty Body System."

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Decaux, "A Preliminary Report Prepared by the Special Rapporteur Responsible for Conducting a Detailed Study of the Universal Implementation of International Human Rights Treaties," (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2004/8, 2004).

ratifications are concentrated on microstates<sup>34</sup>, simple awareness and facilitation of the ratification process may prompt ratification in these states. SR Decaux also proposes convening a seminar with a view to create a 'grid' of non-ratifications and the main reasons for this for use in organizing efforts towards universal ratifications.

23. Finally, any initiatives to expand ratification should be paired with the necessary resource to enable treaty bodies to examine the increased number of reports in an effective and timely fashion.

#### **F. On unifying the system**

24. WILPF agrees in principle that the Treaty Body system could be made more accessible and simplified and should be seen as a unified structure. However, there are some precautionary notes to be taken on this. It is very important for WILPF to ensure that there is no compromising of the unique mandates that the treaty bodies have. Legitimacy of human rights treaties and any future initiatives could be seriously hurt if State Parties' ratifications to documents are amended without support from all states involved.

25. Finally, we recommend that the OHCHR could strengthen its servicing to the treaty bodies by centralizing it; thus we fully support the proposal of the High Commissioner to bring CEDAW to OHCHR. This transfer would greatly improve the status of women's rights at the OHCHR and facilitate the cross-fertilization of gender insights among treaty bodies. CEDAW members should be consulted at every step of this proposed transfer and the OHCHR should ensure that it recreates the support structure CEDAW has received so far. Accordingly, WILPF welcomes the initiative of the newly established Women's Rights Unit along with the post created to solidify cooperative partnerships with women's entities in New York.

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<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Decaux, "Working Paper: Issues and Modalities for the Effective Universality of International Human Rights Treaties," (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/37, 2003), para 26.

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