

To: Members of the Secretary General's Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the fields of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and Environment

From:

Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL),
Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), and
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)

Cc: Secretary General

Date: April 5, 2006

Excellencies,

In the recent Secretary General's report "Mandating and Delivering: analysis and recommendations to facilitate review of mandates" he notes his intention to ask the High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence to include in its work an assessment on how gender equality, including through gender mainstreaming, can be better and more fully addressed in the work of the United Nations, particularly in its operational activities on the ground.

We welcome this decision by the Secretary-General and stress that it is urgent for the High-Level Panel to consider how the UN can deliver on the commitments repeatedly made for gender equality and women's empowerment. To date, what is clear from the various reviews since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing is that the UN and national governments are failing in this task. This, despite the fact that gender equality and women's empowerment have repeatedly been recognized as central to progress on all the agendas of the UN: peace, security, human rights, development and the environment.

It is clear that if these commitments are to be met, there needs to be a major up-scaling of the power and authority as well as resources dedicated to this agenda. There are a number of approaches that can be taken to this task and there have been numerous proposals in this regard. While at this time, we are not endorsing any specific proposal, there must be an immediate decision to undertake a serious and comprehensive assessment of the needs regarding both women's machineries and gender mainstreaming as part of the work of the Coherence Panel. Proposals to date already range from incorporating UNIFEM into UNDP, combining UNIFEM, DAW, OSAGI and INSTRAW, and creating a new women's agency with a broad mandate on gender equality (building on UNFPA and UNIFEM) with substantial resources at the global and country levels. The same commitments to innovation and effectiveness by member states on other issues should be brought to the discussion of gender equality and women's human rights.

With regard to this process, experience indicates that women's equality and human rights cannot be achieved without a powerful and well-resourced entity within the UN specifically mandated to achieve these goals. And yet, despite repeated statements on the importance of gender equality, women's machineries within the UN remain under-resourced and marginalized from the main activities and policies on development, humanitarian affairs and environment, as well as from human rights and peacekeeping, at the operational and the policy levels. Women's empowerment and gender issues need to be represented more powerfully at the table at the UN HQ and in the UN country teams and complex peacekeeping operations.

While gender is cross-cutting, and therefore, gender mainstreaming can be one of the useful tools in this process, it cannot be a substitute for women-specific bodies that have this as not only a mandate but also a priority. The failure of existing efforts is well documented. In fact, gender mainstreaming can only succeed if it is done in collaboration with powerful well-resourced separate women's units that are driving this agenda, monitoring and innovating as well as advocating for it continuously.

We recognize that the exact shape this should take at this historical juncture must be responsive to other changes being made in the UN. However, the Coherence panel must integrate gender as a cross-cutting issue into its program of work and make strong recommendations in its final report for more effective UN mechanisms to achieve gender equality in development, humanitarian affairs, and environment, as well as in human rights and peace-keeping.

We stand ready to work with you and hope to have an opportunity to meet with you when the panel next convenes.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Bunch, CWGL
June Zeitlin, WEDO
Jill Sternberg, WILPF UN Office