



GEAR Campaign input on the gaps in the way the UN System is currently addressing gender equality issues

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Context

Ten years after Beijing and 30 years after the first world conference on women in Mexico City, gender equality has a growing number – but still too few – advocates in the corridors of power at international, national or local levels where critical decisions are made. For decades, women have relied on the United Nations as an important venue for the promotion of human rights and social justice, demanding that the UN set global norms and standards in these areas. Just 3 years ago, at the World Summit, governments reaffirmed that gender equality is critical to the achievement of all Millennium Development Goals, and re-committed to its promotion in Goal #3. But too often there is insufficient implementation of these commitments, as demonstrated by the failure to achieve universal primary education in 2005 - the first MDG target.

Many women's rights advocates now fear that the political championship at a global level for social justice and women's rights is eroding. Evaluation after evaluation shows that countries, bi-lateral donors and the multilateral system consistently fail to prioritize, and significantly under-fund, women's rights and equality work¹. Money talks, and in this case, it has voted with its feet. Equally worrying is the fact that new aid principles stressing national ownership and their accompanying aid modalities such as budget support and sector wide approaches, while laudable in some ways, make it even harder to specifically resource and track gender equality goals.

Current state of Gender Equality and Gender Mainstreaming at the UN

The present phase of UN reform provides an opportunity to take gender equality from the realm of rhetoric to the practice of reality. Most women's rights advocates agree that the normative frameworks for gender equality and women's human rights – legal frameworks, constitutional guarantees for equality, and gender equality policies – have advanced considerably in many countries as well as within the UN system. However, the lack of implementation and accountability repeatedly undermines these commitments.

“Gender Mainstreaming”, promoted widely in the UN after the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, was transformatory in its conception. But it has been extremely limited in its implementation. Gender mainstreaming has often only been reluctantly adopted by “mainstream” agencies because top leadership has not adequately supported this agenda; it has too often become a policy of “add women and stir” without questioning basic assumptions, or ways of working. It has been implemented in an organizational context of hierarchy and agenda setting that has not prioritized women's rights and where women's units usually have limited authority to initiate or monitor gender equality work, and no authority to hold people and programs accountable.

¹ UNIFEM Assessment: A/60/62 - E2005/10; UNDP Evaluation of Gender mainstreaming, available at http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/EO_GenderMainstreaming.pdf

Gender mainstreaming is sometimes even misused to simply mean including men as well as women, rather than bringing transformational change in gender power relations. At best, it has meant such things as adopting a gender policy, creating a gender unit to work on organizational programs, mandatory gender training, and increasing the number of women staff and managers. In the worst cases, gender mainstreaming has been used to stop funding women's work and/or to dismantle many of the institutional mechanisms such as the women's units and advisors created to promote women in development, in the name of integration. Both national and international institutions have had this experience.

Structural constraints

The UN system is replete with examples of structures and personnel mandated to do gender equality work that are under-resourced and under-prioritized. They constantly must fight an uphill battle as a result of their low place in organizational hierarchies, small size, limited mandate, and the lack of autonomy and connection to key constituencies. Currently, there are several under-resourced agencies focused exclusively on women's issues² (United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Secretary-General's Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI), and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)). For example, UNIFEM, the only unit with a (limited) field presence, is a fund, not an independent operational agency, that reports to the UNDP administrator, which means that it doesn't have a seat at high-level decision making tables. Gender units – from OSAGI to those in the specialized agencies – have limited ability to provide critical feedback or speak out on gender equality performance; too often these special advisor or gender focal points in the UN are used to defend the status quo rather than change it. Their limited budgets, their limited access to decision-making, and their limited terms of reference do not position them as critical players in their own entities.

Other larger agencies, including UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNESCO, the High Commissioners for human rights and refugees and others, sometimes do important work on gender equality, but it is only a part of their mandate, and often receives low priority. According to a 2002 UNIFEM/UNDP scan, of the 1300 UN staff who have gender equality in their terms of reference, nearly 1000 of these are gender focal points that are relatively junior, have little substantive expertise, no budgets, and who deal with gender as one element of a large portfolio. In other words, these structures are designed to fail or falter.

