

U.N. Women's Agency Remains Politically Paralysed By Thalif Deen*

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 3, 2010 (IPS/TerraViva) - A longstanding proposal for the creation of a special U.N. agency for women - officially called a "gender entity" - is apparently moving at the sluggish pace of a paralytic snail.

The proposal - originally conceived by a high-level panel of U.N. experts back in 2006 - has remained a theoretical exercise for so long that a coalition of women activists is spoofing it in a fake electronic newspaper being circulated at a U.N meeting on gender empowerment here.

The fictitious headlines in the newspaper say it all: 'New U.N. Women's Rights Agency Created (Not true);' 'Search for the head of the U.N. Women's Agency (A long way off);' 'New Women's Super Agency Attracts Donors' (Hardly); and 'Much Awaited but Slow Reforms' (Closer to truth).

The satirical newspaper's editorial column says the paper "provides an example of news that women's rights advocates from around the world have wanted to read for years."

But never did - at least so far.

A brainchild of the European Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign, the newspaper symbolises the frustrations of women activists who are livid that the United Nations has been dragging its collective feet over the creation of the proposed new body.

"It's shameful that we have to come back time and time again to explain why the new entity is needed - and why it's needed fast," Daniela Rosche, Policy & Advocacy Advisor on Gender Justice at Oxfam Novib, told IPS.

She said this issue has been "going on forever". The decision to set up a new gender entity, she argued, is a rather profound transformation but it is a much needed one that all governments have agreed over and over again.

"The issue is: Why do women's rights and gender empowerment issues always take forever to tackle? Where is the sense of urgency in this regard? It's not like we don't have a huge amount of work before us - let's get on with it," said Rosche.

She also pointed out that although governments signed the deal last year, it's not sealed yet. "We are still waiting for key decisions that are long overdue."

The proposal for the creation of the new agency was part of a set of far-reaching reforms for "coherence and coordination" in the U.N. system in several fields, including economic development, humanitarian aid, gender empowerment and the environment.

But there is speculation that both the United Nations and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon are being held hostage by some countries which are demanding all-embracing, not piecemeal, system-wide reforms.

Colette Tamko, coordinator of the Gender and Governance Programme at the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO), told IPS that a small number of states, including some members of the Group of 77 (G77) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), as well as Russia and Japan, are now asking for further clarifications before moving forward.

These countries have raised numerous questions in response to a recent report by the secretary-general spelling out details of the proposed entity.

"What is annoying is that some of these questions, addressed in previous U.N. Secretariat papers and in many others, could only be answered by member states, the under-secretary-general and/or the executive board of the agency when it is actually launched," she added.

Tamko said the "unofficial/untold reason for the delay is that G77 countries are using the gender architecture as a bargaining chip to advance their still undisclosed agenda."

She said, "They want the same level of progress on all areas of the system-wide coherence (including funding and governance), when they know that gender is by far the most advanced and that there is enough progress in that area to achieve a concrete decision."

Addressing delegates Wednesday, Ban said he has made women's empowerment a top priority in the world body.

"We hope soon to have a dynamic entity for gender equality and women's empowerment within the U.N. system. That would provide more coherent programming and a stronger voice for women," he said.

Turning to delegates, he said: "I urge the (192-member) General Assembly to create this new entity without delay by adopting a resolution."

But that resolution seems to be a distant dream - judging by the lethargic progress made so far.

Addressing the current two-week session the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, which concludes Mar. 12, Harriet Harman, Britain's minister for women and equality, said: "We have to counter the false arguments that this is an imposition from the North on the South."

She said: "It's not, it's for women and it's for women everywhere."

Harman also said that "we have to make sure that this new U.N. women's agency is not held back because of our desire to make progress across the board.

She said "system-wide coherence" is important. "But women will not forgive us if we let the best be the enemy of the good."

Audun Lysbakken, Norway's minister of children, equality and social inclusion, told delegates the gender entity should be operational before the high-level meeting of world leaders on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September.

"I challenge those who step on the brakes to explain why," he said.

Tamko of WEDO explained that the gender entity is part of the system-wide coherence process - "And I don't think any member states denies that" - but why slow down gender?

"And why hold it hostage when we know that it is ripe for a decision and the other issues are not?" she asked.

She complained these countries are also holding up the appointment of an under-secretary-general to head the new entity despite Ban's willingness to move forward on the appointment.

The secretary-general is not politically free to do so without some countries using that to further stall the process, she added.

Ban does not need legal permission to proceed on such an appointment, but he is getting strong signals from member states that he should not.

"This is a shame," Tamko declared.

The "off-putting position" of the Joint Coordinating Committee, comprising the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), is of serious concern, she said, as is that of Yemen, Egypt, Cuba (all G77 and/or NAM members), as well as Japan and Russia.

"The good news is that not all G77 countries share the position of the hard-liners within that group but it is regrettable that many of those supportive G77 countries are not speaking up, letting countries like Egypt and Yemen that have a different agenda, representing the views of the JCC," Tamko said.

"Women around the world are sick and tired of this process...It's been too long and we demand action from member states on this long overdue reform now," she declared.