

## **BRIEFING NOTE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE "COHERENCE PANEL" IN THE UN REFORM PROCESS**

**African Democracy Forum, Association for Women's Rights in Development, Baha'i International Community, BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, Center for Women's Global Leadership, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, International Center for Research on Women, International Planned Parenthood Federation—Western Hemisphere, International Women's Tribune Center, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Women's Environment and Development Organization, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom**

For the past three decades, women have seen the United Nations as a galvanizing force for our efforts to define a comprehensive global agenda for peace and security, human rights, gender equality, women's empowerment, poverty eradication and sustainable development. While some important advances have been made for women, the failure overall to implement the commitments to women's rights (in CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Cairo Programme of Action and other government agreements) is well-documented. The UN reform process is important to women because we need the organizational structures, high level leadership and necessary resources to enable governments and the UN system to increase significantly their efforts to fulfill their promises on women's human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment.

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide you with information so you can take action critical to advancing gender equality at a time of fast-paced UN reform. The women's organizations listed above, working together on the UN reform process, focus here on women's architecture and machineries within the UN, especially on developments with the "Coherence Panel" since the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2006.

### **Current Reform Process: High-Level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence**

In February of 2006, the Secretary-General announced the formation of a High-Level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment. This panel is comprised of fifteen members,<sup>1</sup> but only three are women. The panel will make recommendations about how the UN should be structured, including at the national and global levels; address new challenges, many of which were delineated in the 2005 UN World Summit; and discuss how the UN system can

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<sup>1</sup> The list of panel members is available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/sgsm10349.doc.htm>.

meet the various internationally agreed goals, particularly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

During the Commission on the Status of Women meeting in March 2006, women's groups released an Open Letter to the Secretary General and member states deploring the lack of gender balance on the Panel and the absence of gender equality concerns in the initial mandate, both in terms of gender mainstreaming and women's machineries of the UN system.<sup>2</sup> Due in part to our criticism, the Secretary General has expanded the mandate of the Coherence Panel to include both "gender equality architecture" of the UN and gender mainstreaming, and has made gender equality a cross-cutting issue for all three themes.

The Panel is working very rapidly because its recommendations are expected by the end of August 2006 in order to go to the General Assembly in September. The Panel held its first meeting on 4-6 April 2006 in New York and will next meet in Geneva on June 2-3. In May the Panel is expected to visit Mozambique and Pakistan to conduct consultations primarily with UN staff and a few others knowledgeable about the UN system, with other field visits to follow in June.

### *Context for Women's Rights and Gender Equality*

It is well-documented that gender mainstreaming within the UN has not been achieved or implemented systematically and effectively.<sup>3</sup> Gender mainstreaming processes have never been adequately resourced, leadership has not been held accountable and those charged with mainstreaming often have not had sufficient authority to implement the policies or proper training.

In addition, we have lacked a critical element: an independent, women-specific agency with adequate stature, resources, operational capacity, and a mandate to drive this agenda. A lead agency is needed along with well-resourced, effective mainstreaming efforts. Currently, we have 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)). 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.

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<sup>2</sup> This letter is available at: <http://www.wedo.org/library.aspx?ResourceID=106> and at <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/policy/unadvocacy/index.html>

<sup>3</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).

### *Proposals*

Proposals to strengthen gender architecture of the UN are circulating, including the following:

- ♣ Merge UNIFEM into UNDP (Netherlands proposal).
- ♣ Merge UNIFEM/INSTRAW/DAW/OSAGI into one or possibly two agencies, one operational and the other policymaking.
- ♣ Create a new independent women's agency with a broad mandate, led by a director with Under-Secretary-General (USG) status, and with greatly enhanced resources. (SG's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa Stephen Lewis' proposal) This agency could be built by initially combining UNIFEM and UNFPA field and headquarters staff, by significantly scaling up UNIFEM, or by creating a new independent agency entirely.

