

Statement by Dr. Nafis Sadik
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at the

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Rescuing Cairo and Beijing

Introduction

After the Cairo and Beijing conferences, we had high hopes that women's empowerment and gender equality would take their proper place on the development agenda, with reproductive health as a fundamental component.

The High-Level Group on, "Threats Challenges and Change", of which I was a member, had only one reference to Gender in the context of trafficking.

We were disappointed: the Millennium Development Goals interpreted empowerment and equality in terms of education and maternal mortality.

This was and remains completely inadequate. Reproductive health and rights are of course implicit in the Goals: the Millennium Project staff and women's organizations have spelled out how that works in practice. There are proposals for including explicit indicators and targets in the Goals – but so far they have not been adopted. The balance might still be redressed somewhat: but why we are still struggling for principles agreed over a decade ago?

The outcomes of the United Nations 60th Anniversary Summit show that empowerment and equality are still footnotes to the main development agenda. In particular, leaders will not acknowledge the fundamental importance of women's sexual and reproductive health and rights: it is too sensitive; it is a matter for each country and each culture; it opens the possibility of sexual licence, etc., etc. They have forgotten, or they have had second thoughts, about the simple and explicit consensus of Cairo and Beijing. We thought we had settled all these imaginary problems. Instead, with every day that passes, the impetus is slipping away.

Defeating HIV/AIDS

The battle against HIV/AIDS offers a prime example of what this failure means in practice. There is no prospect for defeating the HIV/AIDS pandemic unless the consensus of Cairo and Beijing is fully implemented. HIV/AIDS is overwhelmingly a sexually transmitted disease. Beating HIV/AIDS depends on preventing transmission through sexual contact.

Yet, at the 60th Anniversary Summit, and again at the Special Session on HIV/AIDS, we saw that leaders were embarrassed to talk about sexuality, let alone discuss how to protect women's sexual health. The words "sexual

health” do not appear in the final documents of either the 60th Anniversary Summit or the Special Session on HIV/AIDS. At country level, governments, even in the most seriously-affected countries, are still unwilling to ensure that women can protect themselves against infection; and that men respect their right to do so.

Confronting the facts

Twenty-five years after the virus was first identified, nearly 12 years after ICPD at Cairo recognised the right to reproductive health, nearly 11 years after the Beijing women’s conference put reproductive health and rights in the context of equality, development and peace, we are entitled to ask why our leaders will not act to protect women from their increasing vulnerability to HIV infection.

My answer, in one word, is ***fear***. It appears that our leaders are simply afraid to let women control their own sexual and reproductive health. The men who lead governments, lead communities, manage education and health systems and supervise religious observance are more frightened of women’s autonomy than they are of the HIV/AIDS virus. This may sound like an extreme conclusion, but I am compelled to say it.

Leaders will talk about culture, values or tradition as the glue that holds society together: they will speak of women as the lynchpins of the family, and marriage as a sacred institution: but they cannot find the courage even to discuss sexual behaviour, let alone how to protect women's sexual and reproductive health.

Women are the first victims of their leaders' failure, but they will not be the last. In our time, HIV/AIDS is a real and present threat to all our societies. The only way to end the pandemic is to prevent HIV/AIDS from spreading. The only way to do that is to address the main route of transmission, which is sexual contact between men and women. And the only way to address the issue of sexual contact effectively is to empower women, all women, to make their own decisions, and provide the information and the services they need to put their decisions into practice. This includes the adolescent as well as the adult, the single woman as well as her married sisters, the widow as well as the wife. For a decade, women have had the right to reproductive health in theory: it is time, and long past time, that they had the right in practice.

All this requires strong leadership, at all levels.

- Leadership can give societies and communities the confidence to change in healthy directions.
- Leadership can give women the power to protect themselves.
- Leadership can change the attitudes and practices of individual men, and give men the ability to respect their partners' sexual health.
- And leadership can help remove the fear of women that perpetuates the HIV/AIDS pandemic and threatens development itself.

I hope our leaders will find the courage they need, and find it soon.

Giving leadership to gender

At the international level, the United Nations has a responsibility to give a lead. The UN system has a variety of organizations and structures to promote women's empowerment and gender equality: INSTRAW, DAW, CEDAW, OSAGI and the Millennium Project. They all have admirable purposes, and they all have very hard and dedicated workers driving them along.

