

***Summary of the Panel Discussions “UN Reform: What’s in it for Women?”
a parallel event at the 50th UN Commission on the Status of Women session***

**Organized by
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Speakers

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Liane Schalatek:

Women are special stakeholders in the UN system. A comprehensive UN reform will have a profound effect on women. These are the unquestionable starting points of the discussion. The panel discussion today aims to shed a light on how the various UN reform efforts will impact women specifically and why women’s and feminist groups should not only care but get involved. As part of the wider package of UN reforms, there is a myriad of issues of relevance to women: the new Human Rights Council and the new Peace Building Commission, but also issues such as the establishment of a new Ethics Office, which is aimed at strengthening UN policies against sexual harassment--for example in the context of peacekeeping operations, or issues related to UN Management reform. In this context, one has to address the promotion of women to senior UN management positions as well as the role of the gender mainstreaming mandate in UN reform, and, last but not least, the overall review of programmes and mandates of the UN, which will lead to a reorganization and reduction of UN activities (Some 3000 (programmes???) are scheduled to be abolished in fiscal year 2006/2007 alone). Some of these might very well affect women and gender issues disproportionately.

Two additional points about UN reform also warrant consideration by women’s and feminist groups. First, the question of ECOSOC reform and economic competency of the UN. ECOSOC is supposed to be the principal policy dialogue and coordination organ on issues of economic and social development. This includes the interlinkages between development, peace and security and human rights and how these affect women. However, in recent years the UN development vision seems to have “bought” into one championed by other international organizations of global economic governance (World Bank, IMF and WTO most dominantly) which touts trade, investment and aid (in that order), as best path to development and only after developing countries themselves have brought their own economic house in order (“good governance”). This leaves no room for a systemic critique nor for a human and women’s rights-centered development concept. Second, with the US as the main driver of many UN reform efforts – and the deplorable role that the Bush administration has played in recent years in undermining the promotion and strengthening of women’s rights promotion in the UN context, it is at least fair to wonder and worry what a US dominated push for UN reform will mean for women’s and feminist groups worldwide.

Barbara Adams:

Despite the fact that a lot of attention has been given to ongoing UN reform efforts, the issue of UN reform itself is not new. Various reform measures in the current package have been underway since 1997. One of the changes being made is that the UN is now pulling together UN country teams at the country level, which will bring together the experts from various UN

agencies. UN country teams are to interact with the host country governments as well as attempting to connect actions by UN agencies with those from leading donor governments in the respective countries. A lot of this ties back to international efforts for more donor coordination and increased aid effectiveness.

Crucial for a feminist and women's groups is that the financing which supports women's agenda within the UN system is changing. For example, instead of agencies like UNIFEM supporting NGOs and their activities in the countries directly, more of the agency's funds will be given instead to governments with the goal of encouraging them to write development plans with a solid gender focus.

Yet, despite ongoing UN reform efforts, the current phase and pace of UN reform is different. This stems mostly from a strong political mandate, resulting from the outcome document of the Millennium Review Summit (World Summit) of September 2005, which brought more than 100 heads of states together in agreement to strengthen the UN. Some of the concrete reform proposals and commitments made at this summit are currently underway or on the verge of being implemented. They include specifically a new Peace Building Commission (PBC), which was already established, as well as discussions for a new Human Rights Council to replace the existing Commission on Human Rights. A reform of the composition and mandate of the Security Council (SC) is also part of the package, but negotiations are politically stuck and a compromise seems aloof. Furthermore, the Summit renewed commitments made in the context of the Millennium Summit of 2000 to achieve a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

An interesting ongoing aspect of UN reform is the effort of coherence within program areas of UN agencies involvement. For this purpose a High Level Coherence Panel on Environment, Development and Humanitarian Assistance was recently established. In contrast to former UN High Level Panels, this "High Level Coherence Panel" is composed of 15 senior government officials from around the world, who are in positions of power right now. While this fact might speak to the probability of pushing through with panel recommendations in the political realm, from a feminist/gender point of view the panel composition is worrisome: only three of 15 members are women. Thus, women's organizations need to pay attention to the panel's work to ensure that women's rights and the goal of women's empowerment receive adequate consideration.

