

# Gender Equality Architecture and UN Reforms<sup>1</sup>

For submission to the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on System-wide Coherence by the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) and the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)

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*This paper briefly outlines the successes and failures of the current UN system in addressing gender equality and women's rights, and puts forth several principles and characteristics that are critical to reforming the gender equality architecture in order to deliver consistent positive gender equality outcomes*

**I. Introduction:** In the last decade, efforts to make the development, human rights and peace/security 'mainstreams' work for women have resulted in impressive gains as well as staggering failures. In the 10 years since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), a number of strategic partnerships forged between women's movements and policy reformers have placed equity and women's human rights at the heart of global debates in areas such as the International Criminal Court, Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, and in the Millennium Project Task Force on Gender Equality. In some regions, women have made striking gains in elections to local and national government bodies, and in entering public institutions; girls' access to primary education has increased and women are entering the labor force in larger numbers; access to contraception is much more widespread; gender equality has been mainstreamed in some countries into law reform processes and statistical measures; and violence against women has been recognized as a human rights issue and made a crime in many countries.

However, gains for women's rights are facing growing resistance in many places and too often positive examples are the exception rather than the norm. They usually occur because an individual, a network, an organizational champion, or a unique confluence of 'push' factors is responsive and receptive to change. Even then, these changes only come about when women's rights advocates invest extraordinary interest, time and effort and, where required, take significant risks. For instance, it took nearly five years of advocacy by women with support of a small number of donors to get Burundi women included at the peace table and, at the eleventh hour, it was the advocacy of Nelson Mandela that made it finally happen. This ad hoc approach, which too often requires high-level intervention, is not effective in producing consistent positive outcomes to support gender equality and women's human rights.

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**II. Identifying the Gaps and Problems:** Ten years after Beijing and 30 years after the first world conference on women in Mexico City, gender equality has a growing number – but still too few – advocates in the corridors of power at international, national or local levels where critical decisions are made. For decades, women have relied on the United Nations as an important venue for the promotion of human rights and social justice, demanding that the UN set global norms and standards in these areas. Just last year at the World Summit, governments reaffirmed that gender equality is critical to the achievement of all Millennium Development Goals, and re-committed to its promotion in Goal #3. But too often there is insufficient implementation of these commitments, as demonstrated by the failure to achieve universal primary education in 2005 - the first MDG target.

Many women's rights advocates now fear that the political championship at a global level for social justice and women's rights is eroding. Evaluation after evaluation shows that countries, bi-lateral donors and the multilateral system consistently fail to prioritize, and significantly under-fund, women's rights and equality work<sup>2</sup>. Money talks, and in this case, it has voted with its feet. Equally worrying is the fact that new aid principles stressing national ownership and their accompanying aid modalities such as budget support and sector wide approaches, while laudable in some ways, make it even harder to specifically resource and track gender equality goals.

**Current state of Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming at the UN:** The present phase of UN reform provides an opportunity to take gender equality from the realm of rhetoric to the practice of reality. Most women's rights advocates agree that the normative frameworks for gender equality and women's human rights – legal frameworks, constitutional guarantees for equality, and gender equality policies – have advanced considerably in many countries as well as within the UN system. However, the lack of implementation and accountability repeatedly undermines these commitments.

“Gender Mainstreaming”, promoted widely in the UN after the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, was transformative in its conception. But it has been extremely limited in its implementation. Gender mainstreaming has often only been reluctantly adopted by “mainstream” agencies because top leadership has not adequately supported this agenda; it has too often become a policy of “add women and stir” without questioning basic assumptions, or ways of working. It has been implemented in an organizational context of hierarchy and agenda setting that has not prioritized women's rights and where women's units usually have limited authority to initiate or monitor gender equality work, and no authority to hold people and programs accountable.

Gender mainstreaming is sometimes even misused to simply mean including men as well as women, rather than bringing transformational change in gender

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<sup>2</sup> UNIFEM Assessment: A/60/62 - E2005/10; UNDP Evaluation of Gender mainstreaming, available at [http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/EO\\_GenderMainstreaming.pdf](http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/EO_GenderMainstreaming.pdf)

power relations. At best, it has meant such things as adopting a gender policy, creating a gender unit to work on organizational programs, mandatory gender training, and increasing the number of women staff and managers. In the worst cases, gender mainstreaming has been used to stop funding women's work and/or to dismantle many of the institutional mechanisms such as the women's units and advisors created to promote women in development, in the name of integration. Both national and international institutions have had this experience.

