



An Open Letter on Women & UN Reform to the Secretary General and Member States from NGOs present at the 50th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

March 6, 2006

For more than six decades, women's groups and others from around the world have been strong supporters of the United Nations. We have actively shaped the UN's work on peace, human rights, development, security and environmental issues, and, of course, on gender equality. The UN is at a critical juncture. In the 2005 World Summit, women's organizations successfully advocated for greater commitments on gender equality and expected to see these commitments implemented in the UN reform follow-up.

We are disappointed and frankly outraged that gender equality and strengthening the women's machineries within the UN system are barely noted, and are not addressed as a central part of the reform agenda. Again, we must ask how it can be that more than ten years after the commitment to gender parity at the Beijing Conference, the UN is still offering only token representation of women on critical committees, high level expert panels and in senior positions within the organization.

Women welcomed Paragraph 59 in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, in which governments undertook to "strengthen the capabilities of the United Nations system in the area of gender." This commitment made by world leaders will not be met unless gender equality issues and women's machineries are an integral part of the UN reform process. Yet, mechanisms and processes dealing with UN reform have failed to display a consistent and visible commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. For example, the new High-Level Panel on UN system-wide coherence in areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment has only 3 women out of 15 members. We urge that additional women be added to the panel and that gender equality issues be explicitly considered under each theme. Furthermore, the panel should be mandated to hold consultations with civil society groups, especially those working on women's rights, in order to ensure consideration of the impact on women of any proposed reforms.

Women's groups call for serious consideration to be given to the implications of the current reforms on the women's equality agenda. We reiterate the call made at Beijing +10 and the 2005 World Summit for the Secretary General and Member States to significantly strengthen, upgrade and better resource the systems and mechanisms, including the UN women's machineries, through which gender equality can be advanced at the international and country level. This could be a lasting legacy.

In addition, we are deeply concerned that the position of women in high-level UN posts has stagnated. The list of candidates for the position of the executive director of UNEP contains no women at all. This is unacceptable. At the very least, the UN should set an example of gender balance in all high-level decision making positions.

The pattern of publicly adopted commitments and statements followed by 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. We urge you to take the opportunity in your address to the CSW on International Women's Day to announce concrete proposals for advancing gender

equality and strengthening gender machineries in the context of UN reform. In addition, we urge Member States to explicitly address gender equality concerns in all aspects of UN reform.

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