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**No reason to fight? European women and the UN reform**

By Franziska Brantner

*Why did, do and should European women rights activists get involved in the UN?*

The answer is quite simple: the UN is *the* global rights setting institution. No other institution has and will have the capacity to advance the international human rights agenda in the same way. The universality of women's rights requires a universal organization- the UN. If in the policy arena, the World Bank and the IMF have sidelined the UN in terms of real impact on women's lives, the right setting forum is the UN and therefore an important lieu for feminist advocacy. It is an ongoing struggle, with ups and downs, but no credible option has yet been found.

*Why should European women rights activists get involved in the UN reform?*

The global struggle for women's rights is at least partly framed by the UN's institutional setting, its rules and procedures. The institutional setting lays down either favorable or disadvantageous conditions for the advancement of women rights at the UN and via the UN in the field. For example, access rules for NGOs or, quite simply, the level at which gender issues are dealt with. These organizational settings, rules, policies and operations are now under reform. European feminists are part of the global struggle; therefore the framing of our common struggle should matter to European feminists.

*What has the World summit brought for women and what is left to do?*

I will not repeat the many aspects of the issue specific articles of this publication, but highlight a few cross-cutting points that should receive attention from European women's rights activists – in addition to the importance of ensuring strong women's (NGO) participation in the Peacebuilding Commission and of setting the right direction for the new Human Rights Council.

**Restructuring of UN agencies**

“System-wide coherence” is a point that passed without much public attention in September, but after intense negotiations. What is it about? It is about the reorganization and restructuring of the UN work in order to render it “more effective and relevant”. It concerns its funds, agencies, and programs in general as well as the UN presence in every country. In the World Summit final document, Member States agreed to strengthen the management and coordination of UN operational activities, including proposals for “more tightly managed entities in the field of the environment, humanitarian assistance and development”. It called upon the Secretary General to present options for such a restructuring. On 16<sup>th</sup> of February, Kofi Annan therefore set up a High-level Panel to develop such proposals. Louis Michel, EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, is member of the Panel, as well as Gordon Brown (Chancellor of the Exchequer, UK), Ruth Jacoby (Director General for Development Cooperation, Sweden), Jean-Michel Severino (Director General, French Development Agency). The Norwegian

Prime Minister is one of the three chairs of the panel. Already on February 23rd, the UN Ambassadors of 13 donor countries (G13) presented a letter to the Prime Minister of Norway containing proposals with far-reaching consequences (the Annex outlines 8 “key issues for strengthening the UN operational system”). The G13 comprises Canada and twelve European countries - Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. But EU countries have discussed this restructuring already for a while, but rather in the DAC (OECD) framework than at the UN<sup>1</sup>.

According to Martin Khor, the UK has also “floated a consultant's discussion paper on “system-wide coherence, a vision for the UN”, which stresses it is “not UK government policy”. As envisaged in World Summit document, the proposals consider restructuring the funds, agencies and programs into three big organizations (development, humanitarian and environment). At the country level, the UN would work really as one team, under one program and one coordinator. This implies merging or at least combining many agencies, which the papers propose could be done in different ways and stages. One target that is always mentioned is the fusion of UNIFEM into UNDP.

Will this serve the women’s rights agenda? The restructuring will for granted have an impact on the work of women’s rights activists on the ground. Streamlining the organizations and making sure that all parts pull in the same direction can be positive, but it can also be negative if that “main” stream does not integrate a strong gender perspective - while the gender specific fund will have disappeared. It is therefore of special importance to women’s rights activists to make sure that the gender aspect does not lose out. This is especially important for European activists, as the pushes and proposals for reform emanate in Europe. Advocacy for a strong gender component in the new “system-wide coherence” will have to be advocated towards the European governments, as their proposals so far are weak on this aspect and will most likely not be strengthened in the process by proposals of the G77...

