

A new agency for women

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The Beijing Conference Platform for Action provides a concrete agenda for women's empowerment. But it fails boldly to address the institutional structure needed for its implementation. It recognizes that effective implementation will require changes in institutions and organizations, acknowledging a 'need to renew, reform and revitalize the various parts of the United Nations system'. Yet its suggestions reflect 'more of the same' – strengthening the existing institutions with more funding and human resources.

Many institutions were established for the advancement of women during the last two United Nations Decades for Women, especially the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Commission on the Status of Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The main characteristics of these institutional arrangements are multiplicity of actors, diffused mandates, limited financial resources and inadequate interaction with national governments.

At Beijing, we need to ask: do the existing mechanisms have structures and resources to give them the independence and strength to influence national policy-making? Or do we now need a permanent mechanism that puts women's issues on top of the global policy agenda every day, every week and every year, instead of every decade?

What we need is a United Nations Agency for Advancement of Women (UNAAW) which will keep reminding the world of such critical policy issues as:

- **Ninety nations have still not signed or ratified the CEDAW Convention, including the United States: pressure must be maintained on each nation every year to implement this Convention.**
- **National income accounts fail to register the fact that women contribute as much, or more, to global and national output as men, so there is an urgent need to produce new and more transparent data.**
- **The entire basis of property ownership, divorce settlements and economic transactions between men and women must change fundamentally once women's economic contribution is fully recognized.**
- **Women receive less than 10 per cent from formal credit institutions even though they are the best savers and investors. Grameen Bank type facilities, as successfully introduced in Bangladesh, need to be set up nationally and internationally to provide them with credit.**
- **On average only 10 per cent of seats in parliaments, 6 per cent in cabinets and 15 per cent of top managerial and administrative posts are occupied by women. Strong affirmative action – as in the Nordic countries over the last two decades – is needed to increase women's participation in political and economic decision-making.**
- **The current disparity in the educational, health and nutritional status of men and women must be removed through well targeted social investment programmes and policy adjustments.**

It is now time to consider establishing an integrated United Nations agency to elevate women's advancement to the top of the policy agendas, to monitor specific achievements and failures, and to provide a coordinated policy framework to galvanize energies and efforts throughout the international system. Its most important role would be to widen the policy choices for women and to become their most articulate champion at the global level.

UNAAW can be conceived as an umbrella organization with some existing facilities and programmes grouped under its jurisdiction, so it is seen not as a new addition but as an efficient and cost-effective use of existing structures and resources. Under the stewardship of an eminent and recognized world leader of women's causes, the Agency could engage in policy dialogue with the highest level policy makers at national level, and ensure the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action •

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