

**STATEMENT OF CARIBBEAN WOMEN ORGANISATIONS AND
WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVOCATES**

Delivered to the
UN Secretary General's High Level Coherence Panel on UN Reform
Regional Consultation for Latin American and the Caribbean

25-26 July, 2006

We, the undersigned, representing women's organizations and networks working toward gender equality within the Caribbean, are grateful for this opportunity to meet the "High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence in the areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and the Environment" (hereafter referred to as the Panel on UN Reform).

We start by endorsing the letter from the G-77 calling for a body that continues to take leadership in meeting the needs of the majority of the world's people and to link development (including the environment) to human security and human rights – the IFIs cannot do this. The links between freedom from want (development), freedom from fear (security) and freedom to live in dignity (human rights) highlighted in the visionary Report of the SC, *Toward Greater Freedom*, are most clearly highlighted in the lives of women, as we will underscore below.

We also endorse statements, like that of CWGL and WEDO presented to the High Level Panel at the consultation held in Geneva on July 2, calling for the strengthening of mechanisms within the UN system for addressing gender equality and women's rights. Their statement contains a detailed analysis of some of the limitations of the UN's attempts to address the issue of gender equality over the past several years.

In this statement we draw on experience of the UN system within CARICOM, especially within the past 10 years. We note the effective functioning of UNDP and UNIFEM in promoting a system-wide approach that incorporates a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in this region. What have been missing are the resources (including additional staff) to enhance this work. Given this experience, we wish to emphasize 5 points.

1. The dominant economic model promoted by the IFIs can undermine human development and should be balanced by an explicit emphasis on the promotion of all human rights, including social and economic rights.

In this region, characterized by the number of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), a multi-island, coherent, system-wide approach has been critical. Over the past 10 years, the UN system has coordinated its programmes to support our governments in moving towards stronger integration of our societies and economies.

The export-led, market driven economic model promoted by the IFIs is, on the other hand, increasing vulnerabilities of both national producers and consumers to the convulsions of the world market. Today, a significant proportion of our populations are self-employed, and a substantial part of our GDP is produced by the informal sector, which in many CARICOM countries is dominated by women. While the unregulated market threatens livelihoods of both women and men, women more often carry the burden of social reproduction, and are therefore more affected.

Any move to reduce the role of the UN in this region would not be in the interest of CARICOM people. We need the leadership of a strong UN with system-wide coherence in the areas of Development and the Environment, Peace, Human Security and Humanitarian Assistance to serve as a champion for the rights of those most marginalized by the current economic model.

2. The effectiveness of the UN at the country level will depend on the extent to which: a) gender equality and women's empowerment is treated on par with other themes (not only as cross-cutting and therefore invisible, but rather – as in the MDGs – as a goal its own right, as well as central to all other goals), and; b) the Resident Coordinator system is accountable for supporting strong action on gender equality and has the technical support to do at the operational level (in particular through the work of UNIFEM) to ensure gender equitable outcomes from the work of the UN Country Team (UNCT) with governments.

The Millennium commitments establish gender equality as central to achieving the MDGs and the importance of promoting the participation of women in development, security and a sustainable environment.

There is general agreement that persistent poverty, the spread of crime and violence and of HIV/AIDS cannot be eliminated without tackling unequal gender relations and persistent power roles that benefit men. Studies show that the majority of the poor are women, that they bear a disproportionate burden of poverty and reproductive responsibility, while they continue to have unequal access to production resources and time. The alarming increase of HIV infection among Caribbean women is linked to unequal gender relations that place women at risk of unprotected and forced sex, while at the same time increasing their burden for caring for the affected.

As the UN reform processes move towards a functioning and coordinated 'One UN' country team, the presence of a representative of an agency for women becomes even more important, to provide the accountability and the capacity to the Resident Coordinator, the UNCT and government for ensuring that gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the technical collaboration in achieving the MDG.

