

HELP WOMEN HELP THE WORLD FAQs

What is this campaign about?

VSO is campaigning for a new UN Women's Agency to help unlock women's potential to contribute to development. It is widely acknowledged that empowering women will drive progress on the Millennium Development Goals.

Are women really key to development?

It is now recognised across the sector that unlocking women's potential will have significant benefits for development. The World Bank has written a policy paper called 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics', and DFID has a position paper called 'Gender Equality at the Heart of Development: Why the Role of Women is Crucial to Ending World Poverty'.

Why are you campaigning for a new UN Agency for Women?

The UN sets global standards for human rights. It is also the only organization that has the authority, capability, resources and credibility with governments to push for changes that will end discrimination against women. The UN has galvanized governments and donors to try and achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and have secured many international commitments to women's rights (including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, and the Beijing Platform for Action).

What's wrong with the way the UN current deals with 'women's issues'?

The UN system is failing women by fragmenting responsibility for improving their situation across a number of small, poorly funded and poorly coordinated bodies (including UNIFEM and the Division for the Advancement of Women). They have little power or influence because even their most senior representatives are not part of the UN's main decision-making forums. And they have little ability to make a real difference because they have virtually no operational capacity on the ground.

UNIFEM (the United Nation's Fund for Women) is currently the biggest, and most well-known, of these entities but its resources are tiny compared to UN agencies like UNICEF (the United Nation's Fund for Children).

	UNIFEM	UNICEF
Staff	47 staff ¹	10,565 staff ²
Operational capacity	15 regional offices 0 country offices	190 country programme offices
Budget in 2007	\$129 million	\$3 billion

Despite numerous international agreements on women's equality, no UN agency has responsibility for ensuring governments deliver on these promises.

Isn't the UN doing 'gender mainstreaming'?

Yes, but not effectively. No evaluation of the UN's gender mainstreaming has found it to be successful or serve its intended purpose. One of the reasons is that the task of mainstreaming is assigned to mostly junior, entry-level staff (who have no authority and no background or experience in this or women's rights). It is an add-on to their regular duties and they are not expected to devote much time to it. A new UN

¹ Figure given in Organisational Assessment: UNIFEM Past, Present and Future, Sadik, N. et al (2004)

² Figure from UNICEF HR Department, January 2009

Women's Agency would be able to provide expert support to other UN entities on mainstreaming and ensure that it was being implemented effectively.

Isn't a new UN Women's Agency just a pipe dream?

No. In 2006 a UN High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence (which included the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown) found that the way the UN system worked for women was "incoherent, fragmented, and under-resourced". The panel recommended the consolidation of the women's entities into a single UN agency with greater resources and authority, as well as real operational capacity on the ground.

Why are you campaigning now?

Since 2006, discussions about this proposed reform have been ongoing. In early 2009, the General Assembly members will be presented with a detailed 'options paper'. This will include different possible options for a new Women's Agency (looking at structure, mandate and financing) or sticking with the status quo. At some point before September 2009, it is expected that they will be asked to vote for their preferred option.

So is this reform a forgone conclusion?

No. There are still many member states who don't see what's wrong with the existing system. Kenya, Mexico, Brazil and Columbia are some of the G77 countries in favour of a new UN Women's Agency, but more needs to be done to convince other countries that investing in women will have wider economic/development benefits.

What exactly do you want a new UN Women's Agency to look like?

UNICEF is the closest existing model within the UN system, but VSO's key criteria for any Women's Agency is that it has:

- An Under-Secretary General to lead the agency and take a seat at the UN's top decision-making tables
- \$1 billion a year funding initially
- A major operational presence on the ground
- Close links and accountability to women's organisations and global civil society

What exactly would this new Women's Agency do?

A new Women's Agency would help more women earn an income, grow more food for their families, access healthcare and have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. It would also ensure governments kept their promises about treating women equally.

Is VSO the only organisation advocating on this?

No. VSO has been working closely with other organisations that have been lobbying for this change for a number of years. They include AIDS-Free World and ACTSA who are also members of the global 'Gender Equality Architecture Reform' campaign.