

Speaking to the CEDAW Committee about women's rights in the UK



Ava Lee is an MSc Gender student at LSE. She has been working on the CEDAW shadow report at the Women's Resource Centre since the beginning of 2012. In this post she describes the work of the Women's Resource Centre and CEDAW on highlighting the problems impacting on women's equality in the UK. She argues that British Government has not done all it could to face up to their international obligations under CEDAW to protect and advance the rights of women.

Today (22/10/2012), my colleague Charlotte Gage, policy officer at the Women's Resource Centre (WRC), is in Geneva as part of a small group of women from the UK addressing the United Nations (UN) **Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**. She will be highlighting the problems impacting on women's equality in the UK and guiding the Committee on what women's organisations believe our Government must be questioned on, and held to account over, by the UN. This is a unique opportunity for women to raise with the UN the key issues that we are facing in the UK today.

Charlotte will be making a presentation on behalf of the CEDAW Working Group, which is facilitated by WRC, and will be highlighting how women's rights in the UK have come to a standstill and in some cases are being reversed. **Government policies** and **austerity measures** disproportionately impact women, and the rights that were fought so hard for are now being rolled back.

For example, the lack of Government support for women's NGO's, despite demonstrating **value for money**, and the decentralisation of power to local authorities who are also facing huge cuts, means that local services for women are now **closing** at a fast rate leading to a lack of appropriate, accessible services for many women around the country.

On top of this, since 2010, a staggering £14.9 billion worth of cuts per year have been made to welfare payments, and **analysis** shows that 74% of these savings are being taken from women's incomes. Child Benefit, which until recently was paid to the main carer (in 94% of cases the mother) had its rate frozen in the **2010 Budget** for three years, until April 2014, saving the exchequer an estimated £2 billion.

With inflation and the cost of living rising steeply, this means that the value of Child Benefit will be cut by over 10% by 2014. By this time, a family with one child will be around £130 a year worse off than if Child Benefit had been increased each year in line with inflation and a family with three will be **£285 a year worse off**.

The inclusion of Child Benefit in Universal Credit, which will concentrate financial resources into the hands of one person in the family, has the potential to exacerbate gender inequalities and to trap women in violent relationships who, without access to their own finances, will be left with no means to escape and nowhere to turn for support.

In addition to these issues around welfare benefits, Charlotte will also be bringing the Committee's attention to women's unemployment which is at a **25 year high**; the **gender paygap**; the widespread **closure of Sure Start Centres** and the **high cost of childcare** (the **highest in Europe**); and a number of other matters which you can read **here** in our list of issues and suggested questions.

The international spotlight will remain on the UK's record on women's rights as in July 2013 the UK Government must report to CEDAW on their progress since they were last examined by the UN Committee in 2008. All member States are examined every four to five years, but 2013 will be particularly interesting given the reversal of women's rights in the UK and the **deepening** of women's inequalities since the last examination. We are looking forward to seeing **how** the

Government will address these issues after claiming in their **own submission to the CEDAW Committee** to be presenting an example to other countries through their international work; the Government's support of programmes in Bangladesh and Malawi in particular are cited throughout their report.

Vivienne Hayes, Chief Executive of the Women's Resource Centre, isn't convinced that the British Government has been setting good example for other nations. She said: "The Government must face up to their international obligations under CEDAW to protect and advance the rights of women in the UK. It is unacceptable for the UK to be reversing women's rights and austerity cannot be an excuse – the legacy of these changes will be felt for generations so we must ensure that the UN holds them to account and they do not continue to roll back women's rights in the UK."

With the CEDAW Working Group, a group of women from UK NGOs including the **Southall Black Sisters, Sister of Frida, ERAW, ROTA, WILPF** and **BIHR** amongst others, Charlotte and I are producing a shadow report which will reflect on the **Government's report** to CEDAW. We have already sent the **list of key issues and suggested questions** for the CEDAW Committee to ask the Government in order to highlight the extent of discrimination against women in the UK, and Charlotte will be following up on this at the meeting in Geneva today.

We will also be at the **UK Feminista lobby of Parliament** on October 24th where women from across the country will meet with their MPs and ensure that they understand their international obligations as well as those to their female constituents. WRC will be providing information on CEDAW and supporting women to raise these issues with their MPs.

You can follow us on Twitter **@womnsresource** and see how Charlotte is getting on in Geneva today.

Find out more about CEDAW and how it can be used in the UK here: www.wrc.org.uk/cedaw

Or use our online CEDAW toolkit: www.wrc.org.uk/cedaw/toolkit

Join the facebook group to stay up to date with this work – <http://www.facebook.com/TheWomensResourceUsingCEDAWToReachEquality?ref=hl>

Read our blog on CEDAW related issues – <http://thewomensresource.tumblr.com/>

Join us today to hold the Government to account on their international obligations under CEDAW and refuse to let them continue to roll back women's rights in the UK.

Ava Lee is an MSc Gender student at LSE. She has been working on the CEDAW shadow report at the Women's Resource Centre since the beginning of 2012, after spending a year working with women living in refuges in East London. She graduated with a BA in Comparative Literature with Film from King's College London, and is particularly interested in the relationship between media representation of femininity and female sexuality with violence against women and girls.

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