

HELP WOMEN HELP THE WORLD

WOMEN – THE KEY TO REDUCING POVERTY

“Women are the key to eradicating poverty. The roles they play in their families and communities make them the real facilitators of development. Whenever there is progress for women, the whole world benefits.” Ban-Ki-Moon, United Nations Secretary General

Women are the world's greatest untapped resource for development. But because of laws and traditions that discriminate against them, they are being denied the opportunity to fulfil that incredible potential.

- Evidence shows that when women earn and manage their own money they are more likely than men to spend it on educating and feeding their children. **Yet women currently earn just 10 per cent of the world's income**¹ (even though they work two thirds of the world's working hours).²
- Rural women already play a major role in agriculture. If they had the same access as men to resources such as land, seed and fertiliser, agricultural productivity would increase by 20 per cent.³ Despite this, **women receive less than 1 per cent of all credit for agriculture**⁴ and many governments still deny them the right to own land.
- For every year a girl spends in school, her family's income will increase by 20 per cent and the likelihood of her children dying early will decrease by 5 per cent.⁵ **But there are still 41 million girls who don't get the chance to go to school.**⁶
- Research shows that peace agreements and post-conflict reconstruction do better when women are involved⁷, and that there is less corruption when women are more active in politics.⁸ **However, just 18.3% of the world's parliamentary seats are held by women.**⁹

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The UN sets global standards for human rights. It is also the only organization that has the authority, capability and resources to push for changes that will unlock the potential of women all over the world. The UN has galvanized governments and donors to try and achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and has already made real progress in other areas, including eradicating smallpox and negotiating 172 peaceful settlements of regional conflicts.

But currently the UN system is failing women, by fragmenting responsibility for improving their situation across a number of small, poorly funded and poorly coordinated bodies. 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.

In 2004 the total number of staff across the four women's entities was just over 100 people.¹⁰ And the total funding for the largest of these, UNIFEM, was just \$129.8 million in 2007.¹¹ That's less than 5% of the \$3 billion available for children through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)¹².

With such limited resources, how can the UN really help half the world's population?

This isn't just a moral injustice. It's an economic tragedy. Because the UN's eight Millennium Development Goals can only be achieved if women are empowered to play an equal part in them.

WHAT CHANGE IS NEEDED?

Development doesn't happen just by writing reports or signing international treaties. It happens when there is real action on the ground.

That's why VSO is calling for the UN to push ahead with reforms – first presented to its General Assembly in 2006 - to consolidate all the existing women's entities into a single, UN Agency for Women with:

- 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

This agency would:

- Help governments implement international agreements on women's equality
- Support women to generate their own income to spend how they judge best
- Ensure women farmers get help to improve their crops
- Keep girls in school for longer
- Involve more women in decision-making and government
- Give women's needs a voice in all UN country programmes
- Fund women's organisations who provide advice and support to local communities
- Lobby to change policies that discriminate against women, such as laws that prevent women from owning land

THE TIME FOR ACTION IS NOW

The General Assembly is expected to make a decision about whether to stick with the status quo or opt for a new UN Agency for Women by September 2009. They will be presented with a range of options this December: we need the UK to push other member states towards the option that offers women, and the world, the best chance of real progress.

Ask your MP to write to Lord Malloch-Brown (the UK Minister in charge of the UN) to encourage him to call upon the General Assembly to back these reforms.

If women could fulfil their potential, imagine what they could do for the world. Let's not miss this opportunity. www.vso.org.uk/women

¹ UN, quoted in Oxfam, Gender Equality, accessible at

www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/issues/gender/introduction.html

² UNESCO, 2007, Gender Equality Quiz, accessible at http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=37284&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

³ DFID, 2007, Gender Equality at the Heart of Development: why the role of women is crucial to ending world poverty, p13

⁴ UNFPA, State of the World's Population, 2005, quoted in Danida, 2008, Gender Equality in Agriculture, p3

⁵ Care Canada, 2007, Annual Report, p16 & p21, accessible at <http://care.ca/userfiles/file/CAREar2007e.pdf>

⁶ World Bank, 2008, Girls' Education in the 21st Century: Gender Equality, Empowerment and Economic Growth, p4

⁷ DFID, 2007, Gender Equality at the Heart of Development: why the role of women is crucial to ending world poverty, p4

⁸ World Bank, 2001, Engendering Development, p95

⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2008, accessible at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

¹⁰ Paula Donovan, 2006, Gender Equality Now or Never: A new UN agency for women, accessible at <http://www.aids-freeeworld.org/content/view/101/155/> p10

¹¹ UNIFEM, Annual Report, 2007, p22/23

¹² UNICEF, Annual Report, 2007, p31