A coalition of several women rights groups (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Center for Women’s Global Leadership) has campaigned for strengthening the gender aspect in this process. They managed to get the Secretary General to mandate that gender mainstreaming be added as a cross cutting issue in the Panel’s work. The Panel now will review both the “gender architecture” of the UN and gender mainstreaming as part of its official assessment. Regarding a future possible architecture, they propose the following criteria:

- Autonomous UN agency with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women’s rights and concerns, derived from the Beijing Platform for Action, Cairo Programme of Work, CEDAW, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> At the DAC conference in December 2005, Belgium presented a paper entitled “Redesign of the UN development architecture”, and the Netherlands the paper “A UN operational system for development fit to face the challenges of reaching the MDGs”.

- Under Secretary General leading agency to guarantee a voice for women and a seat at the UN decision making table
- Substantial, regularized and predictable resources adequate to implement the mandate
- Headquarters and in-country presence with sufficient and well trained personnel and resources
- Accountability mechanism that includes regionally-diverse independent women's rights advocates as part of its governing body

But apparently, after the showdown in the 5<sup>th</sup> Committee over the SG's management report, the Panel will not work on radically restructuring or creating institutions. The push for gender mainstreaming came therefore almost right in the sense that the Panel will now focus on how to best mainstream environment, gender, human rights and sustainable development in the UN (besides UN financing and the Resident Coordinator system). This is a big opportunity for women, which should not be missed.

### **Follow up to Beijing**

As the follow up process to Beijing came seemingly to an end with the Beijing + 10 Review in 2005, the Outcome Document of the World Summit has set the new framework for the follow up of all major conferences and summits of the 90s. In order to strengthen ECOSOC, the Outcome Document decided that an Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) within the ECOSOC high level segment will be responsible for reviewing the follow up to the outcomes of the major conferences. (§ 155: ECOSOC will "Ensure follow-up of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits, including the internationally agreed development goals, and hold annual ministerial-level substantive reviews to assess progress, drawing on its functional and regional commissions and other international institutions, in accordance with their respective mandates").

Right now, a draft resolution on ECOSOC reform is discussed in order to define such a review in more detail. One aspect of the current debate concerns the format of the debate: will each year examine the follow up to one conference, or according to thematic focuses or according to cross-sectorial issues? The latter is the proposal of the G77. Their OP II "*Recommends* that the Economic and Social Council establishes a multiyear programme of work based on a focused and balanced list of cross-sectorial thematic issues common to the outcomes of major United Nations conferences and summits including the objectives, goals and targets of the Millennium Declaration for the Ministerial review". What does this mean for the follow up on Beijing? Is gender equality going to be a cross sectorial thematic focus at all, and if yes, when? The G77 proposal further suggests that governments would make voluntary presentations on the cross-sectorial thematic issues and not on progress on the outcomes of the major conferences! This should be of serious concern to all those who agree that what is needed now is implementation. The reluctance to strengthen any sort of monitoring of implementation has been very strong and attempts at weakening even the existing structure are all present.

Furthermore, will the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) just be responsible for feeding into the bigger thematic issues on “women’s issues” - in accordance with their mandate? Or can it contribute on all issues? How will the decisions taken by the CSW feed into the larger processes and who will ensure that its decisions are really taken into account? Put it briefly: The future work of the CSW depends on the decisions taken on ECOSOC reform.

In addition, the September 2005 summit has again shown that the UN is no longer hosting large, formal preparatory processes. This will most likely not change in the near future. The UN preparatory processes of the 90s have been a good way for civil society involvement and allowed for broad consultative processes reflecting the diversity of the civil society movements. How will such a broad consultation – not only of the New York based NGOs- be ensured and allow for networking, cross-issue fertilization and inclusion of local and regional women’s NGOs? Women NGOs from the developed world fare better in the current system of sporadic NGO hearings, but it is our interest to fight for inclusion, broad access and consultation of our partners from around the world. We should ask for formal (regional) preparatory processes that allow for NGO participation.

### **Gender equality inside the UN**

One of the sad points of the World summit outcome is that language calling for the strengthening of the status and resources of women-specific UN entities and for gender balance in the staffing of the UN have not been included. At one point, the call for gender balance in staffing was included (§ 161 c), but then again deleted.