A number of women's organizations have begun to discuss these proposals. Advocates have strongly opposed the UNIFEM/UNDP merger as well as the merger of all the women's agencies (UNIFEM/INSTRAW/DAW/OSAGI). The first proposal is viewed as further marginalizing women's concerns, and, for the time being, is stalled. The second is viewed as inadequate to the challenges posed, primarily because a merger alone may not bring more resources or stature to women's issues and does not distinguish field operational needs from policy headquarters ones. However, as far as we know, the details of such a merger have not been fully explored.

Some feel the option of creating an independent strong women's agency led by a high level official with autonomy and adequate resources has the greatest potential. However, we recognize there are different approaches to the creation of such an agency and many organizational details that would need to be addressed.

Unquestionably, there needs to be strong women-specific machinery both in the operational and policy-making spheres. This requires a major up-scaling of the power, authority, and resources dedicated to women's human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment. At the operational level, in particular, a strong and independent women's agency must be linked to and reinforce other gender mainstreaming and gender parity efforts within the UN system.

Rather than endorsing any particular approach, we want to ensure that there is a serious and comprehensive assessment by the UN and member states of gender equality architecture and women's machineries in the UN system. In an effort to contribute, we have begun to outline some of the characteristics of effective gender equality architecture. These include:

- ♣ Autonomous UN agency with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women's rights and concerns, derived from the Beijing Platform for Action, Cairo Programme of Work, CEDAW, etc.
- ♣ Under Secretary General leading agency to guarantee a voice for women and a seat at the UN decision making table
- ♣ Substantial, regularized and predictable resources adequate to implement the mandate
- ♣ Headquarters and in-country presence with sufficient and well trained personnel and resources
- ♣ Accountability mechanism that includes regionally-diverse independent women's rights advocates as part of its governing body

In addition, the UN system should commit to an effective gender mainstreaming strategy that addresses the lack of effective leadership and accountability for gender equity in the UN.

#### *Meeting with the Secretary General*

Representatives from a number of women's organizations have met with UN staff, including the Panel Secretariat, over the past month. On May 3, 2006, representatives met with Secretary General Kofi Annan to discuss the need for the UN reform process to address strengthening gender architecture and gender mainstreaming within the UN system. We outlined the key characteristics needed for effective gender equality architecture described above.

The Secretary General said he shared our concerns about moving this agenda more effectively within the UN but made the following points in response to our proposals: It would be difficult to advocate for the creation of a new independent women's agency at this time, in part because of expected government resistance; it was important to ensure that work on gender be mainstreamed and "women's issues" should not be isolated in the work of one agency; as an alternative to a new agency, it is important to strengthen existing structures and ensure that they have the characteristics to deliver on gender equality; the appointment of an Under-Secretary General with a dedicated team would provide participation at the highest levels of decision-making and would ensure independence and greater attention to action on the gender equality agenda within the UN system; having such a driver he thought would ensure the effective implementation of gender mainstreaming at all levels.

The Secretary General was interested in learning more about the challenges posed by the current gender focal point system (at all levels), and the ways it often fails to effectively address gender equality and women's rights at the national level, or when it does deliver, what are the factors that make this possible. With regard to the Coherence Panel, he encouraged us to communicate our concerns about the gender focal point system and women's experiences in

engaging with the UN (particularly at the operational level). We also discussed the importance of having consultations with women's groups throughout the process to hear directly about these concerns.

### *Next Steps*

The Coherence Panel will recommend how to make the UN more effective operationally at the country level and as a policymaking and norm-setting institution. To influence these recommendations, we must provide the Panel with information about women's experiences in engaging with UN agencies, at national, regional and global levels. We need to document and provide this information, supported, wherever possible, by concrete examples and data. It would be most helpful if this documentation included examples both of the failure to deliver on gender equality and women's empowerment as well as successes on the ground and what made them work.

We urge women to speak with Panel members from your country/region and the Secretariat for the Panel and also to begin conversations with national government officials so they understand that the gender equality architecture is under review. This is an important opportunity to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations to implement the far-reaching commitments it has made on gender equality and women's human rights. It seems likely that the Panel will recommend to the General Assembly in September 2006 either some changes in gender architecture or a process for making such changes. Check the websites of the organizations listed above for periodic updates.

May 8, 2006