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GENDER EQUALITY ARCHITECTURE REFORM: REALITY OR RHETORIC?

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GENDER EQUALITY ARCHITECTURE REFORM: REALITY OR RHETORIC?

Fleur Roberts¹

Abstract: The United Nations (UN) has long been seen as one of the world's most influential organisations in the movement for gender equality. The UN is unique in its ability to produce binding inter-governmental normative frameworks, and it has played an important role through its research, advocacy and programmes. However, many gender equality advocates have become increasingly concerned with the significant weaknesses within the UN system and the ongoing gap between policy and practice. The current Gender Equality Architecture Reform process has offered new hope that the UN might finally live up to its potential and deliver tangible support for gender equality. However, the reform process has moved at a sluggish pace and some are worried that once again the UN will fail to deliver on its promises. The paper will explore these issues and goes on to consider the viability of creating a global gender entity outside of the UN system.

Keywords: *United Nations, gender equality, women's rights, women's empowerment, architecture reform.*

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“The UN may be the only global institution with the legitimacy to create change for women’s rights on a massive scale.”

(Women’s Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) 2007)

Introduction

The UN is regarded as a key partner in the movement for gender equality and women’s rights. The past year marks several historic occasions that reflect the important role the UN played in supporting gender equality. For example, 2009 marked the 30th anniversary of the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and 2010 marks 15 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and 10 years since the adoption of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. These milestones allow us to look back and celebrate the successes of the past 30+ years. Unfortunately, this is equally a time to reflect on the paucity of achievement. Gender inequality remains a pervasive problem throughout the world; women are more likely to live below the poverty line, one in three women experience some form of violence, women are severely under-represented in political governance – on average only 18% of national parliament seats are held by women, and girls’ net school enrolment continues to be lower than that of boys despite global efforts (Department for International Development, 2010). Therefore, it is particularly encouraging that in July 2010 the UN General Assembly gave its official support for the formation of a stronger gender equality entity within the UN to be known as UN Women. But do these endeavours mark a turning point for gender inequality or reflect more hollow rhetoric from the UN and its Member States? For some gender equality advocates, discontent with the ongoing lack of support for gender equality at the UN led them to question the value of engaging with the UN, and they have proposed the creation of a new non-UN entity to champion gender equality (Kettel, 2007, p. 881). This paper will investigate the UN’s

contribution to the realisation of gender equality and identify the possible reasons why the UN failed to live up to the expectations of gender equality advocates. The paper will then assess whether the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) process represents a beacon of hope or whether the time has come to establish an independent gender equality entity.

The United Nations: Leading the way

Gender equality advocates have long engaged with the UN system because it is considered to have an important role to play in the promotion and protection of women's rights and gender equality. The UN has contributed to the movement for gender equality in three key ways: 1) Through the establishment of normative frameworks and government commitments to women's rights; 2) By providing space for civil society organisations to collaborate and strategise on progressing gender equality; 3) By making important contributions through its programmes, advocacy, and research on the status of women and girls.

Normative frameworks

Since its inception the UN has played a particularly important role as a global forum for the progression of gender equality, and over recent decades it has been crucial in facilitating the establishment of seminal normative standards for women's rights.² These initiatives include CEDAW (1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000), to name just a few.³

CEDAW is the most extensive legally binding framework for women's rights.⁴ It served to give visibility to specific forms of inequity

² See Jain (2005) for a comprehensive overview of early successes for women and equality at the UN.

³ Other important frameworks and standards include the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1994), Millennium Development Goals Three and Five (2000), and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (2002).

⁴ However, as with all UN conventions, the extent to which Member States can actually be held to account is questionable.

experienced by women, and the organisation has given legitimacy to women's claims against discrimination. States that have ratified or acceded to the convention are bound to implement CEDAW's provisions; moreover, they are required to submit regular reports that outline the steps they have undertaken to comply with the convention. The Optional Protocol adopted in 2000 further strengthened the convention as it gives women in signatory countries a channel through which to appeal grievances if their claims were not adequately addressed at the national level. Guerrina and Zalewski (2007, p. 5) have rightly described CEDAW as "a significant landmark in the development of a coherent strategy for the promotion and protection of women's human rights". Although a convention such as CEDAW does not result in a wave of change, it is a valuable tool because it enables women to make supported claims about the way they should be respected and puts legal obligations on signatory governments (Guerrina and Zalewski 2007, p. 5; Lloyd 2007, p. 101). But CEDAW should not be seen as merely a legal framework. Rather, perhaps more importantly, it provided a foundation for grassroots and global advocacy.

The UN conferences on women and conferences such as the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights (1993) and the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (1994) led to the formulation of declarations and output documents that greatly progressed global articulations on gender equality and women's rights.⁵ Although the conferences' action plans are not legally binding under international law, they assigned a moral obligation to the governments that signed onto them (Wichterich, 2005). In particular, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (1995) was an important milestone as it saw 189 governments sign an unprecedented agenda for

⁵ In response to the growing discourses on women and development in the 1970s, the status of women and girls gained greater attention within the UN and amongst its Member States. As a result the UN convened a series of conferences, held during the 1970s to the 1990s, that focused specifically on issues relating to women and gender. The four UN conferences for women were held in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995).

gender equality in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. These documents consolidated past commitments on women's rights and gender equality, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); CEDAW (1979); the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985); the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993); and the Cairo Programme of Action (1994). The Beijing Platform for Action also set out 12 Critical Areas of Concern, the expanse of which meant that many gender equality advocates rightly see the document as the most comprehensive and authoritative consensus on women's rights and gender equality produced at a UN conference (Zeitlin, 2007, p. 8; Zeitlin, Frankson and Valenti 2005, p. 6).⁶ Further, unlike many conference documents, the Platform for Action is a living document as the 12 Critical Areas of Concern shape the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, as well as countless civil society organisations.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security marked further progress for gender equality as it delivered a more nuanced understanding of gender, women, and conflict in a space, the Security Council, which had previously failed to move beyond typical narratives of women as mere victims. In contrast, Resolution 1325 produced a more complete representation of women's varying roles in conflict and peace. The resolution identifies women as active participants in combat, conflict prevention, and peace processes, acknowledges the urgent need to mainstream gender in UN peace-keeping operations, and emphasises the need to improve women's access to leadership positions and decision-making forums related to conflict and peace-building. By producing a more realistic narrative of women's multiple roles and experiences, it acted as a springboard for initiatives at the national, regional and international levels that are