Devaki Jain:

Picking up on the formation of the High Panel on Coherence, Devaki Jain voiced her concern that rather than furthering women's concerns within the UN development setup, efforts such as these might effectively contribute to collapsing, rather than expanding women's spaces" within the UN system. Thus, she called on women's and feminist groups to intervene in an effort to exert some damage control. The best way to do this would be through the establishment of a separate commission, a "Women's Commission on UN Reform". How this commission should be operationalized, whether as part of the existing Commission of the Status on Women (CSW) or as a separate entity, was not further specified. Although this commission would only be gaining a seat at the negotiating table "that is already set," it would ensure at a minimum the consideration and voicing of proposals for a "UN reform as women see it" by reflecting the perspectives of the poorest women and their lived experiences.

Vina Nadjibullah:

One of the key outcomes of the 2005 World Summit was a decision to establish a Peacebuilding Commission to help countries emerging from armed conflicts. The Commission will be responsible for addressing a critical gap within the UN and global system by providing a coordinated, coherent and integrated approach to post-conflict peacebuilding. The work of this inter-governmental advisory body will be assisted by a Peacebuilding Support Office, and a

multi-year standing Peacebuilding Fund to support initiatives on post-conflict stabilization and capacity building.

The PBC will work at the intersection of politics, peacekeeping, development, humanitarian work, and human rights. In principle, it will provide a more coherent approach to post-conflict work, thereby resolving the institutional gap in the UN system. The role of the PBC will not be to come up with solutions for every country situation, but rather to provide the space for strategy formulation, sharing of best practices, and to mobilize resources to assist local actors in post-conflict peacebuilding.

The conflict prevention mandate of the PBC as it was set up is not very strong, since the resolution mentions only “countries that are lapsing and re-lapsing”, not countries in danger of future conflict. In addition, while it was established as an advisory body to the UN Security Council, the PBC lacks teeth (needs to be clarified for people with limited English facility). Moreover, the UN Security Council itself still is unreformed, remaining non-transparent. The mandate the PBC has is restricted and does not take into account the full spectrum of issues related to the women-peace-security-nexus. The issues of nuclear disarmament and particularly the proliferation of small arms, both with a huge impact on women, peace and security, are not addressed by the PBC and remain outside of its mandate.

Despite these, many women’s groups welcomed the creation of the PBC, recognizing that the UN needs to do much more in order to prevent the resurgence of violence in many fragile societies. In the lead up to the World Summit that took place in September 2005, women’s groups joined many other civil society organizations and advocated for:

1. The mandate of the PBC to include the entire spectrum of conflict rather than just post conflict situations.
2. The Commission to consult with and draw on the expertise of civil society and especially women’s groups working on peace and security issues
3. Predictable and adequate financial and human resources for the Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding Fund and Support Office.

Due to pressure from many women’s groups and gender equality advocates, some of these concerns have been addressed. The concurrently adopted Security Council and General Assembly resolution on the PBC, reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention, resolution of conflicts and peacebuilding and the need to increase their participation in decision-making with regard to issues of peace and security. The resolution also “*Calls on the Commission to integrate a gender perspective into all its work*” and encourages the Commission to consult with civil society organizations, including women’s organizations, engaged in peacebuilding activities. This is a significant achievement and a strengthening of the commitment made by the world leaders at the September 2005 Summit.

What women’s rights advocates need to do now is to ensure that gender equality issues are addressed when the PBC considers security sector reform, transitional justice and reconciliation, land reform, and other peacebuilding activities in the context of its country specific work. The national ownership of ideas and strategies for peace-building, which has to go beyond government programs and mandates but need to include the broader national or regional civil society, especially independent women’s groups is very important. Their work accompanying the PBC must built on, strengthen and work to implement UN Resolution 1325, which is the first time that the Security Council explicitly recognized the crucial role of women in peace building. It will also be crucial to monitor and interact with governments in order to ensure that ways and means are established that allow not only for meaningful civil society consultations (CS) through the PBC to take place, but also the consideration and – where possible – implementation of useful civil society recommendations.