Resources

Funding for gender equality work within both mainstream agencies and women's specific mechanisms such as UNIFEM is grossly inadequate for the task at hand. In 2002, UNIFEM's resources totaled \$36 million. In comparison, UNFPA's budget for the same year was \$373 million; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' budget was \$64 million and UNAIDS' budget was \$92 million. UNICEF's budget in the same year totaled \$1,454 million. The message is clear: investment in women is of the lowest order. Most mainstream agencies cannot even track how much money they spend on women rights and the achievement of gender equality.

Some examples of the gaps mentioned above which have been provided by members of the GEAR campaign and women's groups in the field are illustrated in the following table.

² See paragraphs 16, 19 and 20 of the Agreed Conclusions of the 52nd CSW - E/CN.6/L.8

Identified Gaps	Specific Examples in the Field
Lack of strong driver for women's rights at the country level and no accountability for gender equality goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although awareness has been raised since 1975 regarding gender equality in Africa, because of the range of other social and political issues, gender and women's issues are not properly addressed or prioritized – including by political leaders. Work on gender in Africa is primarily done through/by civil society actors. While NGOs are good entry points to the community, they cannot ensure sustainability because they don't have the power to change the laws. There is no political will within the country to work on gender equality. A strong and coordinated UN response can help address these vacuums (Women and Health WHO – AFRO, Brazzaville, Congo). • UN agencies including gender-designated staff, lack the experience, vision and mandate to enforce gender programming. There are efforts which sometimes start well, but get diluted as these efforts proceed as they often do not have the clout to carry forward the agenda. The head/ senior management lacks clear commitment and focus on gender, and there is NO accountability. If there is, it is limited to budgets and weak indicators. Also another feature is limited cooperation between agencies even when they are working on similar issues. (Rozaan, Pakistan).
Lack of coordination on gender equality work between the different entities and agencies leading to duplication and competition for resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN Inter agency collaboration is very weak at the country level. Agencies are competing instead of collaborating and this affects gender programming (Women and Health WHO – AFRO, Brazzaville, Congo). • In the Pacific it has been recommended that UNIFEM in the Pacific collaborates with ESCAP, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and other relevant institutions to support the development and strengthening of national and regional machineries of women in government. This collaboration would play an effective oversight role of policies, programs, laws, regulations, and procedures so as to achieve gender mainstreaming into specific Ministries, departments and institutions (Pacific Concerns resource Centre, Fiji). • There is a lack of coordination on gender equality between the different entities leading to duplication in Nepal. For example, there was a "Mainstreaming Gender Equity Program" under UNDP, which most of the time did similar work as UNIFEM and there was a lot of duplication. However, recently we have seen some improved coordination through a gender theme group of UN where the gender focal points meet and share their work and plans in spite of this some of the work on UNSCR 1325 is still duplicated and there is an invisible "battle" of ownership of issues between UN entities (Saathi and South Asia Campaign for Gender Equality, Nepal). • Gender mainstreaming today is still very much resisted by top leadership that do not agree on this; it has been a way of focusing on women but not necessarily translated into changes in power relations. As we look at the different UN agencies we verify that gender mainstreaming did not lead always to focusing on women's rights. Moreover, gender/ women's units usually have limited authority and resources and little capacity and space to implement and monitor (Action Aid, Latin America).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Mozambique, nine UN agencies are involved in a joint program which started in May 2007. It aims to strengthen gender sensitive legislation, promote economic empowerment, crop production and credit access, and build the capacity of local organizations. While the program has one proposal, the various UN agencies in fact carry out separate activities with separate budgets. To a large extent they try to work in the same areas to build complementarities. However, merging budgets and streamlining staff and other resources within a joint programming frame meets agency resistance at the country level primarily because agencies are reluctant to give up control of resources to another agency and particularly at lower level in the hierarchy, people are worried about losing their jobs in the One-UN process (Gender At Work).
<p>Disconnection between the normative and operational work on gender equality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the UN Joint Project on the CEDAW was implemented in 2007, evaluation of the project showed that compliance and attendance of UN agency staff are at best not consistent. This has to do with the fact that some are involved in operations at the field level and could not have the time to attend to trainings on gender mainstreaming. While funds have been pooled by UN agencies to implement this project with UNIFEM as the lead agency, UN staff are hard put to find full commitment to the project because this is in fact a mere add-on to their jobs (Asia Pacific Women's Watch APWW, the Philippines).
