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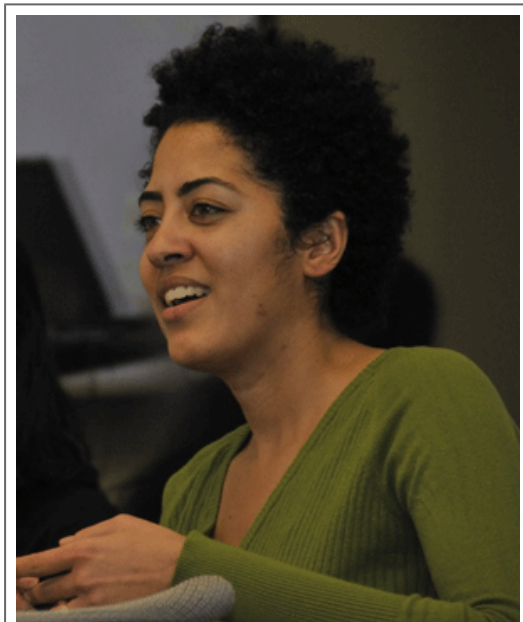
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ADVOCATES WORK WITH U.N. FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AT HOME

After a trip to Geneva, activists find that a local bill to advance "human dignity and equality" is moving forward in City Council this week. > *By Carolyn Whelan*

A group of local human rights activists is hoping that momentum gained by attending an overseas United Nations meeting on discrimination last month will push City Council to address racial disparities by reintroducing a bill on the subject.

The dozen New York City residents – high school students as well as adult advocates – who traveled to Geneva, Switzerland for the **72nd Session** of the International Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) showed their support for a national "shadow" **report** on racial discrimination, submitted by the nonprofit US Human Rights Network explicitly to counter the United States' official **report** to CERD. The group also backed a New York City-specific shadow report, "Race Realities in New York City," produced by the Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center in Manhattan.



Human Rights Project Director Ejim Dike tells a group last week about the Geneva trip. *Photo by Richard Caplan*

"No government is going to tell on itself, and the U.S. government is particularly good at not telling on itself," said Ejim Dike, director of the Human Rights Project, explaining the rationale for supplemental reports. Though not government-sponsored, shadow reports are welcomed by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, and acknowledged by the U.S. Department of State, which authors the official version. The State Department even invited shadow report-writing groups to a meeting in Washington in January.

"It's a fallacy that discrimination doesn't happen in New York because it's so diverse. This is one of the country's most segregated cities," Dike said at the first of a series of the

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delegation's report-backs on the trip. In Geneva, Diana Salas, associate director of the Women of Color Policy Network at New York University, and Aishia Glasford, senior policy analyst at the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, joined her in presenting the "Race Realities" report. Asked to comment on shadow versus official reports, the U.S. Dept. of State and Dept. of Justice both declined.

CERD is one of a handful of international human rights treaties the U.S. has signed. Its 1994 ratification obliges the U.S. to submit periodic reports on current efforts to end discrimination across the country. Treaty overseers consider such reports indispensable tools to help monitor, measure and root out policies that foster or fail to address disparities. But Dike calls the government's report "whitewash." Belatedly synthesizing information from 2000 onward in only its second release in 14 years, the U.S. report hardly discusses Hurricane Katrina and police brutality, topics much on the minds of American activists.

The NYC-focused [report](#), on the other hand, documents prejudice that marginalized NYC groups face in nine areas including health, housing, education and employment. Despite a dearth of data, contributors were able to gather ample evidence over a year of workshops and research from groups like theirs to show that both overt and covert discrimination persists, often without any legal remedies, or only costly ones, available.

Evidence of prejudice cited in the report includes:

- The majority of youth arrested for marijuana possession are black and Latino, yet the city's own statistics show that white youth are more likely to use illegal substances – such as marijuana – than black youth
- New York City schools are almost as racially segregated as those in the South in the 1950s, with Asians and Latinos more segregated from whites than in any school system in the country
- The city's wide wage gaps, with the top fifth earning 52 times that of the lowest fifth, put it on par with Namibia for income disparity
- The infant mortality rate among blacks is 10.5 deaths per 1,000 births, versus the citywide average of 5.9 deaths
- African-American and Latino borrowers are almost five and four times as likely as their white peers to receive high-cost home purchase loans

CERD protects people of color more than most domestic laws because its broader definition of discrimination calls for analyzing the effects of discrimination rather than focusing on evidence of intent to discriminate. Among its suggested remedies are implementation of affirmative action and other proactive, systematic measures.

By shedding light on enduring local prejudice and securing tougher CERD-level standards of protection, the women hope that city officials will mandate the collection, publication and analysis of disaggregated data on race, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation and gender identity.

The delegates also call for more ethnic-specific information. Roughly 200 ethnic groups speak 115 languages in New York City, but just five major racial categories are normally referenced, and Middle Easterners are counted as "white." Such data, they assert, will enable officials to proactively address systemic discrimination, through audits and remedial measures, rather than costly legal action.

"Lawsuits are generally the only remedies available to victims of discrimination and while they are an important hard-fought remedy, they also take their toll financially and

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emotionally," said Dike.

New approaches to end disparities and proactively monitor their implementation such as new Parks Department anti-discrimination hiring and promotion procedures could serve as model for similar measures at other agencies, they added. And data-heavy reports, like those produced by the Department of Health, which disaggregate data by gender and race and make such information easily accessible to the public, could also be emulated.

The local group anticipates that the [Human Rights Government Operations Audit Law](#) will be reintroduced at City Council's meeting on Wednesday. It's a revamped version of an earlier anti-discrimination bill, killed after its key sponsor, former Speaker Bill Perkins, a Harlem Democrat, left Council for the state Senate. New sponsors include Councilwomen Helen Foster and Darlene Mealy, who represent the South Bronx and Brooklyn. More than half the Council supported the earlier bill. It calls for disaggregation and publishing data and remedies to fix glaring disparities.

"It's clear from the report that the Human Rights Bill is necessary," said Foster. "My hope is that we embrace the report and make sure that we are proactive about addressing these disparities."

The women are optimistic about the reintroduction and eventual passage of the bill, which they contributed to in citywide hearings. Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Mayor Bloomberg are aligned on most of the subjects, they say, suggesting that the latter could sign the bill into law within three months.

"We should follow former Mayor Dinkins' advice: 'Anticipate, don't mitigate,'" Dike said.

- Carolyn Whelan

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