



PRESS RELEASE

UN Women: Will the UN Squander an Historic Opportunity in the Fight against AIDS?

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

21 July 2010, XVIII International AIDS Conference, Vienna -- On July 2, the General Assembly created UN Women, a new agency that will take on women's issues seriously for the first time in the UN's 65-year history. With this magnificent, historic resolution, Member States recognized the colossal failure of the UN to fulfill its commitments to women's rights and development and decided finally to change its ways.

Here at the XVIII International AIDS Conference in Vienna, where twenty thousand delegates are pledging to tackle the women's and human rights issues that fuel the global pandemic, we have heard not a word about UN Women. Two days from now, thousands of delegates from around the globe will exit the closing conference session without any idea that they are missing a deadline to nominate a candidate for the post of Under Secretary-General of UN Women, a post that if filled by the right person, will have a major role to play in the fight against AIDS.

The Secretary-General promised that the process for selecting the Under Secretary-General of UN Women would be fair, open and transparent and would include civil society. It has not happened. He asked governments to submit candidates and barely made an overture to civil society.

The Secretary-General set July 23rd, the same day as the end of this conference, as the abrupt deadline by which the names of candidates should be submitted. With willful disregard for the promise of transparency, he decided to inform only UN Ambassadors that the deadline had been set. The open search has been confined, as ever, to the favorite nominees of member states.

The sad truth is that the vast majority of the women of the world have not the slightest idea that UN Women even exists, primarily because the Secretary-General has failed to use his communications apparatus to inform anyone anywhere of the existence of the new agency.

There are many women at this conference, for example, who might wish to apply for the position. Many of them would be entirely qualified. They will never get the chance to apply because the position has not even been advertised.

What we have here is a retreat into the sordid pattern of secrecy that has caused the United Nations to fall into disrepute. We do not know the names of the candidates who have been put forward. The Secretary-General's clandestine maneuvers have sullied the integrity of UN Women from the very outset. There is not the slightest appreciation of gender equality at the highest level of the UN Secretariat. We are reminded of Ban Ki-moon's recent appointment of the "UN High Level Advisory group on Climate Change Financing": nineteen members, nineteen men!

That behavior is entirely consistent with the absence of any reference to UN Women at this conference ... not a word from the Secretary-General in his opening video message, not a word from the major UN agencies in attendance. They should have been instructed by the Secretary-General to give high profile to UN Women at this conference. You can be sure that no such instructions were issued.

Why is this important? Because UN Women, as soon as it is up and running in January 2011, will become a co-sponsor of UNAIDS. It will be the first time in UNAIDS' history that women have been thus represented. More, UN Women will doubtless be in a position to join with UNAIDS, on the ground, in the fight against the pandemic: after all, UNAIDS has been strongly criticized in an external evaluation for its failure on issues of women.

It is profoundly important that the AIDS and Human Rights communities at this conference join in common cause with UN Women. Those communities should not be silent when they see the Secretary-General's characteristic indifference to the situation of women and AIDS. There is far too much at stake to toy with the new agency, and to deliver such an affront to women everywhere by choosing an Under Secretary-General sotto voce, behind closed doors.

AIDS-Free World fears that the UN's curious silence about UN Women is not a benign oversight; rather, it's a strategic ploy to rob the new agency of its potential, by turning it into a hollow shell, and maintaining the status quo that has so compromised the lives of women for decades. The Secretary-General must extend the deadline for civil society nominations for the leader of UN Women so that women around the world, ground down by endless injustice, and exhausted by the fight against this pandemic, will finally have an ally at the United Nations.

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