⁶ The 12 Critical Areas of Concern are: Women and Poverty, Education and Training of Women, Women and Health, Violence against Women, Women and Armed Conflict, Women and the Economy, Women in Power and Decision Making, Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, Human Rights of Women, Women and the Media, Women and the Environment, and the Girl Child.

responsive to women's varying roles and promote their involvement in conflict prevention and resolution. Furthermore, like the normative frameworks mentioned above, Resolution 1325 implores Member States and the UN system to support and facilitate the realisation of gender equality.⁷

The three examples above illustrate that the UN has been a leading force on the progressive articulation and recognition of women's rights and gender equality.⁸ Such standards have given validity and support to the issue of gender equality and, because the UN is the world's only democratic multilateral agency, the normative frameworks established in this space have a level of international legitimacy that cannot be achieved in other spaces. The normative standards achieved through the UN most certainly surpass the laws of most states and by signing onto these standards Member States are, in theory at least, accountable to those standards (Choike, 2007; WEDO, 2007). Not surprisingly then, gender equality advocates have long viewed the UN as a crucial partner in the promotion of women's rights and gender equality (Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) & WEDO, 2006, p. 1-2).

Space for civil society to collaborate and strategise

In addition to facilitating the establishment of normative standards, the UN created important spaces through which a diverse range of gender equality advocates have been able to network, collaborate, strategise, organise, and lobby governments. Some scholars believe that the UN has been seminal in helping the global gender equality movement take root and mature into a formidable force (Jain, 2005; Antrobus, 2004; Eager, 2004). For example, the early UN conferences on women took place at a time when feminists had yet to build transnational networks or

⁷ Although Security Council Resolution 1325 was a watershed for narratives on women and conflict, it has also been criticised for its limitations. For example it is not legally binding, it lacks monitoring and accountability frameworks, and it does not challenge militaristic structures that perpetuate gender inequality (Otto, 2009).

⁸ It must be said however that these achievements are in no small part due to the relentless and committed lobbying by gender equality advocates.

to pragmatically work together as a group. Rather, there were significant tensions between feminists of the Global North and Global South.⁹ These UN conferences, which frequently provided NGO forums, provided space for feminists from around the world to share ideas and experiences. These dialogues were a necessary step for later collaboration, and they enabled new networks to be forged – many of which remain strong to this day (Antrobus, 2004, p. 37; Eager, 2004, p. 108-109; Jaquette, 1995, p. 48-49). The annual Commission on the Status of Women meetings and the UN's gender-specific bodies have continued to facilitate this interaction and have provided an authoritative space through which to lobby governments. This is another reason why many believe that the UN has been fundamentally important to the global movement for gender equality (Jain, 2005, p. 160; Phadnis, 2002, p. 8).

Research, advocacy, and programmes

Through its research, advocacy, and programmes the UN provided both support and leadership for the gender equality movement. Though severely under-funded (discussed later), the UN's gender equality entities made significant contributions through their regional and global research on key issues including violence against women, HIV and AIDS, peace and security, the MDGs, economic empowerment, aid effectiveness, democracy, and climate change. They also produced useful databases such as WomanStats – the most extensive compilation of information on gender inequality, publications on the status of women, advocacy and training materials, and web portals on key gender topics. Furthermore, as well as initiating formal global advocacy campaigns such as the 'Say No - UNiTE to End Violence against Women' campaign, the various gender equality entities have been crucial

⁹ Jaquette (1995, p. 48-49) explains that this is because feminists of the Global North, who were focused on the 'Women in Development' agenda, were wary of the South's focus on structural inequality and challenging of economic and neo-colonial hegemony, "which they saw as diversionary". Conversely, feminists of the Global South rejected the dominance of the Global North feminists and their conception of what constitutes a 'women's issue'.

partners for civil society organisations in lobbying Member States and UN officials. Moreover, although its operational capacity is severely limited, UNIFEM does deliver targeted programmes at the regional and national level by working in partnership with other UN agencies, governments, and civil society. Lastly, through its monitoring mechanisms the UN helps to hold Member States accountable for their actions and raise concerns over violations of commitments. This accountability is achieved through mechanisms such as the CEDAW Committee and the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.

In sum, the UN has produced outcome documents that have set new standards for women's rights and gender equality, facilitated dialogue and networking, and developed worthwhile research, advocacy, and programmes. These contributions have been instrumental in elevating the issue of gender equality on international, regional, and national agendas.

The United Nations: Much talk, little substance

Despite the work achieved over the past 35 years, there is consensus amongst gender equality advocates that more needs to be done by the UN if tangible change is to be achieved. The formulation of seminal frameworks and official commitments often failed to translate into tangible action within the UN system and its Member States (Kettel, 2007, p. 873). Not surprisingly, many advocates have become dismayed and frustrated at the lack of progress, and some have questioned the value of engaging with the UN to advance gender equality (Zeitlin, 2007, p. 8; Cornwall & Molyneux, 2006, p. 1189; Griffen, 2004, p. 162-165; Mayer, 1995, p. 189). In an open letter to the Secretary-General, women's rights organisations at the 50th Session of the CSW expressed concern that "the lack of implementation sets a disheartening precedent which retards the work and reputation of the United Nations and impedes the urgently-needed progress of gender

equality worldwide” (Gender Monitoring Group of the World Summit, 2006).

