

**Speech to a conference on UN Reform and Human Rights, Harvard Law School,  
Saturday, February 26, 2006  
Delivered by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, 12:30 pm**

As recently as ten days ago, I wasn't at all sure what I wanted to say in this luncheon address. Then, on February 16<sup>th</sup>, the United Nations announced the appointment of a new High-Level Panel on UN System-Wide coherence in areas of development, humanitarian assistance and environment. My uncertainty was swiftly brought to an end.

The appointment of the panel was done in response to a fiat delivered by the governments of the world during the General Assembly last September. In the so-called "Outcomes Document" of that gathering, the Secretary-General was 'invited' to launch work "to further strengthen the management and coordination of United Nations operational activities so that they can make an even more effective contribution to the achievement of the ... Millennium Development Goals, including proposals for ... more tightly-managed entities in the fields of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment."

Quite a mouthful, although positively mellifluous in the literary aesthetics of UN reform. And I may say, just as an aside, that if the High-Level Panel ever deigned to seek my opinion, I would love to provide some thoughts about the role of some of the multilateral 'entities'.

However, that's not why I raise the panel. I raise the panel because there are fifteen members, and of the fifteen appointees, with the whole world to choose from, three are women. Twenty-seven years after the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, now ratified by 180 governments; thirteen years after the International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, when we coined the mantra "Women's Rights are Human Rights"; eleven years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, twice now reaffirmed at five-year intervals; almost exactly one month after the inauguration of the first-ever woman to be elected President in Africa (Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia); two weeks before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary session of the Commission on the Status of Women; and in the very year when the new President of Chile broke all known precedents to inaugurate a cabinet of exact gender equality, the multilateral system disgorges a high-level panel of fifteen people to look at the re-design all those areas of the United Nations system which so significantly address the lives of women, and but three members of the panel are women.

Now it's obviously difficult for me to be critical; the UN is my second home. And for more than twenty years now, I've loved and defended the organization, whatever warts it may display on occasion. And I shall continue to be a multilateral patriot. But in the spirit of UN reform, which is the centerpiece of this conference, allow me to say that when I read the composition of the High-Level Panel, the natural instinct was to throw up one's hands in dismay and ask, "When will things ever change?" What do you have to do to get multilateralism to embrace even the simplest element of gender equality: the element called 'parity'? I'm reminded, by extension, of the Commission on Africa, appointed last year by Prime Minister Blair, with three women amongst seventeen members: by far the weakest part of the Commission report was the way in which it dealt --- or more accurately, failed to deal --- with the women of Africa. It is ever thus. Over and over again we're guilty of the same folly. I remember Lord Acton's dictum:

**Speech to a conference on UN Reform and Human Rights, Harvard Law School,  
Saturday, February 26, 2006  
Delivered by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, 12:30 pm**

“There is another world for the expiation of guilt, but the wages of folly are payable here, below.”

Women, world-wide, are paying here, below, for that folly with their lives. I see it all around me in the AIDS pandemic in Africa, exacting a carnage amongst women that knows no parallel in modern history. What is more, in the presence of AIDS, it's virtually impossible to talk plausibly of women's human rights ... every right a woman might have can be held to the ransom of the virus.

And that's but one reason why we need a revolution in the way in which the multilateral community operates. Three women out of fifteen may seem a relatively minor matter, but I would argue that it's symptomatic of a much larger truth: if you believe, as I believe, that the United Nations can fundamentally improve the human condition, then multilateralism has to learn that women comprise more than fifty per cent of the world and you simply can't continue to promote, as nation states promote, the kind of intellectual bafflegab which holds women in thrall. And it's bafflegab to imagine that the UN 'operational activities' can ever be reformed or even refreshed if we continue to confine them to the old categories of development, humanitarian assistance and environment.

Even worse, it's darn near criminal to believe, as so many nation states apparently believe, that mainstreaming gender through those three operational activities will lead to improvement in the human rights of women. It never has; in fact, mainstreaming, with its pathetic illusion of transformation, leads to a cul de sac for women. What is needed --- I've said it before, and I shall say it ad nauseam --- is an international women's agency, within the United Nations, to do for women what UNICEF does for children. It's as simple and straightforward as that.

