

What women need from the new UN women's rights agency

Making the case for strong operational capacity and mandate at country level

Over the past few years, women's rights advocates, academic experts, governments, the UN and its agencies have all stated that progress on women's rights and gender equality in the context of poverty eradication and development is:

- Too little or absent
- Too slow
- Without accountability
- Not a priority
- Lacking political commitment
- Lacking leadership
- Lacking effective mechanisms and structures
- Entirely underfunded

In practice, this means the UN is not doing its job effectively and does not work for women. This applies not only to the existing UN gender mechanisms, but also to the bigger UN agencies that operate on the ground and are tasked with putting international agreements on women's rights and gender equality into practice. These structures have shown to have little or no impact on the lives of women and girls.

1. Operational capacity with impact: putting the agency in the driver's seat

We need **a women's agency that operates with impact**. This would represent a change of the status quo of women's rights at country level and in the way the UN works for women. To be able to operate with impact requires a strong mandate at country level which is supported by strong operational capacity, including financial resources. Simply scaling up the existing UNIFEM structures is not a recipe for success.

Here we consider the implementation of policies and laws aimed at protecting and promoting women's rights and ensuring equal opportunities to be the main political challenge. Implementation is a particularly layered and complex process. Usually, only few or none of the existing country level structures, such as governments and related line ministries, NGOs, donors, and experts, have the capacity and expertise to organize such a process from A to Z.

In fact, implementation needs to be the main focus of the agency's work at country level, based on the following key ingredients:

- Autonomy for the women's agency and the space to work proactively anticipating challenges rather than reactively when problems have arisen
- Implementation needs to be approached as a long-term process, which involves developing and executing **multi-year comprehensive programmes** rather than one-off projects aimed at closing gaps.
- Programming as well as other country level activities of the agency can only be successful if they are based on a **gender analysis of the institutional, financial and attitudinal needs at country level**.
- **Predictable funding** (including voluntary) that can be allocated to developing and implementing long-term comprehensive programmes.
- Senior staff selected with a demonstrated commitment to gender equality and women's rights issues and technical ability.
- Sufficient resources need to be made available for staff of the agency to travel in country to areas that have been marginalized or excluded from development activities

- Any operations of the agency need to aim at **empowering constituencies to own the process**. This ensures the agency's work is long-lasting, has impact and constituencies are able to continue the work eventually without UN presence.

2. Collaborating with civil society, especially women's rights advocates at country level

In order to operate with impact, the agency needs to work in support of national civil society, especially women's rights and gender equality advocates. Unless such advocates are part of its work, the agency is not going to be successful. In fact, women's rights and gender equality issues related to development are too complex to be solved by any organization on their own.

Given the lack of capacity, transparency, accountability and democratic governance in many countries, NGOs are often the ones who are linked to the community and grass-roots level, able to assess the "need on the ground". Country level experience shows the UN is often perceived as not approachable and not accessible. In fact, limited resources of the current UN gender structures at country level have prevented staff from travelling in country, making, women's rights and development work a desk job. This means that local people see it as another institution that does not work for them.

The UN and its member states need to completely **rethink how they view women and girls. Women and girls are the clients** of the new women's agency as well as **its strategic partners**. This should be the premise on which the agency's collaboration with civil society at country level should be based. In addition, the following points need to be taken into consideration:

- The agency should develop a clear strategy for collaboration in partnership with civil society, especially women's rights advocates.
- Women's rights advocates have always been at the forefront of undertaking development work and filling the gaps. Their expertise, capacity and vision are the capital the agency needs to work with and draw from at country level.
- In order to build long-term programmes based on country-specific gender analysis, it is necessary that the agency facilitates different constituencies and includes them in the debate. This concerns community based grassroots organizations in particular, as they ensure the inclusion and consultation of poor women. This in turn strengthens their capacities to advocate for themselves without proxy.
- For the definition of the agency's work priorities at country level, collaborating with civil society is a key ingredient for success.
- The agency has to support the independence of women's rights advocates and their organizations.
- As regards the agency's own country level presence, CSO participation should be mainstreamed and be part of the portfolio of all its staff members. In addition, one staff member should act as a formal contact point. Smaller NGOs at country level should not be viewed as logistical entities for the UN.

3. The new UN women's rights agency within the UN country team

For the agency to be recognized and taken seriously at country level, it needs to have its own presence felt. Without a clear mandate to lead the UN's gender equality work at country level, a robust budget, seniority and strategic objectives, the agency will not be an equal partner within the UN country team and will stand in the shadow of wealthier and more powerful UN agencies such as UNDP and UNICEF. Also regarding the UN Development Assistance Framework (UN DAF) we anticipate serious problems if the agency is not in the lead.

To women's rights advocates, a leading role of the new UN women's agency within the UN country team, ensuring accountability with or without the support of the Resident Coordinator would represent a transformative outcome of the reform of the UN gender equality architecture.

4. The advocacy work of the new UN women's rights agency

One of the novelties of the new agency is its proposed mandate to undertake advocacy work. A number of key factors need to be considered when operationalizing this function of the agency:

- Advocacy of the agency at country level includes comprehensive monitoring of governments' compliance with internationally agreed frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action on Women, Peace and Development. As an example, the annual monitoring of the MDGs at global and regional level by the UN, has helped raise their profile and has assisted in calling for targeted action and political commitment. Women's rights and gender equality need to become a household term. Advocacy based on regular monitoring creates an important political platform.
- The advocacy of the agency needs to focus on institutions and the creation of structures as well as targeting specific problems with the implementation of women's rights at country level. The Kenyan experience with Violence against Women for example shows that raising women's awareness of the issue has been successful, but what happens after that?
- Advocacy of the new UN women's agency should include the mobilization of constituencies as well as supporting the advocacy of women's rights organizations at country level. The agency's own advocacy should focus on addressing women's rights and gender equality issues in a direct and effective way, resulting in political action.

These recommendations have been presented and developed jointly by the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), Akcija Združenska of Macedonia, a member of the International Gender Policy Network (IGPN), the Arab Women Organization of Jordan, Equality Now and Oxfam Novib.