

Stephen Lewis: The UN has let down the world's women. Now let's put that right

Friday, 22 May 2009

I have had the privilege of working for 25 years internationally, including being Canada's UN representative in the 1980s. The most lamentable and heart-breaking dimension of multilateralism I have seen is the absence of any serious focus on gender throughout the UN system.

I can cite chapter and verse, but let me start by telling you that whether it is poverty alleviation, or HIV and Aids, or sexual violence and conflict, the whole panoply of discrimination visited on women around the world, particularly in developing countries, the UN's agencies and the Secretariat have been profoundly delinquent in their response.

For me, the struggle for gender equality has become the most important struggle on the planet; the continuing marginalisation of 52 per cent of the world's population is simply unacceptable. So we're now engaged in an effort to create a new international agency for women, a fascinating undertaking that I hope will engage Parliamentarians in the House of Commons and House of Lords because of the UK's extraordinary influence in the multilateral system.

Nothing approximates the possibility of finally having a vehicle that would give voice and resources and support to the struggles of women around the world. It was first suggested in the fall of 2006 and in September of last year, the General Assembly agreed that it should be part of an overall UN reform. My own feeling is that you can't delay a day. I turned on my computer this morning and saw that there was yet another heartbreaking report of sexual violence in the Congo, another episode of dementia and depravity that chills the blood.

Everyone knows what's happening in these areas about women's vulnerability but there is never a consistent voice to bring it to the attention of the world community, to continue to hammer it home, to demand action from government. So the emergence and creation of a women's agency I think would be a Godsend internationally and would overcome the record of the United Nations on gender.

Taken from an address by the Co-Director, AIDS-Free World, at a Parliamentary Event this week, speaking in support of VSO and ACTSA; www.aidsfreeworld.org.

To support the campaign for a UN Women's Agency visit www.vso.org.uk