The UN system is replete with examples of structures and personnel mandated to do gender equality work that are under-resourced and under-prioritized. They constantly must fight an uphill battle as a result of their low place in organizational hierarchies, small size, limited mandate, and the lack of autonomy and connection to key constituencies. Currently, there are several under-resourced agencies focused exclusively on women's issues (United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Secretary-General's Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI), and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)). For example, UNIFEM, the only unit with a (limited) field presence, is a fund, not an independent operational agency, that reports to the UNDP administrator, which means that it doesn't have a seat at high-level decision making tables. Gender units – from OSAGI to those in the specialized agencies – have limited ability to provide critical feedback or speak out on gender equality performance; too often these special advisor or gender focal points in the UN are used to defend the status quo rather than change it. Their limited budgets, their limited access to decision-making, and their limited terms of reference do not position them as critical players in their own entities.

Other larger agencies, including UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, the High Commissioners for human rights and refugees and others, sometimes do important work on gender equality, but it is only a part of their mandate, and often receives low priority. According to a 2002 UNIFEM/UNDP scan, of the 1300 UN staff who have gender equality in their terms of reference, nearly 1000 of these are gender focal points that are relatively junior, have little substantive expertise, no budgets, and who deal with gender as one element of a large portfolio. In other words, these structures are designed to fail or falter.

Funding for gender equality work within both mainstream agencies and women's specific mechanisms such as UNIFEM is grossly inadequate for the task at hand. In 2002, UNIFEM's resources totaled \$36 million. In comparison, UNFPA's budget for the same year was \$373 million; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' budget was \$64 million and UNAIDS' budget was \$92 million. UNICEF's budget in the same year totaled \$1,454 million. The message is clear: investment in women is of the lowest order. Most mainstream agencies cannot even track how much money they spend on women rights and the achievement of gender equality.

With decades of experience and in view of the challenges ahead, there is ample knowledge of how the UN system can be better organized and structured to facilitate positive change for women and families. Currently there are a variety of options that are being discussed. We see some as a backward step, such as the absorption of UNIFEM into a larger agency such as UNDP, while others would bring only cosmetic change, such as simply combining current mandates, activities and budgets of UNIFEM, DAW, OSAGI and INSTRAW. These we reject.

**We believe that the current system is no longer acceptable. Therefore, we have focused on the approaches that have the greatest potential to bring about coherence and positive systemic change. Our preferred approach would be the creation of a well-resourced independent entity with normative, operational and oversight capacity, a universal country presence and led by an Under-Secretary General. An alternative approach would be the creation of a specialized coordinating body with similar functions, drawing on the UNAIDS model.**

### **III. Recommendations for Transforming the UN Gender Equality**

**Architecture:** There are many ways to carry out these approaches, which this paper does not spell out in detail. However, whatever approach is taken, the principal functions and characteristics that we believe are essential to an effective gender equality machinery are described below. Such an entity must be a strong, **women-specific entity** mandated to work across the whole UN system – one that has the capacity to lead, monitor and to act as a driving force, or catalyst, for the advancement of gender equality and women’s rights, at both the global and country level.

This system-wide women-specific entity must perform three critical functions. It must have **policy-setting** responsibilities on substantive issues of gender equality and women’s rights. It must have the capacity to monitor, with the **authority to ensure accountability**, on gender mainstreaming throughout the UN system. Finally, it must have a **field presence to conduct and shape UN operational activities** to ensure that gender equality and women’s rights programming are carried out effectively. This universal country presence is essential to bridge the biggest gap between commitments to women’s human rights norms and the realities of implementation.

In order to function effectively, this entity must be backed up with several critical components or characteristics. It must have **autonomy**; it must be **adequately and sufficiently resourced** (financially and in terms of personnel with high levels of substantive expertise); and it must have the **authority and clout** necessary for the entity to function as a substantive and political leader for gender equality at the global and national level.

## **A: The Framework for a Women-Specific Lead Entity**

**Women-specific lead entity:** Realizing women's rights and gender equality needs clear leadership on both the policy and the operational side and we believe that a more explicit and synergistic relationship between normative and operational work can best be achieved under one umbrella. Without a lead entity, gender equality continues to be everybody's and nobody's responsibility. Gender mainstreaming will work best only when it co-exists alongside a strong women's agency that can demonstrate leadership and advocate at the highest levels and hold the system accountable. An entity with system-wide reach will improve the sharing of information, expertise and follow-up between the normative and operational arms. The artificial separation between the normative and operational does not work in practice, leaving the normative function isolated from work on the ground where real conditions inform policy and program requirements. Moreover, policy advocacy has too long eclipsed the equally important business of institutional and operational change needed to deliver development benefits to women.

Despite the arguments of some critics, having a strong women-specific entity will not "ghettoize" women's issues. Just as other issues have clear leadership (e.g., ILO for labor, UNICEF for children, and UNHCR for refugees), gender equality issues also needs a driving force. This is not a contradiction. The ILO does not ghettoize issues of labor. Just because UNICEF focuses on children doesn't mean that World Food Program should not distribute food to children or that ILO cannot deal with child labor. At the same time, making it the mandate of every agency should not preclude resourcing a specific entity with a mandate to lead, catalyze and monitor the work. Every agenda needs a political driver to lead it and the gender equality agenda is no exception.