It is obvious that despite the constant rhetoric proclaiming unwavering support for women’s rights and gender equality, the support mechanisms at the UN are significantly inadequate (Kettel, 2007, p. 872-873). Particular areas of concern include resourcing; stature of the gender entities; the absence of senior-level support; lack of operational capacity for gender equality work; and the fractured structure of the gender architecture. Before looking into these issues, it is important to briefly introduce the UN gender architecture.

The UN gender architecture

At present there are four staffed UN bodies that are primarily mandated to work on women’s rights and gender equality. They are the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW). There are also other significant gender-focused bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), and the CEDAW Committee. Further, as a result of the UN’s attempts to ‘mainstream’ gender throughout the organisation, there are numerous UN bodies that have a gender equality aspect to their mandates.¹⁰ For example, agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the High Commissioners for Human Rights and Refugees are mandated to incorporate a gender perspective

¹⁰ Key documents on gender mainstreaming within the UN system include The Chief Executive Board’s system-wide policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women (CEB/2006/2) and ECOSOC’s Agreed Conclusions (1997/2).

into their work, and some organisations do important work in this respect (Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2006, p. 2).

UNIFEM is arguably the most significant gender entity at the UN, and according to Jain (2005, p. 127), it emerged as a "leader on a number of issues that are important to the worldwide women's movement". It is an associated fund of the UNDP, commands an annual budget of US\$215.4m, and operates 15 sub-regional offices, ten country programme offices, and 46 project offices (Curtis et al., 2009, p. 4). The organisation is mandated to support national and regional initiatives that benefit women, act as a catalyst to ensure women participate at all levels of mainstream development, and play an influential role within the UN system. Yet, as will be discussed, UNIFEM is severely impeded in its ability to deliver on this vast mandate. Therefore, the organisation focused its work on four key issues: women's economic rights, violence against women, HIV and AIDS, and gender justice in democratic governance.

INSTRAW is situated within the UN Research Institutes, with a mandate to assist the advancement of women through research, training, and the distribution of important information. INSTRAW currently focuses its research on gender in relation to peace and security, migration and development, governance, and political participation. In order to be in touch at the ground-level, INSTRAW forged networking partnerships with gender focal points, regional organisations, and women's networks (Jain, 2005, p. 131). The organisation has 12 staff and an annual budget of approximately US\$4.12m, but it does not have a regular UN budget on which to rely. Rather, funding for the body comes from voluntary contributions from UN Member States and donor agencies (Curtis, et al., 2009, p. 4). This funding structure proved highly problematic for INSTRAW because it struggled to persuade donors that research can adequately affect policies on the ground. This dilemma resulted in

constant funding problems, cuts in staff, and an absence of necessary resources (Jain, 2005, p. 131).

DAW is situated within the UN Secretariat under the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. It has a co-ordinating role within the UN system, with four key responsibilities. First, DAW is responsible for supporting the formulation of international normative standards and policies on gender equality and women's rights. Second, it is required to support and monitor the implementation of international agreements and policy documents on gender equality and women's rights at the global and local levels. Third, DAW must provide support to states in their implementation of CEDAW and give support to CEDAW's working groups. Finally, it is required to support gender mainstreaming within the UN and its Member States. In fulfilment of this mandate DAW plays a main support role for the CSW and the CEDAW Committee, providing them with technical support. The organisation has an annual budget of US\$1.15 and a staff of 28 (Curtis et al., 2009, p. 4).

OSAGI is also situated within the UN Secretariat under the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and it acts as the 'focal point' for women within the Secretariat. The organisation has an annual budget of US\$0.418m and a staff of 14 (Curtis et al., 2009, p. 4). As with DAW, OSAGI is required to support the mainstreaming of a gender perspective within the UN and amongst Member States. Despite the size of the mandate, OSAGI only has two full-time staff responsible for gender mainstreaming (Kettel, 2007, p. 876). The office is also mandated to advise and represent the Secretary-General on gender issues and to lobby for the inclusion of gender in high-level policies of the UN. OSAGI carries a specific responsibility to support the effective implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Beijing Plus Five outcome document. Further, OSAGI is required to give support to DAW, the CSW, and the CEDAW Committee and to give backing on gender issues to the General Assembly and ECOSOC

(Women Watch, 2007). These challenges represent an overwhelming mandate for the office considering its small budget and staffing levels.

At face value it appears the UN possesses the structures and entities in place to effectively address gender equality and women's rights issues. However, these structures are severely under-resourced, and over-stretched, and they lack high-level support, operational capacity, stature, and coherence. As a consequence the capacity for supporting gender equality became more diffuse, and the work these bodies do achieve is the result of constant struggles. Indeed, CWGL and WEDO (2006, p. 3) go as far as to say that "these structures are designed to fail or falter". Although this assertion may be a slight exaggeration, the UN gender architecture and the mainstreaming of gender throughout the UN system have not been given the support they need to succeed.

Lack of resources

All aspects of the UN's gender infrastructure and mainstreaming work are considerably under-funded (CWGL & WEDO, 2006, p. 3). Member State representatives and senior UN officials have often stated that gender equality and women's empowerment are a priority, yet time and again words have failed to translate into sufficient funding, which suggests that supporting gender equality has not been a priority concern. This assertion is supported when one looks at the disparity between the funding for the gender-specific bodies and that of other UN bodies. For example UNICEF - which is tasked with supporting child rights and development, as UNIFEM is for women - has an annual budget of more than US\$3b. In comparison, the entire women's machinery receives approximately US\$221m, not even 1% of the UN's total US\$27b budget (Bunch, 2009, p. 10).¹¹ UNIFEM receives the bulk of the funding with an approximate income of US\$215.4 (Curtis et al.,

¹¹ Estimates on the 2008 budget of the four gender entities vary: Curtis, Rigg & Kotok (2009:4) claim that the total budget was US\$221m whereas the Secretary General claims the budget was US\$224.7m in his report, 'Comprehensive Proposal for the Composite Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women' (United Nations General Assembly, 2010a).