<p>Limited authority, capacity and resources of gender advocates within the system to implement and monitor women's rights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UN Gender Mainstreaming Committee is an important mechanism within the UN system in the Philippines for the advocacy of women's rights, in the implementation of gender mainstreaming policy, as well as for women-or gender-specific programming. Currently, the UNGMC is composed of gender focal points of each UN agency in the Philippines. The team has an <i>ad hoc</i> capacity which means that it lacks the institutionalization necessary for it to be an effective body within the Philippine UN system. It is composed of middle level personnel who, more often than not, do not have the much needed influence to aggressively push gender concerns within their agencies. Moreover, some members are mere contractual employees who may no longer be hired once the contract expires, thus losing vital institutional memory. This affects continuity and stability of gender mainstreaming advocacy within their agencies. Also, this puts to waste the training and experience on gender work that the employee has invested in as a member of the UNGMC. When a new member comes in that is not really into gender, the learning curve necessary to acquire expertise on gender issues affects the efficiency of the employee as a member of the UNGMC. The work of UNGMC members on gender mainstreaming is a mere add-on and is not even part of their existing Terms of Reference (TOR) within their agencies. Hence, their effectiveness really just relies on their personal commitment to gender issues. This situation creates problems for accountability and monitoring of their mainstreaming work. Lastly and most importantly, funding for gender mainstreaming relies on case-to-case contribution from UN agencies (Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW), the Philippines). • There are few national and regional NGOs in the Pacific region that have gender equality and gender mainstreaming areas as priority areas of focus. More concerted effort has to be done by the UN agencies to support national and regional NGO partnerships (Pacific Concerns resource Centre, Fiji).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Asia, UNIFEM with its limited resources has been trying its best to support the implementation of commitments, but the lack of resources within UNIFEM creates a lot of obstacles, a policy or issue might be introduced and supported at the beginning but it never seem to have the resource to upscale such effort and take policy or issue to its tangible end (Saathi and South Asia Campaign for Gender Equality, Nepal). • We recognize that other larger agencies such as UNDP, UNFPA, FAO, UNESCO etc have also done some progress in terms of gender equality, but this is not their priority. They have little budget or not skilled staff to implement it. Finally, funding in mainstream agencies and women's specific mechanisms such as UNIFEM is inadequate. (Action Aid, Latin America).
<p>Disconnect between UN Headquarters and country level</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN agencies when working on women and gender development issues do not confine their partnership only to women's organizations. UN agencies can foster, nurture, and strengthen synergies between national and regional NGO partnerships through its programs as they are currently doing with Pacific governments (Pacific Concerns resource Centre, Fiji). • When there are various priorities placed by the UN headquarters at several UN meetings on gender equality, when Civil society advocates in support of those priorities, the UN field offices many times are either not aware of such priorities or do not give them any importance (Saathi and South Asia Campaign for Gender Equality, Nepal).
<p>Limited programming for gender equality and women's empowerment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UN system in the Philippines has few projects catering specifically on gender issues. Currently, only UNFPA has a project with the national women's machinery. The UNDP has tried to mainstream gender in its Country Programme Action Plan (CPAP) but it currently does not have a gender-specific project. An evaluation of UNDP's implementation of its policy on gender mainstreaming found that efforts were spotty and inconsistent (Asia Pacific Women's Watch (APWW), the Philippines). • The plight, issues and concerns of indigenous women in the Pacific are not being addressed adequately and remain invisible in UN programs. Support for programs on research, documenting and profiling the status of indigenous women in Pacific programs is needed. Workshops for indigenous women to acquire more knowledge about human rights instruments, map out national, regional and international follow-up actions for policies, programs and laws, advocacy training are necessary (Pacific Concerns resource Centre, Fiji).
<p>Lack of country's ownership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the gaps that we know of is the failure of some of the UN Agencies to recognize issues from the perspective of the country partners. It is often the perspective of the UN themselves that is taken on board not that of the country partners. Development assistance needs to be driven by countries themselves as they know best what the issues are in terms of "gender equality" not the other way around as it is the only way to facilitate a sense of responsibility, ownership and sustainability of efforts to achieve gender equality (Division for Women, Ministry of Women, Community & Social Development of Samoa).