

## **A Crying Need for an International Agency for Women**

### **Remarks by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa, to a High-Level Panel on UN Reform, 2 July 2006, Geneva**

There is a crying need for an international agency for women. Every stitch of evidence we have, right across the entire spectrum of gender inequality suggests the urgent need for a multilateral agency. The great dreams of the international conferences in Vienna, Cairo and Beijing have never come to pass. It matters not the issue: whether its levels of sexual violence, or HIV/AIDS, or maternal mortality, or armed conflict, or economic empowerment, or parliamentary representation, women are in terrible trouble. And things are getting no better.

This Panel can create such an agency and show fundamental courage by doing so, or it can tinker at the edges of 'gender architecture' and consign the world of women, yet again, to perpetual second-rate status.

I'm not going to equivocate about my expectations: I expect the Panel to take the road of least resistance, and come up with some high-sounding scheme, probably with a few choice rhetorical morsels about 'gender-mainstreaming' and expect that that will do the trick. It won't. If that's the chosen path, I can confidently predict that we'll be back again, less than ten years from now, driven by a new impetus for UN reform, the Millennium Development Goals unmet in a majority of countries, and the lives of women will be every bit as hazardous, compromised, marginalized and desperate as they are today.

Let's look at the options.

The suggestion has been made that all the present fragments of women's agencies in the United Nations be thrown together, given a little more money and staff, and be led by an Under-Secretary General. We'd take the Division for the Advancement of Women, the Office of the Special Advisor to the Secretary-General, the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and turn them into a viable women's organization. It's not enough; it won't work ... too little experience, too few mandates, too much unbridled competition, too many areas of programming that are entirely unfamiliar. It's a recipe for stalemate. (I might note that in the July 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the Canadian newspaper, the Toronto Star, a story was carried suggesting that I thought a women's agency could replace the mandates of various agencies where they intersect with women ... e.g., WHO on health; ILO on labour; UNFPA on sexual and reproductive health. That was a matter of simple confusion that I may well have caused. I hold no such view).

The suggestion has been made that UNIFEM alone should be transformed into a new, free-standing women's agency. The sentiment is perfectly understandable; UNIFEM has at least made some impact despite being confined to subservient status as a department of UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). But it won't work ... UNIFEM; in its present form has never had extensive programming expertise, or operational experience in countries, or a

range of government counterparts in Ministries, or financial and human resource autonomy, let alone sufficient breadth in its focus to represent half the world's population.

UNIFEM can most assuredly be folded into something new; it cannot become what it was never meant to be. It is part of a gender architecture so dysfunctional as to lead one to believe that the design was deliberate.

The suggestion has been made that the Resident Coordinator (RC) system be altered to separate the RC from his or her duties with UNDP, thus freeing up the RC, as head of the UN family, to devote whatever time is necessary to the struggle for gender equality. I have heard many foolhardy suggestions, but that tops the list. It may help the overall UN relationships with government to separate out the functions of the RC. But to pretend that the RCs, who vary greatly in quality and interest, and have no particular skills on gender (and that's the crucial point), would somehow behave differently on the issue of women than they have behaved over the last many years, is to indulge in reckless self-delusion. How long do we have to toy with the façade before admitting that the architecture is hollow?

Of equal merit is the suggestion that we can strengthen UNIFEM within the UNDP and win the day for women as a result. I don't want to be disrespectful, but just how far can you strain credibility? One of the single greatest failures within the United Nations over the last many years is the performance of UNDP on matters pertaining to gender. It's been awful, and everyone knows it. The UNDP has never even been able to bring itself to make the Executive Director of UNIFEM an Assistant-Director General, in an agency where ASGs abound. It is absurd to think that the UNDP can change its spots.

The suggestion has been made that we create some kind of coordinating Centre for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, in the fashion of UNAIDS. I realize the earnest intent behind this proposal, particularly when the objective of coordination is enhanced by having an individual representative placed in all country offices, and a central office modestly staffed at headquarters.

But the UNAIDS analogy simply does not hold up to scrutiny. UNAIDS was designed to coordinate the separate agency responses to AIDS, using the cooperating partners' (including the World Bank) field level capacity to provide resources and technical expertise to governments dealing with an unimaginably complex pandemic. But where gender is concerned, there's precious little at headquarters to coordinate, let alone at country level. What's more, without operational capacity on the ground, this proposition is a non-starter. It will take us no further than we are today. Advocacy without programme capacity is a recipe for the status quo. Sure, we'll have some heightened consciousness, but that's not genuine reform; that's intellectual dalliance. The entire advocacy in the world (and UNAIDS has some limited country capacity as well), has not managed to stem the carnage of AIDS amongst women.

The proof is in the dying.

In fact, if I may digress for a moment, it's worth pointing out that if it were not for the unsung heroism of the women of Africa, including the grandmothers --- impoverished, uneducated,

disproportionately infected --- the response of the international community would be branded a complete failure.

No, what we need is a full-fledged agency with real operational capacity on the ground to build partnerships with governments, to engage in public policy, to design and finance programmatic interventions for women, to give NGOs and community-based women's groups the support their voices and ideas have never had, to extract money from bilateral donors, to whip the UN family into shape, to bring substance and know-how to the business of gender mainstreaming, to involve women in every facet of life from development to trade to culture to peace and security, to lobby vociferously and indefatigably for every aspect of gender equality, to have sufficient staff and resources to make everyone sit up and take notice. That's exactly what UNICEF does for children. Why can't we have the same for more than half of humankind?

There are five significant caveats raised every time the proposal is put. Let me deal in brief with all of them.