So when the United Nations appoints another high-level group to achieve reform, not only is gender parity decisive, but so is the added investigation of UN entities that deal with women an integral part of that reform. "Operational activities" and "operational entities" then become development, humanitarian assistance, environment AND women. Without wishing to cause offence, I want to say that UN reform without a separate, definitive track for women is a travesty. I have no idea how we will get multilateralism to understand that; I have no idea how we can wrench nation states out of their miasma of sexism, but I know, as I stand here, that a reform exercise of the kind now contemplated constitutes a mortal blow to the women of the world.

To talk of UN reform and human rights for women, in the same breath, under present circumstances, is laughable.

The question then becomes, how do we move in the right direction? Let me speak openly: at the moment, in multilateral terms, the United Nations is hopelessly fragmented in its dealings with women's issues and women's human rights.

**Speech to a conference on UN Reform and Human Rights, Harvard Law School,  
Saturday, February 26, 2006  
Delivered by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, 12:30 pm**

The vehicle that would seem, on the surface, to best embody the hopes and needs of women is UNIFEM, the UN Development Fund for Women. But it's not even an agency; it's a mere department of the UNDP, and it has a budget so modest and a staff so small as to belie any possibility of an agency on a grand scale. I don't belittle UNIFEM: it does its best, but its best is shackled by a lethal combination of parsimony and misogyny within the international system.

Then there's UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, which, for my money, is an increasingly impressive international agency with growing scope and inspired leadership. And despite the unwarranted attacks by the United States administration, with which we're all familiar, UNFPA continues to persevere in a splendid display of indomitability, doing excellent work on the ground.

The problem, however, is mandate and resources. UNFPA necessarily focuses on sexual and reproductive health, and although its 'mission statement' broadens those priorities, the mandate never really extends to the full range of issues relating to women, nor does it have anywhere near the resources for its present mandate let alone a broader design.

Of smaller import is the Division for the Advancement of Women that operates out of the secretariat, and acts, amongst other things, in an advisory capacity to the Secretary-General, but to all intents and purposes, the world would not subside in grief if the DAW were folded into another agency.

Nor do I think that I can or should overlook UNICEF. In a vast myriad of ways, the lives of young women and girls are intertwined with the work of the world's premier children's agency. However, the inevitable tendency is to see women primarily as 'mothers', and that serves to limit the vast array of other characteristics and roles that define the world of women. UNICEF is not the answer, nor would it wish to be the answer.

If we are to have a separate women's agency, with financing of at least a billion dollars a year (in order even to approximate the wealth and clout of other UN agencies), and several thousand staff (UNICEF has more than eight thousand), then we have to start afresh. It is surmised by many that UNIFEM would like to emerge as the strong women's arm of a revitalized UNDP, rather than as an adjunct to a dominant UNFPA. But I'd be inclined to argue that we need an entirely new agency, with a new name, a broad, encyclopedic mandate, headed by an Under Secretary-General (as an aside, I must point out that in one of the most egregious and perverse insults to women in the multilateral universe, the head of UNIFEM is ranked as a "D2", a touch better than middle management, but purely on a par with a number of individual country representatives from various of the agencies. On the other hand, every single special representative of the Secretary-General [overwhelmingly male] is of higher rank. In the lexicon of human rights violations, the situation stands as an example of shameless patriarchal assault).

We're in an intense period of UN reform. This is the moment when the women's movement, and all of its supporters, should confront every member of the international community, and lobby with indefatigable tenacity. The recommendations of this newly-

**Speech to a conference on UN Reform and Human Rights, Harvard Law School,  
Saturday, February 26, 2006  
Delivered by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, 12:30 pm**

appointed high level group are meant to influence the decisions of the next Secretary-General and the member states. We must find a regional champion in each of the major regions of the world, and have that country carry the banner of women's rights, calling on an ignited civil society for support. There will be a natural aversion to creating new entities, but Pavlovian instincts cannot be allowed to get in the way. We're not just fighting for women's human rights, we're fighting for women's lives.

