

## **Office on 'gender' proposed for UN**

**February 26, 2009 - (Spero News)**

At a forum hosted by the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York this week, a former top United Nations (UN) official criticized the UN's "deplorable" record on women and the "the hypocrisy within the UN" on gender. In a presentation entitled "The United Nations and Gender: Has Anything Gone Right?," Stephen Lewis promoted a radical overhaul of the United Nations, starting with a the creation of a new, billion dollar gender office.

Lewis, the former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa and a former Deputy Director of UNICEF, has long been a vociferous supporter of the creation of a "fully-resourced" women's agency. Such an agency could change the UN and end the "suffocating patriarchy" with a new "sensitivity of collaboration." Lewis continued that this, "would not only help women but rescue the UN from some of its worst behavior."

One audience member questioned the necessity of a new billion dollar agency. There are already several UN bodies which focus on issues affecting women, including the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI) and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). Lewis said, "Rendering little agencies is not enough. There is not enough staff, not enough resources and no mandate." He viewed the proposed agency as the UN's "one last chance" to advocate for women multilaterally the way UNICEF does for children with a staff and budget to match.

It was during Mr. Lewis' stint at UNICEF that the Vatican decided to withdraw its annual symbolic donation because of mounting evidence that the agency was promoting abortion. Critics fear that a new agency would not advocate for women but for certain ideologies espoused by those in charge, particularly for a universal right to abortion.

In pushing for a "gender" office, Lewis joins radical feminist non-governmental organizations such as Equality Now and the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). Last year, WEDO commenced a formal campaign for Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR), lobbying for a "stronger, consolidated, higher status women's entity." 275 organizations have signed onto the GEAR campaign and WEDO is slated to host two events at the UN headquarters during this year's annual Commission on the Status of Women meeting in an attempt to rally more support for the new agency.

The Commission on the Status of Women will meet next week at the UN. The annual CSW meetings routinely see efforts to incorporate "sexual and reproductive health services" or abortion as part of promoting "comprehensive prevention" programs.

Lewis said he was heartened by the quick action that the UN is taking on making the new agency for women a reality. In 2008, the General Assembly passed a resolution by consensus calling on the UN to initiate planning for such an agency.

According to Lewis, the ambassadors of Spain and Namibia have already been engaged to lead the UN “gender architecture” planning process and he expects to see the new agency established as early as the end of this year.