

A sobering look at race realities in N.Y.

Sunday, February 17th 2008, 4:00 AM

Barack Obama may very well become the nation's next President. But if you think that by itself his election will mean the end of discrimination in our city, you are sorely mistaken.

That's why three New York women are flying today to a UN convention in Geneva, with the mission of reporting on the sad state of race relations in the city.

Ejim Dike, director of the Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center, Diana Salas of the Women of Color Policy Network and Aishia Glasford of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health will be addressing international human rights observers tomorrow and Tuesday about racial discrimination and its consequences in New York.

"Equal opportunity and freedom from discrimination are widely accepted as basic human rights, and we will be leading the city's delegation in Geneva to explain before UN experts how these basic rights are sorely lacking in New York," Dike said.

Their report, "Race Realities in New York City," does not pull any punches. It comes in response to the U.S.' own recent assessment of its human rights record that, somehow, makes no mention of Hurricane Katrina, police brutality or New York City in general.

According to Dike, together with Councilmember Helen Foster and state Sen. Bill Perkins, she has been calling on the city for years to expand its definition of discrimination to include racial disparities that, she said, are real human rights abuses.

The main reason this has not happened "is that Mayor Bloomberg thinks that the current civil rights laws are sufficient," Dike said. "But the problem with those laws is that they are reactive - that is, you have to experience discrimination and then bring a lawsuit."

But why report to the UN about a New York problem?

For one, because of the mayor's belief that current civil right laws are good enough. Also because the women hope their report will hit a chord with international human rights observers and resonate back home.

Also, Dike said, the city is actually breaking the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), a human rights treaty signed by the U.S.

Under CERD, racial disparities are themselves a form of discrimination and a breach of basic human rights. Where racial gaps exist, treaty-abiding governments must root them out. The city is far from doing enough.

For example, almost 80% of the city's higher-paying administrative and managerial job positions are held by whites; African-Americans are more than five times as likely, and Latino borrowers almost four times as likely, as white borrowers to receive high-cost home purchase loans.

Even more, New Yorkers of color are less likely to graduate from high school or to have insurance. At the same time, they are more likely to live in poverty, lack voting rights or get arrested.

"[It is] a nearly systematic experience of discrimination borne disproportionately by people of color," the report reads in part. "These race disparities are often the direct or indirect consequences of government policies."

"Our goal," said Dike, "is to share with advocates from around the world what they and their governments can do to combat racial discrimination even at the most local level."

When they return, the women will go on trying to have the city treat disparities such as the ones listed in the report as real human rights abuses.

For that, they say, the city needs to develop a much sharper action plan for gathering data on racial gaps and aggressively monitor and fix policies that often further racial disparities.

Otherwise, not even the first African-American President will be able to end discrimination.

aruiz@nydailynews.com