And that's how I'd like to end the making of this argument. What I'm about to say will not sit well with some, but my views are informed by nearly five years of observing the brutal march of the AIDS pandemic across the continent of Africa.

It is my conviction that the staggering, disproportionate vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS could have been diminished, dramatically, if the multilateral system had an agency to take up the cudgels on behalf of women. At some point in time, history will demand an explanation for the torpor that transfixed the international community while women were being decimated, and are still being decimated, in numbers that would numb the mind of Einstein.

How can we ever explain the fact that the funeral parlours and graveyards of Africa are filled with the bodies of young women in their late teens, twenties and thirties? I've just returned from Swaziland: in its most recent representative sample of ante-natal clinics, over fifty-six per cent of the women between the ages of 25 and 29 are infected. How is that other than Armageddon? How can we ever explain the fact that fewer than ten per cent of pregnant women in Africa have access to prevention of mother-to-child transmission in the year 2006? How can we ever explain the fact that fewer than ten per cent of the women in Africa know their HIV status in the year 2006? How can we ever explain the fact that grandmothers, aged, impoverished and failing, have become the last resort of orphan support in 2006? How can we ever explain the fact that young girls in a number of high-prevalence countries still don't have knowledge of how the virus is transmitted? How can we ever explain the fact that laws against sexual violence and marital rape, and laws to embody property rights and inheritance rights, are still not a part of the legislative fabric of several countries at the epicentre of the pandemic in 2006? How can we ever explain the fact that so many international human rights instruments, from the African protocol for the rights of women to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, have been ratified by a host of African states, only to find them dishonoured in the breach? How can we ever explain the fact that the women of Africa carry the continent on their backs, and reel under the burden of care, unacknowledged and uncompensated, while the world looks on with eyes of glass? How can we ever explain the fact that the Millennium Development Goals, six of the eight of which explicitly address women, will never be reached in Africa by the year 2015?

I'm tired of ranting into the void. We need, need now, need desperately, a mass movement in support of women's rights, whose culminating achievement will be the creation of an international, multilateral women's agency. By sheer accident of timing, the appointment of the High-Level Panel gives us a perfect entry point. If the Panel, however male-laden, however cerebrally-resistant, were to take on board the issue of women as a fourth frame of reference, and emerge, for the first time in the 61-year history of the United Nations, with a recommendation

**Speech to a conference on UN Reform and Human Rights, Harvard Law School,  
Saturday, February 26, 2006  
Delivered by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, 12:30 pm**

that gave to women an organizational vehicle to change and challenge the world, then we would have the breakthrough that gives voice, breath and sinew to the meaning of equality.

Agencies of the UN system are capable of changing the world. Look at UNICEF in the 1980's when it advanced the Child Survival Revolution; look at WHO in the last two years as it initiated anti-retroviral treatment which will prolong millions of lives; look at the World Food Programme today, expanding its mandate to touch ever greater numbers of the uprooted and disinherited of the earth.

A true international, multilateral agency for women can do the same. There are infinite numbers of studies to show that to achieve the human rights of women leads, irresistibly, to the amelioration of the human condition without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. God knows, that's what the world needs. It's sad, therefore, that in his report to the Commission on the Status of Women, whose meetings begin in two days time, the Secretary-General is forced to point out "that in no country in the world has women's full de jure and de facto equality been achieved."

It's 2006. What a commentary on male hegemony.

In the New York Times last Thursday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, there was a front-page story by Michael Wines, describing the exodus of hundreds of refugees from a refugee camp in Zambia. They were searching for food. The world community, yet again, had failed to provide the resources sufficient to feed the hungry. It was a story laden with heartbreak. Inevitably, in such refugee situations, the majority of the adults affected are women.

They need a new and powerful voice. They need an advocate that never allows the world to forget the sorrow it perpetuates.

They need a women's agency.