As an article by women from Asia puts it:

“gender and women's rights are a vital dimension at the core, not only of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment, but also the headline events and strategic concerns of our time that surround and overreach these subjects: the intractability of the HIV/AIDS pandemic; persistent conflicts and troubled peace building; the struggle over fundamentalisms and terror; the depletion of our Earth's ability to nurture us that increases the suffering of the poor of every continent - with the destruction of forests, wetlands and fisheries, and the exacerbated burden of care that is the responsibility of women everywhere; and the accelerating pace of health crises and humanitarian emergencies.”

3. “Taking gender issues seriously” means strengthening the architecture of the UN so that there is system-wide competence and responsibility for ensuring gender equality and women’s human rights within *all* its programmes, not only those dealing with development (and environment) but also those in the areas of conflict resolution, peace-keeping, human security and humanitarian assistance.

We recognise that some women's organizations are considering a proposal for a "UNICEF for women", a billion-dollar agency – an idea which is predicated on the dissolution of UNIFEM (and DAW, OSAGI, INSTRAW, etc.). Frankly, we could agree with the independent operational agency; but we would say that it should build on what already exists. That is, it should build on UNIFEM, which – currently – has the only brand name on the operational side, and there is no reason to change it.

We note that there is also a proposal that there be a merger of UNIFEM, DAW, INSTRAW and OSAGI into one body that has policy and normative responsibilities with a watching brief but no operational presence or programmes. However, it seems clear that the highest priority is for an operational presence of a strong women's entity (e.g., UNIFEM) in UN Country Teams and that this will better support the gender equity and women’s empowerment agenda than one high level appointment.

4. Strengthening the architecture of the UN for women’s rights means committing to an agency for women with enough resources, autonomy and clout to respond to governments, partner with civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations and women’s movements, and hold the UN accountable to its commitments to gender equality, women’s human rights and empowerment.

Drawing on the Statement from CWGL and WEDO, and building on UNIFEM’s 30 years of operational experience, we strongly believe that

UNIFEM should be that agency and be strengthened to perform the three critical functions identified by the CWGL/WEDO Statement:

a) policy-setting responsibilities on substantive issues of gender equality and women's rights, **b) the capacity to monitor key programmes of other UN agencies**, and **c) the authority to ensure accountability**, on gender mainstreaming throughout the UN system.

We also agree with the CWGL/WEDO Statement that UNIFEM 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; (and that) in order to do so UNIFEM must have **autonomy**, (and) be **sufficiently resourced** with staff, finances, expertise and clout to function as a substantive and political leader for gender equality at the global and national level. (CWGL/WEDO Statement, Geneva July 2, 2006).

Given the far-reaching importance and reach of the gender equality/equity goals it is clear that the resources allocated to this mandate within the UN system, especially to UNIFEM, are inadequate.

5. Bearing in mind that it owes its establishment and support to women's movements, UNIFEM must reaffirm its commitment, accountability and alliance to this constituency, for in the final analysis it is only women as a strong constituency that can generate the political will and commitment to lead to meaningful change in gender relations.

The women's movement in the region has been weakened since its peak organizing during the Fourth World Conference on Women. Strengthened partnerships can reenergize existing networks linked to the global movement through DAWN Caribbean and other organizations in the region such as CAFRA, Red Thread in Guyana and the Network of NGOs in Trinidad & Tobago. These links can help keep the spirit of women's activism alive.

Through the 30 years, UNIFEM has been our partner within the UN, has represented the voice of women all over the world, and has supported us at the beginning and during times of plenty and drought. We have struggled and survived together to place women's rights on the international and our national agendas. The UN, its member countries and the women's movement cannot jeopardize this partnership, its common commitment and its progress.

Initial Signatories:

CAFRA (Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action)

DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) Caribbean

GNOW (Grenada National Organisation of Women)

GRENCODA (Grenada Community Development Agency)

NGO Network of Trinidad and Tobago

Red Thread (Women's Collective, Guyana)

"The fourth pillar: Women press for real changes in the UN" AsiaWOMENet 11 May 2006

HYPERLINK "http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-pillar-0605.html" <http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-pillar-0605.html>

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