First, how do you wed the human rights objectives of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) with the operational capacity in the field? I submit that it's not so difficult. The provisions of CEDAW become the policy base for the women's agency. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) can then best service the CEDAW Committee while a new women's agency, as part of its mandate, funds the process. That's exactly what is now done by UNICEF and OHCHR in respect to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It works and works well.

Second, how do you re-enforce and make more effective the concept of "gender mainstreaming"? Many governments, especially western governments, have invested huge amounts of money and time in gender mainstreaming, as an easy solution to gender inequality, and want to see it make a dramatic difference; want to see that the needs and rights of women are woven into the body of every aspect of institutional life.

Well, the sad truth is that the governments have to learn to face defeat. Gender mainstreaming is not easy. When it's sloughed off on non-experts and made to stand on its own, rather than alongside targeted programmes to promote women's empowerment and human rights, it just doesn't work. The original idea was intended to use gender mainstreaming as a "transformative" strategy ... that is to say, there would be a radical transformation in gender relationships. It has not happened, least of all within the United Nations itself. There is not a single assessment of gender mainstreaming that I have read --- and there have been many assessments, commissioned by donors, compiled by the UN itself, done by NGOs --- that is fundamentally positive. Every single one of them ranges from the negative to an unabashed indictment.

And the United Nations? The complexities of gender mainstreaming aside, it even flunks the test of gender parity, failing to reach its own target of 50/50 in staffing percentages in the vast majority of departments and agencies. For the UN Office in Geneva, the city in which we're meeting, the 50/50 target, at present rates, will be reached in 2072. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations at present rates, will reach the target by 2100. It makes of gender mainstreaming the *reductio ad absurdum* of United Nations policy.

I have to tell this panel that if there were a true UN policy of whistle blower immunity, you would be inundated by women, especially at the mid and lower levels of the United Nations system, eager to provide testimony about the dismay they feel when it turns out that no one cares about women's issues, let alone the sexism and discriminatory treatment to which they are regularly subjected.

Third, where will we get the money? Everyone argues that there's no money to be had and no patience for large additional sums. I've said publicly that the new agency should be launched at the level of UNICEF's funding, currently \$2 billion a year. If that paralyzes governments, then let's start at \$1 billion a year, build systematically, and with increases of ten per cent a year, for five years, we will have exceeded the \$2 billion mark.

When it comes to women, western governments cry poverty whenever large sums are discussed. It's just unconscionable. As recently as one week ago, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom asserted, in an op-ed for 'The Independent', co-authored by his Chancellor of the Exchequer (a member of this panel!) and his Minister of Development Cooperation, that world foreign aid jumped by 25% in 2005 over 2004, reaching over \$100 billion annually, well on the way to \$130 billion as promised for 2010.

So I ask: is more than half the world's population not entitled to one per cent of the total? What's happened to our sense of international values? How dare the leaders of the G8 crow about progress on aid and debt (albeit not trade) while continuing to watch the economic, social, physical and psychological decimation of so many of the world's women? How in heaven's name can they be sanguine about the catastrophic loss of so much human potential?

Fourth, it is anticipated, in advance, that the 'G77 and China' may not be friendly to the idea of a new agency. That may or may not be the case. But in any event, it should have no veto-like bearing on the recommendations of this panel. After all, the Secretary-General knew that his management reforms would run into hostility from the G77 and China, which indeed they have. But the Secretary-General was in no sense intimidated, and advanced the reforms because he felt they were right. This panel should do the same.

Fifth, and perhaps most pointedly, more and more people --- including NGOs and some governments --- are asking: why create another agency within the United Nations when the multilateral record is abysmal? What makes anyone think that a women's agency will function at a higher level than so many others which have proved themselves dysfunctional.

That's a very tough question to answer. I was frankly surprised at the numbers of people to whom I've spoken, overwhelmingly women, who expressed an almost venomous skepticism about the UN's capacity to perform. They have noted the miserable sidelining of women and women's issues and are close to writing off the entire UN on that basis. I had to plead for one more chance. I had not fully realized how much the United Nations is at the crossroads in the minds of so many.

I will admit that it's somewhat at a crossroads in my mind as well. If this Panel merely concocts a solution that is no solution at all --- sounds good on paper, but like so many other UN documents collapses in practice --- then the rationale for contemporary multilateralism really has to be questioned. We're not talking here of some minor intervention; we're talking of several billion people.

For me, everything I've ever known of gender inequality has been sharpened by witnessing the AIDS pandemic. And I can say, without fear of contradiction, that where the women of Africa are concerned, the UN has been a colossal failure. Confirmation of that can be seen in the work of the UN Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS at country level. I've watched them now for five years; try as they might, they can never get their act fully together to reduce the impact of the virus on women. For the young women in particular, there is a palpable sense of betrayal.

I want to change that view. I want the world to understand that if we had an international organization for women, with force and dollars and staff, we could save, liberate and enhance hundreds of millions of lives. I make that argument because this women's agency can be built on the foundation constructed over the years by the kaleidoscope of women's groups that have operated outside the UN, partly because there's been so little to affiliate with on the inside.

That's why a billion dollars is such a paltry sum. And let no one sow confusion: by an international organization for women, I don't mean a specialized agency like the WHO, or ILO, or FAO. I mean one of the powerful Funds or Programmes like UNICEF or UNDP or UNFPA or the World Food Programme.

Time and time again over the last two years Kofi Annan has called for a "deep social revolution ... to transform relationships between men and women at all levels of society". He means, by that, women's empowerment and gender equality. Gender equality is not achieved in hesitant, tentative, disingenuous increments. It's achieved by bold and dramatic reform of the architecture of the United Nations.

This Panel has the opportunity to take the plunge. Some would argue that more than half the world is waiting.