2009, p. 4).¹² Nevertheless, the organisation is largely impeded in its ability to fulfil its mandate. The funding falls well short of that needed to meet the demands of its work such as the delivery of strong regional and country-level programming and technical expert support for other UN entities. Yet, although it is one of the smallest of the UN funded programmes, the organisation is expected to deliver results that are comparable to its better-funded counterparts (Jain, 2005, p. 129). Despite its low-level funding, UNIFEM works hard to have a strong influence within and outside the UN and Jain (2005, p. 129) claims that it “punches way above its weight”. The other gender entities face similar challenges and in recent years INSTRAW, as mentioned above, struggled to survive due to under-funding.¹³

Beyond the four key gender bodies, other components of the UN gender equality architecture face similar budgetary struggles. For example, the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE) – a network of Gender Focal Points that operates throughout the UN to promote gender equality and support the coordination of gender mainstreaming – raised concerns about the impact that under-funding has on its ability to achieve its mandate:

The lack of resources for the Network’s activities, including for its task forces, remains the major impediment for its work. For many joint activities there is no follow up or continuity because of paucity of financial resources. While external joint fundraising is undertaken, financial support from HLCM [High-Level Committee on Management] and CEB [Chief Executives Board] is vital to demonstrate commitment and ownership (United

¹² UNIFEM’s income of US\$215.4m in 2008 represents a significant increase in funds compared to previous years (the organisation received US\$129.8m in 2007 and US\$63.3m in 2006), which is largely attributable to a US\$64.8m grant provided by Spain (Curtis et al., 2009, p. 6).

¹³ INSTRAW’s financial problem has been an ongoing problem that is recorded in the following UN documents: A/61/897; A/60/366; A/59/433.

Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, 2008, p. 5).

Frustration with the lack of funding has consistently been noted in IANWGE's annual meetings.¹⁴ IANGWE's members are expected to monitor and support the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the General Assembly's recommendations on gender throughout the UN system. This is a critical role, one that has been set up to fail because the network does not have the necessary resources to be effective.

Gender mainstreaming provides another example of the UN's failure to allocate sufficient funding to support the implementation of its gender policies.¹⁵ Despite the ubiquitous language on gender mainstreaming throughout the UN, it would appear that the UN has fallen well short to fund this strategy. Torild Skard's (2009) review of eight different UN agencies, programmes and funds clearly illustrated that support and implementation has been significantly inconsistent; and even in cases where there has been support from senior management, it has failed to be adequately funded to ensure effective implementation. Research conducted by IANWGE showed that, where funding has been made available, gender mainstreaming work usually relied on extra-budgetary funds (United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, 2009, p. 6). In most cases however it is almost impossible to accurately identify how much money has actually been allocated to gender mainstreaming within the UN. For example, Nafis Sadik et al's (2006) review of the UNDP's implementation of its gender mainstreaming policies revealed that "much of the information about

¹⁴ See IANWGE annual meeting reports available online at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/annualmeet.htm>.

¹⁵ The merit of gender mainstreaming to advance gender equality is a greatly debated issue within feminist discourses. This debate falls beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of looking at gender mainstreaming within this paper is to reveal the extent to which gender mainstreaming has received normative and practical support within the UN. For more information on gender mainstreaming within the UN see Otto (2009), Charlesworth (2005), Moser & Moser (2005), Miller & Ravazi (1998).

UNDP resource allocation to gender is missing, incomplete or inconsistent. There is no accurate and reliable way to estimate the exact expenditures on programmes, which pay attention to gender mainstreaming". The overall result has been significant inconsistencies in implementation and a lack of support for training and production of materials, establishment of systems and tools, monitoring and evaluation, and employment of experts.

Lack of stature

All UN's gender entities suffer from a lack of stature and limited access to decision-making forums. For example, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, OCHCHR, and UNAIDS are headed by Under-Secretary-Generals, which enables access to high-level forums. None of the heads of the four gender entities holds the position of Under-Secretary-General. OSAGI is the only entity to have access to senior-level forums and this is only a recent development. In 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon added the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, Rachel Mayanja, to his Senior Management Group (the key advisory body to the Secretary-General). Prior to this the Special Adviser was excluded from the Senior Management Group, despite being the Secretary-General's key advisor on gender issues. Similarly, UNIFEM's Executive Director is excluded from all senior decision making forums. This situation arises because UNIFEM, which is considered to be the core women's organisation at the UN, does not even have agency status. Rather, it is a subsidiary body of UNDP and UNIFEM's Executive Director only has D2 status, which is the level below that of Assistant Secretary-General. At the headquarters level this lack of status means that UNIFEM's Executive Director is excluded from crucial decision-making spaces such as the Secretary-General's Senior Management Group and the Executive Committee on Peace and Security – despite the fact that UNIFEM is expected to influence these forums (Sadik et al., 2004, p. 13). At the country level, UNIFEM's involvement in decision-making forums is at the discretion of UNDP's Country Director.

Given the gender-specific bodies' limited access to decision-making forums, they are severely restricted in their ability to advance gender equality through 'mainstream' policy and planning; directly influence and critique policies and decisions; or hold UN agencies and senior staff to account for their work on gender equality. As a result, CWGL and WEDO (2006, p. 3) claim that the gender bodies and their staff are used to "defend the status quo rather than change it".

