

## **Women's Concerns and Spaces in the United Nations: What Does History Tell Us?** by Margaret Snyder, Founding Director, UNIFEM

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As the UN Reform process proceeds, poverty has grown rather than lessened in much of the developing world, and as AIDS spreads, it is becoming a "women's disease". These and many other pressing global issues are women's concerns. In this context, women need more space, not less, and more influence in the UN. What "architecture" must be designed or reinforced within the complex system that is the United Nations if we are to reach our agreed goal - both institutional and individual space to effectively promote women's opportunities worldwide for greater freedom and wellbeing, side by side with men?

Today, we stand on the shoulders of women who have asked - and answered - that question time and again over the UN's six decades. First, they selected a space in the UN where they thought their presence would be most effective and found ways to move into that space; second, they stood back to assess the instrument they had created and measure its impact; and, third, they strengthened it.

Here are some illustrations from that history:

In the early days of the UN, women thought that the Commission on Human Rights would give them the space and support that they needed, but they got only a sub-commission, so they called for a fully-fledged Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Its secretariat office was renamed and upgraded in 1972 and again in 1988 to meet new needs; it is now called the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW). A second example of creating, assessing, and strengthening began with the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which was designed by CSW to improve women's lives in every country of the world, and adopted by the General Assembly in 1967. Nine years later women added clout to that issue through a legally binding treaty - a Convention (CEDAW). In 1996 an Optional Protocol strengthened it again to allow individual victims of injustices to submit reports to its Committee. UNIFEM offers a third institutional example of creating then strengthening space for women's concerns. The General Assembly created the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women, now called UNIFEM - the UN Development Fund for Women - in 1976, to help countries implement their national plans and programs for the advancement of women. Eight years later it recognized an urgent need to expand VFDW's "crucial role" as a specialized resource for development. Having found that the initial arrangements for the fund in the UN Secretariat - with the Branch (now Division) for women - proved cumbersome at best (because the Secretariat was not set up for financial and technical co-operation), it gave greater autonomy to the new fund, UNIFEM, as a "separate and identifiable entity in autonomous association with UNDP." The intention was that, once well financed, UNIFEM would be given complete autonomy - a step not yet taken.

Those three examples are part of a larger picture of how women have sought first, to institutionalize their concerns, then to assess, then to strengthen the institutions they create in order to make the UN more democratic and more effective as it becomes more responsive to half of the world's people. Women also pressured the UN system to "integrate women in development", an idea that received new life as "mainstreaming". They achieved a great deal over the decades, with only minimal resources.

As assessments of progress toward the millennium development goals reveal, intensified support for women's empowerment is needed if poverty and disease are to be overcome and peace brought within reach. To that end, most of us agree that the "gender architecture" in the UN should include both a strong women's department in the UN Secretariat itself, where General Assembly and Security Council matters are considered, and a strong women's fund that is an innovator and catalyst in the other part of the UN - its development co-operation system. Most of us also agree that two approaches are needed: a women-specific approach that is and has been the font of ideas and a source of our collective strength, and an integrated or mainstream approach that anticipates our final goal.

After these agreements comes the hard part - specific proposals. Today as the UN Reform process heats up, there are proposals to merge DAW and UNIFEM with a USG over them (perhaps the special adviser on gender issues and advancement of women), that would be a step back to the original situation noted above; or to merge UNIFEM and UNFPA, although UNFPA's major concerns are reproductive health and safe motherhood with gender equality - the latter added recently; or to merge UNIFEM with UNDP. UNIFEM appears to be the pawn in each of these merger scenarios.

Questions arise: Will a merger actually bring more money for women, or simply the appearance of more money because of the merger? Is big necessarily better, or can the UN be viewed as governments are, i.e. with many ministries dealing with specialized services to the same citizens? As regards the latter, the UN offers many specialized services for women's advancement, through UNICEF, DAW, UNFPA, UNIFEM, FAO etc. that need greater co-ordination with each other and with other funds and programs, especially at country level, to achieve our goals.

An unparalleled institutional model for such UN agency, bilateral and NGO co-ordination on women's concerns is found in another history - that of the African Centre for Women of the UN's economic commission for Africa. It has been called "the only genuinely interagency partnership program in the UN system". To strengthen the Centre's work, UNFPA financed FAO staff and operational funds; UNICEF sponsored technology (NGO) and volunteer program staff and funds; Swedish SIDA financed ILO staff and funds for small business promotion; USAID financed staff and operations for national machinery seminars. Etcetera. The Centre thus capitalized on the expertise of each of the involved organizations. Inter-agency co-ordination was built in, and the centre gained immeasurable strength of resources for the women of the region.

Drawing on women's UN history we ask: Can UNIFEM be the "independent women-specific agency with adequate structure, resources and operational capacity" that NGO's propose? It is already the UN's only women-specific fund, and it has a broad mandate, but it would need to be moved the final step from its current autonomous association with UNDP to its own full autonomy. Its structure and operational capacity can be strengthened in part through a new inter-agency partnership on the African centre model, and in part from an overall increase in financial support.

Underlying that option is UNIFEM's proud 30-year history of service to women. As a catalyst in the UN system, it initiated community-owned revolving loan funds for women's groups before micro-finance was a buzz-word, and assisted non-governmental organizations directly; both transformations were resisted by traditionalist officials, but finally adopted. As an innovator, UNIFEM popularized technologies, gave the very first large grant to the Green Belt Movement tree planters whose leader received the Nobel Peace Prize, and strengthened women's peace making activities. It is a major actor in the global campaign to eliminate violence against women and it finances engendering national and local budgets so that women and the poor are justly considered. In the age of globalization, fair trade and the export of products of women's agriculture and enterprises are its concern. It can move quickly to support women-identified needs and bring them to the world's attention - and the attention of other funds in the UN system. An enlarged capacity for all this work is urgently needed.

In conclusion, the most promising gender architecture, from the perspective of women's history with the UN system, is a double-benefit model: to add value and strength to both the UN itself through DAW and to its development co-operation system through UNIFEM, the latter with its inter-agency coalition and both with high level leadership. Both must have resources adequate to their tasks: DAW will need more from the "regular" UN budget, and besides the staff and financial support of its participating partners, UNIFEM will need to supplement its voluntary government contributions by drawing on non-traditional sources of support such as the private sector, as it has already started to do.

Let us grow our two major institutions!