It is likely that among the first countries to come on the agenda of the PBC will be Burundi, Liberia, Haiti, Timor Leste, and Sierra Leone. Women's groups in these countries need to be aware of the PBC and its potential impact in terms of strategies and advise for peace consolidation and additional funding that may be available through the Peacebuilding Fund.

More advocacy efforts are also needed to ensure that the Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Fund adequately address gender concerns and promote the implementation of SCR 1325 on women, peace and security.

Cynthia Rothschild:

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) is one of the key functional commissions of the UN system, just like the Commission on the Status of Women. It is mandated to examine, monitor and publicly report on human rights situations in specific countries or on themes, such as violence against women. The Commission adopts resolutions, decisions and Chair statements. It has working groups and a network of independent experts - primarily called special rapporteurs. It has a system of special procedures that focus on countries and themes. It meets once a year for six weeks in Geneva.

The proposed Human Rights Council (HRC) is a reorganization and improvement of the existing Commission on Human Rights (CHR) that was agreed upon during the 2005 World Summit. One of the key issues that is hindering the smooth transition to the new Human Rights Council is that governments don't like to have their human rights records scrutinized. They don't like to be subjects of country resolutions, or to be named in thematic resolutions. They don't like to be judged by their peers. There is also an assumption that developing countries are susceptible to greater scrutiny than wealthier or more powerful states.

The new Council's modalities, membership and mandate have been discussed for the past seven months with the negotiations led by the Ambassadors of South Africa and Panama. A widely supported draft proposal was presented end of February and might be voted upon within the near future. Currently, the United States is the main objector on the grounds that the membership criteria for the new Council are not tough enough to exclude states that might be systematic human rights violators.

A brief background on the creation of the HRC: About a year ago, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan named human rights as a pillar of the UN system and suggested a plan for UN reform in relation to the five-year review of the Development Goals (2005 World Summit). He called for the replacement of the Commission on Human Rights with a new Human Rights Council. Thus, the CHR - HRC shift became a central discussion in the 2005 World Summit negotiations. The rationale for the transformation to HRC was that the Commission was "too politicized" and that it had been "discredited" and its reputation tarnished. It has been abused by countries seeking to use the Commission for political purposes or to shield themselves from scrutiny. Such language has also been picked up and repeated by the media and some NGOs. In some instances, the CHR is jokingly referred to as DCHR or Discredited Commission on Human Rights.

Essentially, the creation of the new Council is intended to strengthen and elevate the status of the human rights system in the UN.

The Center for Women's Global Leadership for the last year has been working with colleagues in New York and around the world to call attention to a few key areas affecting both HR Council and discussions in the UN generally. The CHR has made many positive contributions to the landscape of human rights and to women's human rights specifically. The notion that the CHR is "discredited" is complicated. It does a disservice to the gains made on gender in particular. Many Special rapporteurs have been courageous [in promoting human rights] even in the face

of state opposition. They have fostered innovative thinking about human rights issues and have contributed to new standard setting in HR.

There are two areas of concern in the creation of the new HRC: One is that NGO participation may not be as strong as what it has been in the Commission especially in the light of the trend toward limiting civil society participation in UN processes. However, NGO participation is likely to be reviewed early on and hopefully this would lead to a constructive outcome. The other concern has to do with special procedures--whether the special procedures and system of rapporteurs would be maintained in the new HRC. The risk in both these issues is that the decision is left to the new Council instead of having the General Assembly regulate detail.

Another issue is the reform of treaty bodies. There is an ongoing discussion in the UN system about streamlining government reporting to treaty bodies. How does the treaty body reform process affect the creation of the Human Rights Council? For example, in the aftermath of the scandal about Western cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed, there is talk about strengthening language in support of freedom of religion. The geopolitics including the strengths of donor states and ongoing efforts in the global war on terrorism are all of relevance to women's human rights and should be monitored.

