

Bringing Women's Perspectives into UN Reform Processes

by Devaki Jain

The setting up in this day and age of a High-Level Panel on UN System-wide Coherence in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and environment with only three women out of 15 members has been a shocking revelation of the continued exclusion of women from high profile arrangements on policy. It shows that the UN, set up as a level playing field for nations and a guardian of the equality principle, is withdrawing from its original mandate and the founding Charter. Sixty years of international struggle by women does not seem to have made a difference to the UN, even as it is advising nations to give equality in those spaces.

Several suggestions have come forward to influence this Panel, including building stronger women-centred independent multilateral agencies solely to protect women's rights and reveal their strengths. But the lack of gender balance is not the only difficulty with the Panel – or the Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. The report has been deeply neglectful of the founding responsibilities of the UN, and the long and brilliant history of its association with development, linked to the aspirations and advice of the nations of the South.

A former Secretary-General of the UN, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in a speech given at the meeting of the governing body of the South Centre, Geneva, held in New Delhi in 2005, says, "In its report, the High-Level Panel endorses the progressive weakening and erosion of the UN's role in the socio-economic domains that has taken place over the last two decades. The Report puts forward the North-driven institutional agenda of entrusting socio-economic problems to the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO, the institutions that enjoy a 'comparative advantage' and to the Group of 8. Negotiating and decision-making on hard economic issues would no longer take place in the UN, which would be oriented to becoming a forum for consultation and debate."¹

The G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) group of countries have also prepared papers critiquing the thrust of the reform, not only its concentration on security but also its stigmatizing of the developing countries as the source of this 'insecurity' and concomitant loss of interest in poverty removal and equitable global development.²

Women and marginalization

There have been many attempts at reform of the UN, one of which was to streamline the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). UN development activities have given birth to an enormous structure called the UN Development Programme (UNDP), which has gradually become a self-serving bureaucracy. I happened to be on the three-

¹ 'The United Nations Crisis and its Reform', *South Bulletin* 97/98, 28 February 2005, p. 62.

² *South Bulletin*, March 2005.

member high-powered review committee set up in 1998-1999³ to reform this structure, and we visited a diverse number of countries, ranging from Romania, Vietnam and Ghana to Yemen. We found that the recipient countries felt somewhat assaulted by the multiple fingers of UN Development assistance thrusting into their countries, often competing for space and legitimacy. Their autonomy in deciding what they wanted was often being trampled on by the many UN experts and officials who were living in privileged positions in their countries. We suggested therefore a harmonization process and the building of a common country programme that the country could claim as its own. In almost all the countries, gender was chosen as their thrust area, but was represented by one gender person, in a room, while the rest flowed on. The usual ghettoization.

Even the special agencies focusing on women that were set up both as international agencies and as national machineries have suffered from similar marginalization, ghettoization and the demeaning gaze that excluded peoples and women have experienced at all societal levels worldwide.

I learnt this and so much more while working for over three years on a book, *Women Development and the UN: A 60-year quest for equality and justice*⁴. It was an extraordinarily humbling and enriching experience for me. I developed new respect for history in itself, having previously as an economist been only interested in the here and now. The story in this book reveals what the UN can be – as an arbiter of justice, as an exemplary democratic space that the excluded and oppressed can use to emerge out of those binds, as a space where emancipatory ideas can be consolidated and dispersed and even embedded into the rule of law. I realized that the power of ideas is greater than the power of institutions and numbers.

Women's activities both outside and inside the UN, especially in the early years 1945-1975, provide brilliant examples of how the oppressed can nudge, budge and penetrate these hard rocks of entrenched power. The instruments they used were collective thinking and bonding across divides such as class, race and location. Every investigation into women's status – whether done by UNESCO et al. or by those outside – revealed flaws in facts, in reasoning, in policy and programme and in the design of institutions. Women exposed the mismatch between the UN's intentions and acts through knowledge supported by effective advocacy and influenced UN's conceptualisation and delivery of development.