**System-wide responsibility for gender equality:** Effectiveness of such a high level women-specific entity is contingent not only on its own vision and capacity but also on the strengthened commitment (as measured through prioritization, resourcing and results) of existing agencies in the whole United Nations system toward gender equality goals. Women's lives around the world are touched by decisions ranging from small arms trade, climate control and macroeconomic policy to water and sanitation, health and education. The task is too broad and nuanced to be addressed by any one agency alone. In the case of HIV/Aids for example, the whole UN system is mandated to address it with the support of UNAIDS (including a well-resourced global fund for HIV/Aids) and similarly the whole system is mandated to address human rights with the support of a recently expanded OHCHR. So, too, for gender equality, system-wide responsibility is critical.

## **B: The Key Functions**

**Policy Development and Advocacy:** The entity should have a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women's rights and concerns, derived from CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and other relevant policies. It must be able to create and set coherent global policy for gender equality across the UN system and advocate for necessary changes at both policy and institutional levels. While the primary change must focus on implementation and accountability for commitments that exist, gender discrimination is still embedded in many legal and policy frameworks at all levels and normative work must continue to be a priority.

**Operations:** It is critical for this entity to work at the country and regional levels on strategic thinking, constituency building and programming. To enhance its leadership role, this entity must provide high quality substantive expertise buttressed by research and practice on the gender dimensions of a range of substantive areas from macroeconomic policy and governance to violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights. It should implement programs, facilitate innovation, share lessons learned and enable institutional learning throughout the system. This work must be done in close collaboration with women's organizations and networks.

**Monitoring and Accountability:** Along with policy development and operations, the lead entity must be able to develop a corresponding action plan and set of performance indicators that are consistently tracked. It must have the capacity to monitor and the power to ensure accountability, in the form of a mechanism that would function at all levels of the UN system. Developing partnerships with NGOs and women's rights networks at global, regional and country level is a critical part of the governance structure of this accountability mechanism.

High-level systems at the country and regional levels need to develop and implement specific accountability mechanisms, incentives for promoting work on gender equality, and take action for non-compliance. The institutional architecture at the country level must be held accountable for gender equality goals using agreed-upon benchmarks not only for the process of gender mainstreaming but for progress toward women's rights and equality goals. Incentive systems are key as well as hiring more women in shaping the way staff responds to these issues.

## **C: The Key Characteristics of a Women-Specific Entity**

**Agency Autonomy:** In order to ensure accountability for gender equality and women's rights efforts, there needs to be an independent lead entity with the authority to take responsibility to tackle these issues and promote gender commitments effectively. Such an entity cannot be subsumed under another

agency and must have its own governance structure.

**High-level Leadership:** The formation of a strong entity with the potential to drive and affect change requires a major up scaling of power, authority and resources. To guarantee this organizational stature and a voice for women at the UN decision-making table, it should be led by an Under Secretary General with substantive expertise in gender equality. In addition, this entity must participate in high-level decision-making bodies, such as the Chief Executive Board for Coordination (CEB), High Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP), and the Executive Committee on Peace and Security (ECPS).

**Universal Country Presence:** Every UN Country Team, every regional center, every UN peacekeeping mission needs to have a gender equality expert or team that is represented at the heads of agency level where decisions are made and must have an independent budget.

**Adequate Resources:** The lead entity must have substantial, regularized and predictable resources adequate to implement the mandate. This also includes well-trained substantive personnel at all levels of the UN system, and at the global and country level.

An expansion in resources for work on gender equality, as well as concrete tracking mechanisms for allocations and expenditures in every UN organization and every UNCT is a necessary component of reform. All UN agencies must also do gender budgeting to make transparent the resources they are allocating to gender equality goals. Funding for gender equality goals must come out of regular budgets and not extra-budgetary sources alone and new ways of leveraging funding for this work will need to be explored. For example, the United Nations should consider allocating a percentage of all voluntary contributions to operational activities for gender equality.

Donors need to reinforce implementation of these principles rather than create escape hatches for them. Too often, while donors are calling for gender mainstreaming, they provide cost-sharing resources to mainstream agencies, in spite of the fact that these agencies consistently fail to allocate core resources to gender equality. This takes funds away from women's rights advocates and encourages mainstream agencies to 'hold out' on investing their core resources.

**IV. Conclusion:** This paper has outlined the structure, principal functions and characteristics of an effective gender equality machinery for the UN system. Making this vision a reality must involve not only governments and the UN system but also the creative thinking and vast experience of women's organizations and networks around the world. Time is running out and we must act together now.