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Signed but not sealed, women's rights activists tell UN

Campaigners call for urgent action to launch the new UN women's agency

New York: Women's rights and anti-poverty organizations gathered in New York ahead of the annual meeting of the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women called on governments to deliver on past promises to create a UN-led women agency. Following years of discussions and pressure from activists, governments agreed in September 2009 to create a new women's agency. Since then, no concrete actions have been taken, campaigners say, such as the appointment of a high-profile person to lead the agency or a timetable on when it will be put in place.

The new institution would streamline the UN's gender work in order to make real progress for women and girls.

"Governments have signed the deal last year, but it's not sealed yet. We are still waiting for key decisions that are long overdue," said Daniela Rosche of Oxfam International. "This year we want more than the empty words we are used to every year. They need to urgently agree to launch the agency in 2010 and recruit an Under-Secretary General at its helm through a transparent process based on clear criteria."

In January, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon released a report on what the new super agency should look like. The report looked at the mandate of the new agency, its operational capacity to work at country level, its funding structure and its relationship with civil society.

Campaigners say they are disappointed by the lack of ambition of the report.

"Our governments need to make sure the agency is in the driver's seat, not the passenger's seat" says Brigitte Triems of the European Women's Lobby (EWL). "Fifteen years have passed since the adoption of the *Beijing Platform for Action on Women, Peace and Development*. A long time in which everywhere, including in Europe, progress for women's rights has been extremely slow".

"We need strong and formal collaboration structures between the new agency and civil society on the ground," said Gea Meijers from Women in Development in Europe (WIDE). "It's women and their allies at country level that know what the priority issues are and how to respond to them. They are the partners and clients of the new agency and it needs to build relationships accordingly."

According to Polly Trenow of the UK Gender and Development Network's, the new agency needs to be funded with an initial budget of 1 billion dollars. "Women's rights and gender equality costs money. This is not a case of allocating small change. All governments need to step up now and put money where their mouths are. For the women and girls living below the poverty line, every dollar counts.

At the opening of the Commission on the Status of Women meeting NGOs campaigning for a new UN women's agency launched *The New Times for Women*. "It's a spoof newspaper that promotes our vision for this new super agency, says Anna Elomäki, the editor of *The New Times for Women*. "With this newspaper we want raise awareness and call for immediate political action by governments and the UN Secretary-General.

Kristina Kosatikova from the International Gender Policy Network (IGPN) calls on the UN and governments to show courage: “To change the status quo for women's rights and to create something truly effective, we need guts. We are not seeing this from Ban Ki-Moon and governments right now.”

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Note: Activists from hundreds of diverse civil society organizations from around the world make up the Gender Equality Architecture Reform Campaign (GEAR Campaign). This campaign has been supporting the creation of a new UN women's rights agency over the last few years. www.newtimesforwomen.com