Yet they could not quite break the hard rock of entrenched patriarchy or use their knowledge to break through the entrenched thinking, ideas and paradigms. They were faced with many dilemmas. Does effective participation mean sitting at the existing table

³ Professor Adebayo Adedeji, Devaki Jain and Mary McCowan, External Assessment of the UNDAF, Impact Evaluation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), 2001 (Quoted at the Fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly ECOSOC A/56/70-E/2001/58) 14 May 2001

⁴ Devaki Jain, *Women, Development and the UN – A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* published by Indiana University Press in 2005, Website of the UN intellectual history project of which this book was one of a series is: www.unhistory.org

of power or at their own table? Separate or melded? A further question that haunts those who wish to jump into what is called the mainstream, to ‘integrate into existing policies’, can be captured through Hamlet’s famous timeless existential question, “To be or not to be?”⁵ Integrate into the mainstream or remain apart, challenging its legitimacy and its values? Integrating into a given set up that is inaccurate and flawed means surrender, apart from perhaps leading to undesirable results. But staying away from participating also has its negative effects, i.e., exclusion. In the language of the feminists this question has also been phrased as: “do we want a piece of the poisoned cake?”⁶ or “do we want to swim in the polluted stream?”⁷

The need for a women’s commission

It is we women with our consciousness of discrimination, our experience of nurturing and sustaining life at all costs and our immense intellectual skills that can rebuild a scarred and unequal, warring and unipolar, profit-driven world. These situations need to spur us into revolutionary actions, not reformist ones. In this revisiting and rethinking process, there is a need to introduce something new to the experience of gendered architecture as it has been conceived and has operated in the last 60 years.

My suggestion is that, instead of lobbying to be included in that flawed schema of current UN Reform, we should demand that the UN set up a Women’s Commission for UN Reform or “UN reform: as women see it or want it”. This commission could look at restructuring the UN from the point of view of women from the poorest communities, facilitated by the grassroots and community-based agencies that are working with them. How would they like to have the UN’s hands and fingers reach out to them?

Our input into the UN reform agenda should be to bring back development as the core, rather than security and humanitarian services. This could be refreshing – it could revitalize the international women’s movement and at the same time allow the UN to be the kind of space that gives us all an opportunity to build knowledge-based, solidarity-based transformation both at the international level and locally.

If it is set up as an independent commission, as was the Commission on Human Security⁸ co-chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, it will not enter the heavy abdomen of the UN. It is only if it is commissioned by the UN that it will enter its debating spaces. Regions could be asked to send detailed reports from women in the communities on how

⁵ In Hamlet, Shakespeare immortalized the ultimate existential question: "To be or not to be?" This philosophical question that distinguishes the human mind touches on the universal experience of doubt, of questioning.

⁶ Devaki Jain, “The Role of Peoples Movement in Economics and Social Transformation”, Paper presented at the Opening Thematic Plenary for Economic and Social Development, at 1999 Seoul International Conference of NGOs, The Role of NGOs in the 21st Century: Inspire, Empower, Act (10-16 October 1999, Seoul, Korea).

⁷ Bella Abzug, Bradford Morse Memorial Lecture, UNDP, Beijing, 5 September 1995.

⁸ Commission on Human Security, *Human Security Now* (New York: Commission on Human Security, 2003). The Commission on Human Security was chaired by Amartya Sen and former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata (<http://www.humansecurity-chs.org>)

they have benefited from the UN system, or what their ideas for change are. The Regional Commissions could call on nations to do an exercise of this kind in collaboration with women's networks and local groups. Through a process of harvesting of voice, the commission would give advice on how to reform the UN. In other words, we would set our own table and give a full report, uncorrupted by militarism and domination, on UN reform from top to bottom, from security and development to humanitarian services.

The commission could also hammer out a perspective on what can be called 'gendering international efforts for economic and social justice' or, more directly, 'women's perspective on the development agenda'. The old benchmarks, like looking at Beijing and its Platform for Action, have become outdated as the economic world and the political world have changed since 1995 in very basic ways. The issues poor women are grappling with have changed, and it is imperative, if we are to avoid the deeper incarceration of women in poverty, to investigate the current forces and their flows and find monitoring frameworks that enable nations and the UN to understand that change and soften if not remove the blows.

"We're in an intense period of UN reform," says Stephen Lewis⁹. Indeed we are, and as the majority of the people of the world live in the developing countries – and as the press and public opinion in these countries are affirming – it is these countries that would like to revitalize the UN. It is the only space where the Charter mandates equality, and in an increasingly unequal and unjust world, this institution has to be refreshed and brought back. It will be a betrayal of all that our foremothers fought for if we, as a women's movement, do not engage in this task – not as interventionists, not as lobbyists, but bringing to bear our immense experiential skills and ability to think out of the box. It will also help us to regain our height in the global landscape by building the UN from below, but brilliantly!

⁹ Stephen Lewis, *Keep A Child Alive*, UN Special Envoy for HIV / AIDS in Africa, at a Conference on UN Reform and Human Rights, Harvard Law School on 26 February 2006 (www.keepachildalive.org)