Lack of commitment from senior management

The above issues are exacerbated by an apparent lack of commitment from senior management as well as the absence of adequate systems to ensure the UN's leadership is held accountable to gender policies (AWID 2006, p. 2). Results can be seen in the UN's inability to uphold the most basic principles of gender mainstreaming, such as gender balance. Under Kofi Annan, the Office of the Secretary-General (the highest office of the UN) had 27 members, only six of whom were women. Under Ban Ki-moon 40 percent more women have been appointed to senior posts (Ki-moon, 2010). Yet at the level of Assistant Secretary-General and above, the ratio of males to females remains significantly unbalanced at 93 to 27 (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2009, p. 1). The most common excuse for this inequality is that Member States fail to nominate female candidates for these roles (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2007, p. 21). The same excuse cannot be used when looking at the rest of the UN system. Although the UN has made countless commitments to improving gender balance, particularly at senior levels, female staff members continue to be concentrated at lower levels and are under-represented above the D-1 level.¹⁶ At the current rate of progress towards a more gender balanced UN, the 50:50 target will not be achieved until the year 2114 for the P-5 level or 2130

¹⁶ Policy support for gender balance within the UN can be seen through the numerous resolutions on the issue which have been adopted by the General Assembly: A/RES/41/206; A/RES/45/239; A/RES/50/164; A/RES/51/67; A/RES/52/96; A/RES/58/144; A/RES/59/164; A/RES/61/145; A/RES/61/244.

for the D-1 level (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, 2007, p. 21).

The lack of commitment from senior management can also be seen when looking at other aspects of mainstreaming gender within the UN. For example, the policy and practical support for gender mainstreaming within some of the UN's most significant organisations is considerably inadequate. Nafis Sadik et al's (2006, p. 4) review of UNDP found that "UNDP's gender mainstreaming policies do not have clear objectives, targets and timeframes, [and] it was not possible to assess the effects and impact of gender mainstreaming on projects and programmes at the country level". By not putting adequate systems in place, UNDP's leadership failed to show commitment and sent the message that gender equality is a 'nice to have' rather than an imperative priority. It is a similar story throughout the rest of the UN – when it comes to gender equality there have not been consistent efforts to set solid targets and concrete requirements. Instead, the implementation of gender mainstreaming is reliant on a few champions and junior level staff. In fact, the responsibility of gender mainstreaming has been delegated primarily to junior, over-stretched, and inexperienced staff – many of whom have no background or training in promoting gender equality. Of the UN's 1300 Gender Focal Points, 1000 are at a junior level, and they have inadequate budgets for the task (CWGL & WEDO 2006, p. 3). In practice this means that, without the support of senior management at all levels, these focal points are restricted in their ability to contribute to and influence policy making; institute gender mainstreaming strategies, methods and tools; organise staff training; and undertake monitoring and reporting - all of which are expected of them in the job description.¹⁷

Donovan (2006, p. 14) rightly believes that the lack of senior management support has resulted in an "institutional culture that treats gender and women's rights as 'soft' issues, requiring no particular

¹⁷ The full job description of a Gender Focal Point can be accessed through the OSAGI website: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gmfpdrafttors.htm>.

expertise". This response meant that rather than being a transformative strategy at best gender mainstreaming has been implemented as a technocratic tool, and at worst completely sidelined. As a result, gender mainstreaming has not delivered its expected outputs, and this initiative is now widely seen as a failure (AsiaWOMENet 2006; AWID 2006, p. 2; CWGL & WEDO 2006, p. 2; Donovan 2006, p. 14).

Lack of operational capacity

UNIFEM is the only body with operational capacity, but not surprisingly, considering its limited budget, any operational capacity is modest to say the least. UNIFEM has 15 sub-regional offices, 10 country programme offices, and 46 project offices (however these only remain open when funds are available) (Sadik et al 2004, p. 11). The organisation has 230 staff, and approximately 150 work in field offices; UNICEF in comparison possesses a presence in 191 countries and operates with 7200 staff (Curtis, Rigg & Kotok 2009, p. 4-5). As UNIFEM has little to no presence at the country level, inter-agency Gender Theme Groups are relied upon and even then exist in only a handful of countries. Gender Theme Groups meet regularly, though not on a compulsory basis, and are encouraged to support gender mainstreaming, identify key issues within the country, and propose possible actions (Keays et al 2005). The UN's resource guide for Gender Theme Groups states that such groups are at their best when they ensure that UN organisations within the respective country coordinate their efforts on gender equality, ensure normative commitments on gender equality are integrated into the mainstream frameworks such as Common Country Assessments, UN Development Assistance Frameworks, and Poverty Reduction Strategies, and support the collection and utilisation of sex-disaggregated data (Keays et al 2005, p. 3). Although such an impact would be a good beginning in improving the UN's gender equality work at the country level, it is only the start, and it pales in comparison to what is needed. Unfortunately, the UN too often falls short in even meeting this starting point.

The Gender Theme Groups are usually made up of junior level staff members who have gender as an add-on to their job descriptions, rarely have relevant expertise or training, and do not have access to decision-making meetings at the country level (Donovan 2006, p. 13). They most certainly do not have the capacity or funding to deliver the kind of strong programming that is required at the country level. Furthermore, the Resident Coordinator has no mandated responsibility to ensure that the Gender Theme Group has access to decision making meetings and s/he is not officially required to meet with them (United Nations Development Group 2008). Indeed, it is at the discretion of the Resident Coordinator whether a Gender Theme Group is even needed within the UN Country Team (Keays et al 2005, p. 39). Given the pervasiveness of gender inequality in every country, and the UN's supposed commitment to gender mainstreaming, surely the power to dismiss the validity of such a group should not be concentrated in the hands of a few individuals. Given the challenges these groups face, coupled with their lack of capacity, it is almost impossible for them to make a significant contribution to addressing gender inequality. Any success they do achieve is a tribute to the individuals involved, not a result of institutional support.

Considering UNIFEM's restricted field presence and the inability of Gender Theme Groups to adequately address gender inequality at the country-level, there is limited capacity within all of the UN's country programmes to: develop concrete, targeted programmes which address gender inequality and deliver on frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action; provide expert technical support to civil society organisations and governments; and support gender mainstreaming throughout the activities of the UN country team. In sum, the UN's capacity to deliver effective programming for gender equality at the country-level is woefully inadequate, resulting in a failure to serve the needs of countries and communities. Despite this failing, UNIFEM and

the Gender Theme Groups should be commended for the work they do and their achievements.