The Secretary General has now proposed a series of management and staff reforms – many about restructuring the relationship between the General Assembly and the Secretariat, but also relating to senior management. The later address gender balance – but always combined with geographical balance- as one criterion for appointment. Given the turfs over “equitable geographical representation”, this means that, in doubt, the geography factor will take the upper hand. So women’s rights activists have to make sure and monitor continuously high-level appointments and lobby for women to get the jobs (of course if equally qualified).

However, any changes in this field have been postponed to the future. The G77 group had introduced, and pushed through against the votes of the developed countries, a resolution in the 5<sup>th</sup> Committee demanding several more reports of the Secretary General before taking any action – a well-know tactic to postpone decision-making. But women rights’ activists should continue lobbying for improved transparency in appointment procedures, in monitoring of staff (not at least to make sure that future peacemaking soldiers do not abuse women and children).

Furthermore, the selection of the Secretary- General (SG) is one of the most significant collective decisions made by its member states and will occur this year. The appointment of the next Secretary-General of the United Nations represents a crucial moment for women, especially from Eastern Europe, as this region has a certain admitted claim to fill

this position (next to the Asian group). The European Women's Lobby has been advocating for selecting a woman as next Secretary General. But the debates within the General Assembly go much further, trying to establish mechanisms that would actually increase the chances for women to be selected.

The Secretary General of the UN is approved by the General Assembly, upon recommendation by the Security Council. In fact, the Security Council selects one candidate and the GA accepts. GA Resolution 11(1) from 1946 decided that the Security Council should recommend a single name for appointment as Secretary-General and that debate on the nomination in the General Assembly should be avoided. Already in 1997 did the General Assembly decide to make the process more transparent, but no significant step has been undertaken so far for its implementation. In the framework of the debate on "Revitalizing the General Assembly", Canada has now put forward concrete proposals to render this process more transparent and accountable. First of all, a list of qualifications should be agreed upon. Secondly, the GA should have the benefit of examining the declared candidates on their positions and qualifications before the SC takes a decision.

"Canada wants to see procedures in place that will enable the General Assembly on a consistent basis to play its important role effectively, and allow it to exercise the judgment required of it in an informed and responsible manner -- not simply as a question of informal arrangement, but as a process that is understood and agreed." Furthermore the Canadians propose to abolish the possibility of reelection (possibly extend the term to 7 years), increasing the frequency of the selection process, "thereby creating the possibility of more regular distribution among regions and between genders." The Canadian proposal does not suggest the Security Council to propose more than one candidate, the risk of politicization and division of the GA being too high.

Such reform is surely in the interest of women, increasing transparency in the procedure and highlighting the importance of finding measures that promote an equal distribution between genders. We should lobby the European governments and the two European P5 countries to support such a procedure.

To conclude: the UN reform is a process and the real impact of the decisions taken still depends to a large degree on the implementation and specification of certain aspects. Regarding the follow up to Beijing +5 and the restructuring of the agencies and funds, most is still up in the air. It is time to act to ensure an institutional framework favorable for women's rights –in times of rather hostile governments.

And on all these issues, we, as European feminists, can no longer take for granted that the EU position, the compromise between its 25 Member States, will anyway be progressive and does not require our lobbying. This is wrong. Given that several countries, especially from the new member states, have extremely conservative governments right now, the compromises that the EU defends, especially with respect to women's rights, are not up to our standards. Remember that the first anti-abortion exhibition is taking place now in the European Parliament. We have to watch out that the progressive governments do not sell out the women's right issues in exchange for receiving the support of the reactionary governments on other aspects closer to the hearts of the (male) deciders. We constantly have to monitor the positions taken by the European Union in these negotiations and hold

our governments accountable for them. To easily do they escape by arguing that it was not possible to maintain a stronger position because of the reluctance of some of the conservative governments. This is no excuse. There are many other issues on which they do not give up their positions – just think about agricultural subsidies- why should we accept this argument when it comes to women’s rights? The European Women’s Lobby is in Brussels and in New York only for major events. Who is monitoring EU positions on a continuous basis? Such a monitoring mechanism is necessary, collecting information and then forwarding it to national and European actors for advocacy and lobbying of our national governments.