



Briefing

Reforming the UN for Women: Support the Resolution to Create a Powerful New UN Agency for Women

11th September 2009

Understanding and supporting
women and their organisations

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Introduction

Despite many important developments for women, Governments have failed to implement the commitments to women's rights they have made in the CEDAW Convention, Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and through other human rights agreements¹.

On **Monday 14th September 2009**, at the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly, the UN General Assembly will decide whether a resolution on the creation of a powerful new UN "agency for women" will be passed. If agreed, this will be a watershed moment for gender equality and women's rights.

A new agency will improve the UN's coordination and efforts to fund and promote gender equality, and has the potential to end the 'suffocating patriarchy'² within the UN.

Context

There is varied commitment to gender equality within the UN itself³. At CSW in 2007, Secretary General Ban Ki Moon launched an international campaign to end violence against women. Some UN agencies, such as International Labor Organisation (ILO) and Habitat have strong gender policies. An initiative of gender 'score cards' for UN agencies was introduced, but it has not been clear what the sanctions or rewards are, so this has not been particularly effective⁴.

Currently, there are a small number of agencies within the UN that focus on gender equality:

1. UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
2. Office for the Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI)
3. Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
4. International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)
5. Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE)
6. UN Population Fund (UNFPA)

Less than 1% of all UN money goes towards gender equality, and UNIFEM gets 99% of that funding⁵.

According to the World Bank, USD20 – 30 billion of new money is required to achieve Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3), the Goal that specifically focuses on women⁶.

¹ European GEAR Campaign Working Group (2009). Campaign for Stronger Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) at the UN.

² Spero (2009). "Office on 'gender' proposed for UN".

³ Pat Holden and Lucy Earle (2009). "The UN Delivering as One for Women at Country Level", Department for International Development (DFID), London.

⁴ Pat Holden and Lucy Earle (2009). "The UN Delivering as One for Women at Country Level", Department for International Development (DFID), London.

⁵ European GEAR Campaign Working Group (2009). "Ambitious funding will ensure an effective new UN gender equality entity".

Some in-country gender programmes are delivered under the banner of “Delivering As One”, and these have been most successful where the priorities of the programmes align with Government priorities⁷.

The UN sees their role as mainstreaming and alignment of gender programmes compared to isolated funding for women’s activities.

It’s important to understand the different mechanisms that exist within the UN to support gender equality.

For example, the Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is often called the ‘international bill of rights for women’. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and was ratified by the UK in 1986. Governments are required to report to the CEDAW Committee, a group of experts on women’s rights, every four years. The UK Government was last examined by the CEDAW Committee in July 2008, and was required to submit a ‘One Year On’ report in July 2009. CEDAW currently ‘sits’ within the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and will not move or become part of the new women’s agency.

CEDAW shadow reports (the formal mechanism for women’s organisations to respond to their Government’s report) remain a very important way to raise difficult issues around inequality (e.g. women’s organisations themselves not getting enough funding). Shadow reports are also a powerful way of reiterating the call for a new women’s agency.

⁶ European GEAR Campaign Working Group (2009). “Ambitious funding will ensure an effective new UN gender equality entity”.

⁷ Pat Holden and Lucy Earle (2009). “The UN Delivering as One for Women at Country Level”, Department for International Development (DFID), London.

The GEAR Campaign

The GEAR Campaign is led by a coalition of women's NGOs worldwide who are calling for a strong, unified, appropriately funded women's agency within the UN.

The GEAR Campaign was launched at the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2007, and was the subject of high level discussion in 2006.

Such an agency would lead UN efforts to hold Governments to account, be an advisory service across the UN, leverage other UN agencies and make sure gender equality commitments are being implemented.

Most Governments support the new agency in principle, but some are reluctant. A few countries that have a strong position of resistance and attend all meetings.

The agency should have presence in developed as well as developing countries because women's rights are still widely abused in every country in the world. Therefore, the agency should be accessible to women's organisations in the UK in order to hold the UK government to account on its gender equality work.

Key campaign demands are:

- The new agency must be headed up by an Under Secretary General to ensure that there is a seat at the top decision making tables. The appointment of this woman needs to be an open and transparent process that is open to critique by civil society, to avoid political jousting.
- There must be a starting budget of USD1 billion otherwise it will falter at the outset, i.e. 'ambitious, predictable, stable funding'. This means increased resourcing from member states (including UK, through the Department for International Development).
- The work must be programmatic (i.e. operational, to ensure it reaches the women who most need investment and support) as well as policy-driven (normative).
- The agency must be governed by an Executive Board in the same way UNICEF, UNDP and others are governed.
- *Women's organisations must be involved in the process.*

Actions

- Sign up to the GEAR campaign: www.un-gear.eu
- Subscribe to campaign@un-gear.eu to ensure you are regularly informed on campaign developments.
- Women's organisations can be asking themselves: how could a reformed gender body engage at a country level? What could it do for you?
- If you have links with women's organisations internationally, especially in countries that are resisting this initiative (Egypt, Cuba, Sudan, Iran), ask them to write to their Governments TODAY in support of a new UN women's agency.
- If you have links with international press in London (e.g. Inter Press Service) ask them to cover the story.
- Read the articles attached to this briefing, and keep an eye on the papers for further developments.

Further Reading (see www.wrc.org.uk/cedaw)

- Diplomatic ambush threatens UN 'super-agency' for women, Sept 11, 2009
- Rights: UN May Shelve Creation of New Women's Body, Sept 5 2009
- The UN has let down the world's women. Now let's put that right, The Independent, May 22 2009

About the Women's Resource Centre

WRC is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding. Our members work in a wide range of fields including health, violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women. There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

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