Gender architecture is fractured

In addition to the problems discussed above, the gender architecture is severely fragmented and incoherent. This situation is made manifest because specific gender bodies have been established over time, in reaction to identified need, rather than as part of a cohesive, long-term strategy (Jain 2005, p. 132). This resulted in a lack of clear classifications for the various gender bodies' roles and responsibilities towards the UN's gender frameworks and forums, thus resulting in a duplication of mandates in some cases and a questionable absence in others (Sadik et al 2004, p. 17). For example, although organisations such as UNFPA and UNICEF have clear responsibilities for the normative frameworks relevant to their areas of work, UNIFEM has no officially mandated responsibilities with regard to critical frameworks such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, or Security Council Resolution 1325 (Donavan 2006, p. 10, 13; Sadik et al 2004, p. 17). Yet UNIFEM is considered to be the UN's front-running body for women, and it is the only gender entity with operational capacity. In contrast to this bizarre absence of mandate, OSAGI and DAW's mandates in some ways appear duplicated. For example, they have similar responsibilities towards gender mainstreaming. The two entities' scope of work is so similar that Donovan (2006, p. 34-35) claims that "the roles of OSAGI and of DAW are not easy to decipher; it appears that the two offices often work in parallel" with little coordination. This lack of coordination can also be seen between INSTRAW and UNIFEM. Even though they were established as "two halves of a dual strategy" to progress the status of women, a General Assembly review of INSTRAW revealed that despite the inter-connectedness of their work, there has been a consistent lack of collaboration and connection between the work of UNIFEM and INSTRAW (Jain 2005, p. 94; United Nations General

Assembly 2002).^{18 19} These problems have inevitably had significant impacts on the functionality of the UN's gender equality work.

The overall impact

When reviewing the issues above, the following statement from Donovan (2006, p. 14) seems apt: "Faced with a job that requires a fork lift, women have been handed a fork". Without adequate resources, stature, senior-level support, operational capacity and coherence, it is very difficult for the gender-specific bodies to fulfil their comprehensive mandates. As a result, many gender equality advocates agree that the UN requires a "major up-scaling of the power, authority, and resources dedicated to women's human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment" (AWID 2006, p. 3).

United Nations reform: Tangible change or more rhetoric?

The weaknesses of the UN are not limited to the gender equality architecture alone. Problems with the UN's governance structures and processes are widespread. Therefore, during his tenure former Secretary-General Kofi Annan initiated a reform process that commenced with the release of his report, 'In Larger Freedom' in 2005. In February 2006, Kofi Annan appointed a High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence (henceforth Coherence Panel) mandated to provide recommendations to improve the UN's management of its operational functions and produce better-managed entities in the key focus areas of

¹⁸ At the recommendation of the Mexico City conference in 1976, the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women (now known as UNIFEM) and INSTRAW were established. These entities were mandated with specific responsibilities relating to women, but were expected to collaborate as part of a dual strategy. They were created as separate entities because UNIFEM was only intended to be in operation for the duration of the Decade for Women (1976-1985). However, the importance of its work was recognised, and it became a permanent body of the UN in 1984.

¹⁹ There are several reasons for INSTRAW and UNIFEM's lack of collaboration, and these include: the geographic distance between the organizations (UNIFEM is based in New York and INSTRAW is based in the Dominican Republic); the entities see their roles as distinctly separate and therefore have not actively sought regular collaboration; there are inadequate mechanisms in place to ensure regular collaboration; both organisations have limited resources and are already overstretched; and the UN's funding structure means these entities inevitably compete for funds, which stifles cooperation (Jain 2005, p. 131; Sadik et al 2004:17; United Nations General Assembly 2002).

development, humanitarian assistance, and the environment (United Nations 2006a).²⁰

A year prior, at the World Summit, gender equality organisations lobbied the UN and Member States to strengthen and adequately resource the UN's gender architecture. This advocacy resulted in Paragraph 59 in the 2005 'World Summit Outcome Document' in which governments pledged to "strengthen the capabilities of the United Nations system in the area of gender" (United Nations General Assembly 2005, p. 17). Therefore, when Kofi Annan initiated his reform agenda, gender equality advocates welcomed the process; it was thought that the time had finally come to substantially strengthen the UN's flawed gender equality architecture (AsiaWOMENet 2006). However, dismay quickly followed when the Coherence Panel's terms of reference made no recommendation to address the UN's support for gender equality. For advocates this omission was another example that gender equality is not a priority. Thankfully a ground swell of lobbying by gender equality advocates took off within days. The objective? A new UN agency for women and the inclusion of gender as a cross-cutting issue in the reform process. Representatives from prominent women's organisations met with the co-chair of the Coherence Panel, Shaukat Aziz (Prime Minister of Pakistan) and Kofi Annan in the ensuing weeks, and eventually the lobbying paid off when Kofi Annan expanded the mandate of the Coherence Panel in mid-2006 to include a review of the UN's gender equality architecture and gender mainstreaming. Importantly, he also recommended that gender should be addressed as a cross-cutting issue. Nonetheless, this scenario illustrates how easily a concern for gender equality can be left off the agenda; moreover, it represents the constant vigilance required by advocates to ensure that it is not.

²⁰ Notably, the Coherence Panel consisted of three women and 12 men, a significant gender imbalance.

*Recommendations of the High-level Panel on System-wide
Coherence*

When the Coherence Panel presented its recommendations in 'Delivering as One' in November 2006, it included direct recommendations on the UN's gender architecture. The Coherence Panel made a number of observations that echoed the concerns discussed above. The Coherence Panel observed that:

While the UN remains a key actor in supporting countries to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, there is a strong sense that the UN system's contribution has been incoherent, under-resourced and fragmented.

We believe that the importance of achieving gender equality cannot be overstated. For both reasons of human rights and development effectiveness, the UN needs to pursue these objectives far more vigorously. While there are inspiring examples of UN initiatives that have helped to change women's lives, these have unfortunately remained isolated "best practices" (United Nations 2006b).