Every agency and programme in the United Nations system has a department or division responsible for gender equality; at the political level,

every committee and governing body has women's empowerment and gender equality as an item on its programme.

UNIFEM has done admirable work and its programme includes some excellent examples of good practice. But it remains small and sequestered. It has little or no influence even in UNDP where it is lodged, and has great difficulty in scaling-up successful projects, even at country level. Its position as a special fund for women actually begs the question, which is precisely to ensure that *all* programmes and projects adequately address gender concerns, as they affect both women and men.

What is missing in all these structures, and all these admirable efforts, is the dynamism to move gender issues to the head of the development agenda.

I am tempted to propose a super-agency for the advancement of women, but we already have enough agencies. In any case, I do not want to propose a super-agency that will become a super-ghetto, an excuse for other parts of the system to ignore the issue. The challenge is to breathe urgency into the existing structure, to give it focus and leadership, to put women's

empowerment and gender equality at the centre of the work of the United Nations.

I think there is a place for a Monitoring and Accountability mechanism at the highest level in the United Nations system. It would act as a watchdog, but it should have a bite as well as a bark. It should also be a sniffer dog and a sheepdog, finding out what is going on across the system and pushing it in the right direction. It would not be an operational programme so much as a normative, standard-setting organization. It would sniff out good practices and push laggards into line. It would hold agencies and programmes accountable for gender mainstreaming. It would be enabled to be an equal partner at all levels of decision-making from country, regional to the international. It would demand that agencies, funds and programmes indeed all departments, themselves have the internal mechanisms for gender mainstreaming, and that each governing body sets and monitors its own standards. It would act with the authority of the Secretary-General; it would have its own funding, and it would have the support of all executive boards and governing bodies across the system.

My idea would be to merge all the existing mechanisms – OSAGI, DAW, INSTRAW, UNIFEM – and establish a Centre for Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality, with an Executive Director at the Under-Secretary level reporting directly to the Secretary-General.

The Executive Director would be a member *ex officio* of all executive boards and governing bodies, peace-building commission, and human rights council. She would report to the ECOSOC, to the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly dealing with economic and social, humanitarian or human rights affairs. The Centre would service CEDAW and CSW .

If member states determine she would be also a member of the CEB and play a similar in the entire UN system.

The Executive Director would exercise oversight of gender mainstreaming, both in development funds and programmes, and in all the operations of the Secretariat such as human rights and peacekeeping. She will have to be a charismatic leader, with powers of persuasion equal to her task. I don’t think we need a one-woman band beating the drum for gender mainstreaming;

what we need is someone who can conduct the orchestra, and bring out the theme of gender mainstreaming that should run throughout the work of the United Nations.

To keep this focus on gender mainstreaming, the Centre's terms of reference will have to be very carefully structured: to ensure that the gender concerns of both women and men are adequately represented in consensus agreements and working documents; to encourage and promote good practice in the various funds and programmes at the operational level, and ensure that good practices are identified and scaled-up appropriately; to monitor and evaluate gender mainstreaming in the work of the Secretariat, and to report to the Secretary-General annually, perhaps in the form of a scorecard or a *State of the World's Women* Report.

All this will cost money of course, but the existing bodies already have funding from the regular budget. We will identify additional streams of regular, consistent and independent funding, maybe from the operational budgets of agencies and programmes, with additional funding from the international community. The amounts involved would be very small, especially in relation to their impact.

Great care will be needed to ensure that the Centre is not seen as an alternative to action by the existing mechanisms of the United Nations. Experience has shown us how that happens, especially with sensitive issues: once a separate programme is set up, the rest of the system assumes the problem is solved and proceeds to ignore the issue or give it token attention. Our Centre would have precisely the opposite task – to insist that all parts of the system give gender mainstreaming its proper place in their work.

The Executive Director will be the principal advocate within the United Nations system for women's empowerment and gender equality; but she will also ensure that everyone in the system becomes an advocate too. Understanding the nature of gender mainstreaming will do a great deal at all levels to remove the stigma and prejudice – the fear of women – that has returned like a bad dream to threaten our future. Our leaders need to know that their courage will have its just reward. Such a structure as I am suggesting will help to reassure them.

The United Nations Centre for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality will encourage open and honest dialogue at the international level. In time, it will restore the lost impetus of Cairo and Beijing. Most important,

it will give the necessary impetus to institutions and individuals at national level to confront the daily realities of women's lives, and change them.

I look forward to the rest of our discussion.