

Submission for the Gender Equality Architecture Consultation with the High Level Panel on System Wide Coherence

'A Vision for the Future of Women's Issues at the UN'

How can we increase the effectiveness and efficiency of gender issues at the UN? This submission/paper suggests a way of enhancing the profile of women's issues whilst containing costs.

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Identification of the Problem to be Addressed:

Despite widespread acknowledgement by governments that the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment is crucial to the achievement of sustainable development, peace and human rights, there remains an immense gap between the commitments governments have made and the reality of ordinary women's lives. Women still constitute the poorest of the poor, continue to be subjected to widespread and persistent discrimination in all areas of their lives, and are sidelined from decision-making processes.

The UN has been an important force for change in advancing gender equality and women's rights globally, but the failure to provide the machineries responsible for advancing gender equality and women's rights with sufficient resources and authority or to implement and resource the strategy of gender mainstreaming effectively has critically undermined the UN's ability to tackle gender inequality and promote sustainable development. Evidence shows that gender mainstreaming has failed consistently.

Furthermore, the multiplicity of UN agencies working on gender equality issues has led to a lack of coordination, duplication of efforts and dilution of available resources. Crucially there has been a singular lack of political will and leadership to bring about the necessary changes and insufficient resource allocation to address these changes. It is essential that the UN reform process addresses these obstacles. If we are to achieve more effective UN mechanisms to achieve gender equality in development, humanitarian affairs, environment, human rights and peace-keeping, women must be part of the process.

Proposal for Approaches or Solutions:

1. Restructure existing UN entities which focus exclusively on women's issues (INSTRAW, UNIFEM, OSAGI, DAW & IANWGE) to establish one well-resourced body led by an Under-Secretary General with thematic and cross-cutting authority. A restructured women's body at the UN would play a dual role: advocacy, research and implementation of initiatives relating to women's empowerment and rights on the one hand; and driving, supporting, sustaining the gender mainstreaming work of other UN agencies, on the other (see also point 5 below). Its functions would include research, analysis and standard setting, advocacy (including around the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolution 1325), gender training, annual women's conference and monitoring committee on CEDAW and operational activities.
2. This restructured women's body would have the capacity to initiate and coordinate gender programmes which are currently run by other agencies but do not constitute their main mandate, eg UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, etc; their budgets should be reallocated to the new body.
3. The work of UNFPA should report to the restructured women's body given that its key role is female reproductive health and choice
4. There should be cost savings resulting from our proposals through consolidated back office functions and administration, as well as increased effectiveness and efficiency.
5. The restructured lead agency on women should have the authority, resources and mandate to drive, support and sustain the process of ensuring the centrality of gender mainstreaming within each UN agency. Gender mainstreaming must be implemented systematically and backed up with political will, resources – financial, technical and human – and effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability mechanisms. The UN has failed to date to reach this strategic objective.
6. Rationalise and streamline in-country and regional UN offices to create one office per country/region, ensuring that gender equality and human rights are represented at all levels in that body.
7. Each in-country/regional UN office should provide for the women's agency, to promote proactively women's equality and gender mainstreaming at country/regional level.
8. Establish an effective accountability mechanism that functions at all levels – local, regional and international – and includes the representation of diverse women's rights advocates as part of its governing body.

Institutional Impact and/or Future Institutional Structure:

The establishment of a coherent single body - UN Centre and Field Operations - reporting to UN Secretary General, which would deal efficiently, effectively and equitably with advocacy, setting standards, operational programmes and in all areas of activity which impact on women.

References and Information Sources:

Result of consultation with women's organisations called to a meeting by UNIFEM UK at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on 21/06/06:

WOMANKIND Worldwide
Commonwealth Secretariat
Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland
UK Gender and Development Network

Meeting with UNIFEM National Committees (Finland, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Sweden, UK and USA) in Helsinki, May 2006