As a result of these observations the Coherence Panel initiated a reform package that held real promise by recommending:

- The consolidation of DAW, OSAGI and UNIFEM into a single UN agency for women.
- The appointment of an Executive Director for the agency who holds the rank of Under-Secretary-General.
- A mandate for the agency that includes strong normative, advocacy and targeted programming roles.
- A substantial increase in funding to ensure that the entity is "fully and ambitiously funded".

- Ensuring that a focus on gender equality is included in all UN One Country Programmes (therefore at the country-level).
- The continuation of gender equality as a mandate for the entire UN system
(United Nations 2006b, p. 6).

The Coherence Panel's recommendations addressed many of the issues discussed earlier, including resourcing, stature, coherence, and operational capacity. Unfortunately, since the Coherence Panel issued its recommendations, progress has moved at a sluggish pace, and a concerted lobbying effort has been required to keep the process on track.

Progress... eventually

When the Coherence Panel released their recommendations, Kofi Annan (and subsequently Ban Ki-moon) was supportive of fast-tracking the gender equality architecture reform by recommending that it should be negotiated separately from the overall reform agenda. However, as seen too many times, the gender reform proposal became a 'bargaining chip' in a larger process. Even though the gender entity reform had widespread support, a small handful of Member States, including some countries from the G77 and NAM, refused to negotiate the gender entity separately, and they succeeded in stalling progress in order to advance their own agendas related to the rest of the reform package (Deen 2010; Deen 2009). Keeping the process alive required constant lobbying efforts over the past four years, draining civil society finances and human resources.²¹ Gender equality advocates became increasingly

²¹ The following milestones have occurred to date: In late 2006, Kofi Annan put forth the Coherence Panel's recommendations to the General Assembly and early in 2007 incoming Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued his report on UN reform which supported the recommendations of the Coherence Panel. From 2007 informal and formal discussions began and Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro issued several papers to the General Assembly which identified existing gaps, further contextualised the vision and purpose of a new entity, and presented options for the possible shape the new entity might take. Finally, in September 2008 the General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/62/277 in which it requested that the Secretary-General provide a modalities paper in the next session that outlined details such as

flabbergasted at the time required to make each small step forward. Daniela Rosche (in Deen 2010), Policy and Advocacy Advisor on Gender Justice at Oxfam Novib, reflected the sentiments of many advocates when she said:

It's shameful that we have to come back time and time again to explain why the new entity is needed – and why it's needed fast... The issue is: Why do women's rights and gender empowerment issues always take forever to tackle? Where is the sense of urgency in this regard? It's not like we don't have a huge amount of work before us – let's get on with it.

Thankfully, in September 2009, on the last day of the General Assembly's 63rd session, the body endorsed the creation of a composite gender entity to be headed by an Under-Secretary-General in Resolution A/RES/63/311. Charlotte Bunch described the General Assembly resolution as a "great victory" (Amnesty International 2010). This achievement was followed by another in July 2010 when the General Assembly established UN Women in Resolution A/64/L.56, with the intent that the new entity should be operational by January 2011. These achievements should be celebrated, but it is also melancholic that 35 years after the first UN conference on women, gender equality advocates have struggled for every small gain in this four year process.

Fortunately, the creation of UN Women delivers on a number of the key issues for which the GEAR network has been lobbying. The resolution formalised the creation of a composite entity possessing both a normative and operational role. UN Women will not only encompass the

funding, structure, function, and staffing - particularly in relation to a composite entity. This was the first formal indication that a new gender equality entity was to become a reality. In 2009, informal discussions continued after the Secretary-General released his modalities paper 'Further Details on Institutional Options for Strengthening the Institutional Arrangements for Support to Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women'. In September 2009, the General Assembly endorsed the creation of a composite gender entity in Resolution A/RES/63/311, and in July 2010, Resolution A/64/L.56 formerly established UN Women.

mandates of the four disbanding UN gender entities but also have greater operational capacity and responsibilities towards gender mainstreaming and coordination at the UN. Moreover, the entity will have official responsibilities towards the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and other key commitments. As expected, the entity will be funded from both regular (normative role) and voluntary (operational role) funding. The resolution confirmed that UN Women should be headed by an Under-Secretary-General (to be appointed September 2010) who should be included in the Secretary-General's Chief Executives Board for Coordination and recommended that she be included in other key senior-level forums such as the Policy Committee and Senior Management Group. The key role of civil society was also recognised in the resolution by recommending that UN Women should work in consultation with civil society. However, the resolution is ambiguous on some issues, and signals indicate that the creation of UN Women is falling short on key issues, including funding, operational role, and civil society engagement. There are also concerns that the Secretary-General's recruitment process for the Under-Secretary-General to head the agency is not being conducted in a fair and transparent manner (AIDS-Free World 2010a).

Where's the funding?

The General Assembly made no commitment to a specific funding level in Resolution A/64/L.56; however, the UN Women website indicates a funding target of US\$500m, as recommended in the Secretary-General's 'Comprehensive Proposal for the Composite Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women' (henceforth Comprehensive Proposal), which informed Member State discussions on the new entity (United Nations General Assembly 2010a). The GEAR campaign and other advocates, such as Stephen Lewis - former Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, have consistently emphasised that such an entity would require a minimum start-up budget of US\$1 billion, with substantial increases in the future. This monetary goal is a reasonable

target compared to UNICEF's budget of US\$3 billion. The Secretary-General's Comprehensive Proposal envisions that the new entity should be funded as follows:

	Existing	Proposed
Total budget	US\$224.7m ²²	<u>US\$500m</u>
Basic staff/programme capacity		US\$125m
Country-specific 'gap' funding		US\$375m
Headquarters staff	205	206
Field staff	196	760

