

**Excerpt from a speech by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa  
on the occasion of International Women's Day  
Delivered to an event hosted by the Women's Global Health Imperative,  
University of California, San Francisco, March 8, 2006, 17:30 P.S.T.**

Lewis continues to advocate for autonomous international women's agency; sees grave failings in appointment of new high-level panel; argues that women abandoned in fight against AIDS.

Seldom have words leaped off the page as they did in the open letter, sent to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and member governments, by a coalition of international women's groups earlier this week. They were designed to acknowledge International Women's Day, and to coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary session, in New York, of the Commission on the Status of Women.

They were angry words. They were words that did not succumb to diplomatic niceties, even though they were meant for the Secretary-General of the United Nations. One paragraph said it all: "We are disappointed and frankly outraged that gender equality and strengthening the women's machineries within the UN system are barely noted, and are not addressed as a central part of the reform agenda. Again we must ask how it can be that more than ten years after the commitment to gender parity at the Beijing Conference, the UN is still offering only token representation of women on critical committees, high level expert panels and in senior positions within the organization?"

I have to say --- however awkward it is for me to say it --- that I fully understand, and entirely agree. Here it is, more than a decade beyond Beijing, and so many of the fine words of the Plan of Action have turned to dust. Not only has there been lamentable stagnation when it comes to elevating women to senior positions within the United Nations, but a particularly provocative incident undoubtedly played a part in driving the women's groups to draft their letter.

It happened this way: the theme of International Women's Day this year, and the major theme of the meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, is *the role of women in decision-making* in every sphere of society, according to the Deputy Secretary-General, who opened the Commission proceedings, and was unselfconsciously critical of the failure of the United Nations to live up to the Charter "which proclaims the equal rights of men and women."

Even more a propos, in his official International Women's Day message, the Secretary-General himself said that "... the role of women in decision-making is central to the advance of women around the world ... and their full participation *on the basis of equality* in all spheres of society ... (is) fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace."

Good, strong words, and the climactic note was yet to come: "It is, therefore, right and indeed necessary that women should be engaged in decision-making processes in all areas, *with equal strength and in equal numbers* ... On this International Women's Day, let us rededicate ourselves to demonstrating the truth behind those words. Let us ensure that half the world's population takes up its rightful place in the world's decision-making."

The problem for the women at the Commission meeting was to find a way to reconcile those words with the apparent indifference of the United Nations over the years since Beijing. Worse, just ten days before the Commission opened, there came a straw that broke the women's backs. In response to a request from the member states, the UN had appointed a fifteen-person high level expert panel to initiate definitive reforms in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and environment: *of the fifteen members, three were women!*

How do you describe three out of fifteen as "equal strength and in equal numbers?" From what I can determine, that was, at least in part, what prompted the angry open letter.

The women have an irrefutable point. There's something pretty flagrant, in the year 2006, about establishing an eminent panel, upon whose recommendations the rights of women will depend, and have such provocatively disproportionate representation ... representation that flies in the face of everything determined at Beijing, and everything said over the last ten days at the Commission on the Status of Women.

I would agree that it is necessary to enlarge or even reconstitute the panel. And at the very least, the panel must grant public access to its deliberations, and provide time for public hearings and public submissions, so that women's groups can shape the findings.

But I would go much further than that; further than the letter to the Secretary-General and the member states. I do not believe that simply factoring women into the consideration of development, humanitarian assistance and environment will lead to fundamental change. The demand to incorporate women's concerns into priorities set by men has been made, met, and invariably abandoned countless times before. We must have a fourth and separate category on the agenda, and that category is called 'women'. Otherwise, I'm prepared to bet that we'll end up with the same old rhetorical flim-flam, repeating the same old commitments, and leading to the same old pattern of betrayal. I continue to believe that the only way to break through the throttling paralysis on women's needs, and women's rights, is to create a major new multilateral women's agency with resources and staff and mandate that can finally give meaning to equality.

The women of the world have been staggeringly patient. The patience has to come to an end. This high-level panel gives the women's movement, and all who support it, the opportunity to challenge, head-on, the very premise on which the panel's work is based. A dreadful mistake was made in the composition of the panel. That mistake should be used to drive home a restructured panel and an appropriately restructured reform agenda. This is an amazing opportunity for the women's movement: I hope they seize it.

And I hope they seize it because the brouhaha around the panel is only a fragment of the picture. The panel simply exposes the soft underbelly of everything that's hollow in the protestations of equality. What's much more important is to see the gap between promise and performance in response to women's needs (just look at the report, tabled at the UN this week, documenting the pathetic under-representation of women in the parliaments of the world).

This becomes critical, and engages my immediate attention, because of the multi-year programme of work, for 2007-2009, of the Commission. One of the three topics for policy

development is "... sharing of responsibilities for home and family, *including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS.*"

Thus do we come full circle. It starts with the abandonment of the principles of equality writ large in the text of Beijing; it exposes an indefensible paucity of women in senior positions at the United Nations; it leads to the establishment of a high level panel that repudiates the simplest norms of gender parity, and it ends up dealing with the pandemic of AIDS, itself decimating the lives of women precisely because gender inequality is driving the virus.

You want a programme of work that talks about care-giving in the context of AIDS, then ask yourselves why the care-givers are overwhelmingly women; why are they so universally unacknowledged and uncompensated; why are they increasingly made up of grandmothers, bereft and in despair; why are they almost always hungry; why have they no support to soften the trauma with which they struggle; why are they so poorly-funded; why do they live lives of such intense vulnerability?

I don't care what anyone says. My view is that there's a kind of organic line of continuity between the indifference to gender equality in the echelons of power, and the horrendous predicament of women living with and coping with AIDS.

The only thing that will give adequate voice to the women of the world is an international women's agency of clout and power. If that's not in the cards because the world doesn't really give a tinker's damn, then the carnage will continue unabated.

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