While there are some concerns about how the HRC will function and the fact that the current draft is not perfect, many people feel this is the best draft that we can get. The level of energy and attention to the process [within the UN and civil society] is also a good sign. What we need to do now is to work out the details. Human Rights groups and most governments are hoping that this draft will be approved. If it gets torn apart, it remains to be seen what will happen. We encourage you to work with your governments in support of the creation of HRC.

Note: The UN General Assembly voted to create the Human Rights Council on March 15, 2006. The Council will replace the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), the body that currently sets and advances human rights standards in the UN. The Human Rights Council will have 47 members. Election of its members will take place on May 9, 2006.

Mavic Cabrera-Balleza:

The UN is in the midst of reform. This is not a new process as our previous speakers said. The train is in motion, so to speak. Can we still get on board? The process has taken place so fast -- it caught most of us unaware. In last year's CSW session, the discussion was still at the level of finding out how women's organizations were engaging in the UN. It was at a seminal stage. One year later, a new UN reform package is in place. The Peace Building Commission has been approved in December and deliberations on the Human Rights Council are on their final phase.

We all agree that the UN needs reform. But there are major differences (and likely) disagreement on what kind of reform is needed and for what purpose. Civil society (at least those of us who engage in UN issues and processes) has a long list of why we want the UN to reform. A lot of countries want to see a more powerful UN and more effective multilateral policy making. However, powerful countries and transnational corporations would rather see a weak UN with hardly any say --especially in global economic policies. So the question here is what type of reform and whose reform agenda will prevail.

Another point I wish to make has to do with the snail's pace that the UN has taken to address the gender imbalance within its own system. Even as we recognize that, we still see some opportunities and we want to grab those opportunities. We want to see an adequate representation of women in the institutional structure of the PBC. What is also important to stress here is that this means more than just gender-based appointments. We need to ensure that we have the right women--those who see their work not just as a career but as a great opportunity to be of service to women all other marginalized groups whom the UN is committed

to serve. We also want changes in mechanisms, entrenched attitudes and institutional culture to provide women the spaces, resources, opportunity and respect to participate in a most effective manner as they have always been promised.

The disconnect between global policies and advocates at the national level is another point that I wish to highlight. The lack of information as well as the fact that the little information we have on the UN Reform package is concentrated in the UN circles is evident. Most of the participants in this year's CSW session especially those coming from the regions are hearing the developments around the Peace Building Commission and the Human Rights Council for the first time.

Our experience in advocating for the full implementation of UNSCR 1325 tell us that even a potentially powerful global policy like this one could be completely meaningless for women at the national and community levels if women are not aware of it; if they did not have access to information. But then, awareness-raising is just one step. Women need to know exactly how this could be translated into concrete actions that are consistent with their realities--and these, they will themselves define. Without making a meaningful connection between the global and the local, this is not likely to happen.

On the other hand, is this just a matter of lack of information or lack of interest? We remember that the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City brought together 6,000 women; the Second (mid-decade) World Conference in Copenhagen, 8,000; the Third World Conference, 8,000; and the Fourth World Conference in Beijing, 40,000. Nearly 11 years after the Beijing Conference, we are still taking of the same issues. While we all agree that there had been some inroads, we also know that most Member States failed to honor their commitments. Beijing was betrayed as the WEDO coordinated alternative report said. Given this, can we still get the same number of women interested in the UN? Would they find the UN reform relevant? This is a big question.

Q & A:

A number of questions and comments addressed the lack of information and the point of relevancy of the UN Reform agenda for their organizations' work at the national level. Some criticism was voiced that there had been no continued information flow from New York-based groups to those in the regions, particularly in the weeks leading up to the CSW. Some women felt they could have engaged their governments prior to coming to New York on UN reform issues and followed up with them here. Some participants asked specifically how they could follow up at the national level and how they could hold their governments to honor their commitments with respect to human rights.

The website www.reformtheun.org was pointed out as a good source of information and for gendered analysis, www.beijingandbeyond.org was suggested. Some panelists also suggested that women's organizations focus on specific human rights issue to advocate for at the local level.

As to the concern that UN agencies might divert more funds to national governments for national plans of action, the panelists felt that the UN will still need to interact with civil society organizations on the ground, since they are an important part of the accountability mechanism for national and international governance.