Table 1 *Secretary-General's proposed funding for new gender entity*

The proposed funding target is more than twice the combined funding level of the four existing gender bodies. However, the ambition for UN Women is that it should be more than a simple amalgamation of the existing architecture. The new entity will have far greater normative, operational, and monitoring responsibilities. A major concern with these proposed funding targets is that the UN does not have a realistic idea of the funds needed to 'fill gaps' at the country level because it has never conducted a full scale investigation, and this inadequacy is revealed in the lack of evidence provided in the Secretary-General's Comprehensive Proposal on how these figures were derived (AIDS-Free World 2010b, p. 5). Unquestionably, the proposed funding level falls well short of what was expected, and what is needed. In paragraph 44 of his Comprehensive Proposal, the Secretary-General reflected that applications to UNIFEM's Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

²² As mentioned earlier, estimates on the budget of the four gender entities vary: Curtis, Rigg & Kotok (2009, p. 4) claim that the total budget was US\$221m whereas the Secretary General, in his report entitled 'Comprehensive Proposal for the Composite Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women' (United Nations General Assembly 2010a), claims the budget was US\$224.7m.

received requests totalling more than US\$900m in 2009 alone. The World Bank recently estimated that US\$83.2b would be required to meet Millennium Development Goal Three on promoting gender equality and empowering women (Grown, Bahadur, Handbury & Elson 2006, p. 22). This estimate presents a question mark as to why the funding estimate for the new entity is so low. Although funding needs to be achievable, the bar should be set high because without adequate funding the new agency will suffer the same fate as its predecessors.

Why is operational capacity weak?

One of the GEAR campaign's most significant objectives is that the new entity should have the capacity to deliver a significant up-scaling of gender equality work at the country level. It is imperative that UN Women has the capacity, authority, and independence to deliver effective, self-led programming. Although Resolution A/64/L.56 instructs that the new entity will have operational capacity, it emphasised that responses at the country level will be at the request of Member States (see paragraphs 51(b, c) and 68). The Secretary-General's Comprehensive Proposal also put emphasis on meeting the requirements of governments (see paragraphs 4, 9a, 14, 15 and 45). Although it is important that the entity should be responsive to governments, it is equally important that it should have the mandate to identify and initiate programmes that do not necessarily meet the demands of governments. Given some governments' antagonism towards certain gender equality issues, this point is of paramount importance.

Capacity at the country level is another concern. Resolution A/64/L.56 notes that UN Women will work within the UN Country Team system and will be responsible for leading and coordinating the UN's gender equality work at the country level (see paragraph 56). However, in his Comprehensive Proposal, the Secretary-General proposed that the

smaller country offices would consist of only one national professional officer, with support staff and a budget as low as US\$500,000 (United Nations General Assembly 2010a, p. 24).²³ This staffing and fiscal reality effectively means the entity will be starting on the back foot; if the gender entity is to be a considerable component of the UN Country Team, it needs to have the size and capacity to fulfil its leadership and coordinating mandate.

Why is there limited civil society involvement?

Resolution A/64/L.56 encourages UN Women to “continue the existing practice of effective consultation with civil society organizations, and encourages their meaningful contribution to the work of the entity” (United Nations General Assembly 2010b). However, given their significant expertise and stake in the gender equality movement, civil society organisations have previously argued the importance of a more substantial role within the organisation’s governance mechanisms at the country and headquarters level (AIDS-Free World 2010b, p. 3-4; GEAR Campaign 2010, p. 2-3). For example, the new entity could emulate organisations such as UNAIDS which incorporates civil society representation within its governance structures. Many believe the new entity should go further, for example by giving civil society representatives voting rights within governance mechanisms (AIDS-Free World 2010b, p. 4). AIDS-Free World (2010b, p. 4) hoped the organisation would “be on the vanguard of the movement for a more people-centered (and in this case women-centered) UN”. Unfortunately, Resolution A/64/L.56 makes no provision for civil society to be included on the Executive Board, which will be composed entirely of Member States (see paragraph 60). It is disappointing that the UN General Assembly failed to make the most of the opportunity to fully tap into the extensive knowledge and expertise that exists within civil society.

²³ The Secretary-General’s report proposes that in the initial phase there would be up to 12 small offices, 41 medium offices, 27 large offices, and 6 regional offices (United Nations General Assembly 2010a, p. 24).

Conclusion: What now?

The UN reforms could have a significant impact on resolving the institutional and commitment issues that have proved so problematic, and their approval could create a stronger, more effective response to gender inequality. However, although the GEAR process holds promise in what it might deliver, there are valid concerns that it might not live up to its full potential if key factors such as funding and operational capacity are not delivered upon. Therefore, is it time to seriously consider alternatives to the UN? In 2007, Kettel (2007, p. 882) suggested that if the GEAR process did not deliver significant reforms with a US\$1b budget, gender equality advocates should abandon the UN and consider the establishment of an autonomous gender equality entity. Although the GEAR process under-delivered in areas such as the budget, the creation of UN Women offers enough progress to remain committed to the UN. This paper suggests that the potential drawbacks of creating an autonomous gender equality entity currently outweigh the potential benefits. An autonomous body might have greater freedom to set its own agenda and implement programmes because it would be removed from the significant bureaucracy and political wrangling of the UN. It also would presumably have deeper and more effective partnerships with civil society organisations. However, such an entity would also be entering a highly competitive and uncertain funding environment, risk further fracturing the gender equality sector, have no formal links to global frameworks such as CEDAW, and civil society resources and capacity would be further stretched because advocates would still need to actively engage with the UN to avoid co-optation of the gender equality agenda; to name just a few issues. Therefore, this paper asserts that ultimately the UN is still a crucial partner in the struggle for gender equality. Although it has not delivered in all areas (for example the budget), the creation of UN Women offers enough progress to put other trajectories such as creating an autonomous body on hold, at least for now. But, and this is a big but, if the UN can truly be considered “the only global institution with the legitimacy to create change for women’s

rights on a massive scale”, as WEDO (2007) believes, then now is the time for the UN to deliver – time has run out for excuses.

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