

Gender Equality May Finally Arrive at the United Nations

By June Zeitlin, Executive Director, Women's Environment & Development Organization



The United Nations has been an important global force for social change, particularly for advancing gender equality and women's human rights. In 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (following Rio, Vienna, and Cairo and subsequent follow up world conferences) governments committed to a far-reaching agenda for women's rights. Some progress has been made for women in every part of the world, yet women still comprise the majority of the world's poor and disadvantaged and remain under-represented in decision-making. (See *Beijing Betrayed*, www.wedo.org/library.aspx?ResourceID=31.) Improvements in women's daily lives still lag far behind the promises governments have made to the world's women.

The reasons for this are well-recognized. There has been a lack of political will, a lack of commitment at the highest levels of government, and a lack of resources to implement these commitments, along with a backlash in many parts of the world against women's progress. This has resulted in a lack of adequate capacity in international and many national agencies charged with advancing gender equality.

There is an opportunity now to address this gap between the rhetoric on gender

equality and the reality on the ground. The UN Reform process provides a chance to revamp the UN and re-prioritize gender equality, globally and on the ground. For months, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and women's rights NGOs around the world have been pushing to ensure the inclusion of women's rights in the UN Reform process.

Women Seize Opportunity in UN Reform

Prior to his departure, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed a high-level panel to make recommendations on greater coherence in development, humanitarian affairs and environment. (See www.un.org/events/panel/html/page1.html.) After a campaign by women's rights advocates, the Panel also directly addressed the need to strengthen the gender equality architecture at the UN.

The Panel's recommendations for UN reform and gender equality marked a major victory for women's rights advocates. For months, women's groups pressured the Panel to make strong recommendations on women's rights, and for the most part the Panel listened. Its bold recommendations included the following points, each of which is followed by the collective response of a number of women's organizations involved in pressing for change:

Consolidating the existing women's agencies (Division for the Advancement of Women, Office of Special Advisor on Gender Issues, and UNIFEM) into a single agency that would have both normative and programmatic responsibilities at both the global and country level.

Response: The mandate of the new entity must have a relevance to the needs and concerns of women in all regions, especially those in which it will operate.

The working group of UN officials must set up an open and inclusive process to consult with women's rights groups and include their perspectives in shaping the structure of the women's entity.

Appointing an Under-Secretary General (USG) to head the new women's agency so that women have a seat at the decision-making table at both the headquarters and field levels.

Response: The establishment of a new USG post must accompany the creation of the consolidated structure. There must be an open, transparent and global search for candidates with substantive expertise in gender equality. We urge that civil society be consulted during this open search process.

Substantially increasing resources for work on gender equality and women's human rights.

Response: The current combined budget for the three women's agencies (DAW, OSAGI and UNIFEM) totals around \$65 million. This is less than fifteen percent of the budget of UNFPA, which is around \$450 million; and it cannot even be compared to the \$2 billion budget for UNICEF. The Panel initially recommended \$200 million for the new women's agency, particularly to increase its field and programming capacity. Some believed this was too low a target and that far more resources should be made available at the outset. In any event, women's groups will be undertaking a campaign to press donor countries to substantially increase their funding for the new consolidated women's agency.

Expanding its in-country field presence and programs.

Response: For this agency to function as a driving force throughout the UN system, particularly to better address women's needs and experiences at the country

level, it is critical that every UN country team include senior-level gender equality experts with adequate resources and support who can lead the team's efforts to support programs that advance women's human rights. This will result both in stronger women-specific programming and more effective gender mainstreaming in the work of other UN agencies. Not surprisingly, this is one of the most controversial and ill-defined aspects of the report. Many of the details will need to be worked out in the implementation process. But from the perspective of women activists and allies, the expanded presence on the ground is absolutely critical to the success of the new agency. And women's groups will be both advocating for these recommendations and monitoring their implementation.

Change Ahead Requires Action

The UN General Assembly will take up the Panel's recommendations sometime this spring. In the meantime, activists

are urging their governments to support the consolidated women's agency, led by a new Under Secretary-General, with substantial resources and an expanded field presence.

Global leadership has a responsibility to mobilize, inspire, and, in turn, learn from and support women's rights and grassroots movements. The evidence on the importance of women's empowerment continues to pile up: empowering women leads to poverty eradication, helps halt the spread of HIV/AIDS, and leads to sustainable development. It is now up to the UN and governments to commit to action that will change the world. At the 51st meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting in New York, women from around the world made their case directly to their government representatives and to the Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon and the new Deputy-Secretary-General Dr. Asha-Rose Migiro. For more information on the CSW meetings, visit the UN website at www.un/womenwatch/daw/csw.



The 51st session on the UN Commission on the Status of Women, an annual meeting of UN member states, was held from February 26 – March 9 in New York. Each year, the meeting also provides a venue for NGOs to network and advocate for women's empowerment globally.

Over 4,000 representatives from NGOs and women's organizations registered for this year's meeting which focused on the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against the girl child and the inclusion of boys and men in achieving gender equality.

Look for more information on the outcomes of these meetings in the next issue.

Presenters and organizers of the workshop on the Women, Faith, and Development Alliance presented by InterAction and partners at the CSW, from left to right: Jean Duff (Washington National Cathedral's Center for Global Justice and Reconciliation (CGJR)), Thu Cao (InterAction's Commission on the Advancement of Women (CAW)), Pauline Muchina (UNAIDS), Suzanne Kindervatter (CAW), Joyce Jackson (World Vision Ghana and East Africa), Fatuma Hashi (World Vision), Dianne Forte (Heifer International), and Mary Pat Brennan (CGJR)

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