

The Women's Foreign Policy Group Presents

Anne-Marie Goetz

Chief Adviser for Governance, Peace and Security, UNIFEM

Gender Equality in the Work of the UN: Where Are the Accountability Systems?

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Maxine Isaacs: Our next speaker is Anne-Marie Goetz. She's Chief Adviser for Governance, Peace and Security at UNIFEM. She previously was a professor of political studies at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, and is the author of five books relating to gender and politics in developing countries and accountability reforms. She is going to speak today on "Gender Equality in the Work of the UN, Where are the Accountability Systems?" So thank you Anne-Marie Goetz for being with us

Anne-Marie Goetz: Well thank you very much for inviting me and let me apologize on behalf of Noleen Heyzer the Executive Director of UNIFEM, the UN fund for women, who couldn't be here because she's at West Point right now brokering a very interesting, historic emergence of an Israeli-Palestine negotiation group, getting women from civil society from both sides to get together and talk about peace. This group, called the International Women's Commission, will be launched this afternoon, here in New York. She would have loved to be here, but that kind of took over.

I'm going to be talking about gender equality in the work of the UN and let me be very clear that I'm not going to be talking about gender issues in UN staffing, because that's just not the same thing. Gender equality in UN staff, or gender parity, is a reflection of the UN commitment to gender equality but it's not a determinant of that conviction as you well know. Outside today on your way in, you may have noticed that there's a tent celebrating the UN Millennium Development Goals. It's going to be there for three days and we'll be there this afternoon when you leave. It might be interesting for some of you to go in and look at the Development Goals and see how far we're on or off track in meeting these. One of the things you might notice is that on Millennium Development Goal Three, which is women's empowerment, we're off track already. The very first — and what was seen initially as the most achievable of the indicators for meeting this goal of women's empowerment, which was girl's education, parity in girls' and boys education at primary levels globally — was supposed to have been met last year, and we're way off track. This is an indicator of the severity of the problem that we're looking at when we're

trying to meet women's needs in development, and guarantee and protect women's rights, because this one's a no-brainer. Everybody wants their girls educated. There's not that much resistance to this. But there isn't enough money, and there is more resistance than we expected.

In other areas, sometimes we can be lulled into a sense that the UN and other institutions such as the World Bank are doing enough around gender equality. Numbers of women in national parliaments is going up; numbers of women in the paid workforce is going up too. However, there's a lot of ambivalence around the achievements of women's rights even in those respects. Yes women's activity rate is going up around the world, but this is associated with a deterioration of the standards of work in which women find themselves and an informalization of work around the world anyway. Yes, numbers of women in parliaments are increasing, but how much influence do they really have? There are a huge range of still unmeasured atrocities against women; violence against women in the home, in the invisible arena. Sexual violence is now being deployed as a deliberate weapon of war. We don't even know what the dimensions of these problems are. Maternal mortality — which for heavens sake, anyone in here who's had a baby will know how painful that is, and how if you were in power you'd stop that from being so painful and you'd certainly stop people from dying from it — maternal mortality, we don't really even have a very good grip on how numbers are changing because, of course, it's never reported properly. So, I think we're a very long way from meeting women's needs in development and achieving gender equality anywhere. Fertility rates are falling around the world and yet in the countries where they're falling the most rapidly they're being associated with a very disturbing increase in the male to female sex ratio; so [there are] more boys than girls, an unnatural imbalance in the number of girls in the population. The countries I'm talking about are, of course, India and China, which account for 80% of the missing women of the world; missing because of infanticide, undue violence and so on. The fact that these are the two fastest-growing countries in the developing world also shows that gender inequality is not incompatible with rapid growth. This is a huge problem and one of the obstacles to devoting more energy and resources to addressing [gender equality].

What has the UN done for women? Well, the strongest area of achievement of the UN the most notable achievement is of course in the normative standards of the international human rights regimes and conventions, which set up architecture and language of aspirations on women's rights which is unparalleled. Gillian earlier mentioned many of the absolute landmark conventions in this respect. There's the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which has been around for a while. In the 90s there was a proliferation of very interesting conventions. There was a Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women. The Homework Convention, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the UN Convention Against Organized Crime which tackles sex trafficking. Now, we all know that ambitious conventions of these kinds, however poorly applied in practice are really worth more than the paper they're printed on, because they set up these apex aspirations against which we can measure national achievements. So they are worth doing. There's a huge amount of cynicism around them too, and a lot of doubt about the value of all of this if these

conventions are not applied and implemented. They do sometimes seem like a cynical posturing exercise, especially when the countries that are most eager to ratify them are those in the least position to do anything about them; the ones with the weakest accountability systems. Whereas the ones with the very strong accountability systems and litigious citizens are the ones that are most reluctant to ratify them, and I think you know which country is most in deficit in this respect.

So this brings me to the issue of accountability systems. Who answers for failures to achieve commitments to meeting women's needs and rights? Of course a notable feature of UN conventions is that they do have very weak enforcement systems. We would never get these fine, high-sounding conventions if we had stiff enforcement systems and in this respect, the Rome Statute is a bit of an outlier because it does have stiff enforcement arrangements that even go against state sovereignty and state obstacles. What's going on right now around Darfur is a very interesting example, but I could go into detail later if you're interested. We wouldn't reach these conventions if there were very very strong accountability systems. We wouldn't have a UN if there were very strong enforcement systems. This is an important issue and dilemma for the current process of UN reform where accountability is the watchword and I'll come back to this and Gillian talked about it quite extensively earlier. The point about these UN conventions is that they put the onus on the nation state to implement them and they put the onus on accountability systems within the nation state. So this is actually an important emerging area for accountability within the UN, to examine gender deficits, gender accountability failures at the nation state level and to work on gender sensitive governance and accountability reforms. This is something that the UN Fund for Women does. We work on gender and anti-corruption systems, gender-specific types of corruption that afflict women differently than men. We look at public sector reform and what needs to be done to make public services answer to women's needs. We look at judicial reform and rule of law reform to see can we improve women's access to these accountability systems. They may demand that these conventions are applied or incorporated into national law.

What about within the UN itself in its own machinery for advancing women's rights and women's interests? I'll devote the remainder of my few minutes to this. It's imperative right now to be asking whether the UN is doing enough in its operational work, not normative work, in its operational work, whether it's doing enough for women's rights. Why is it important right now? Gillian mentioned we're going through a process of UN reform right now. There's a high-level UN coherence panel which is considering elements of UN reform and it's looking at the gender architecture, by which I mean the agencies and institutions responsible for advancing women's rights. Those of you who are not familiar with this, here's a quick map. The gender architecture within the UN is divided between a few tiny departments for example the Division for the Advancement of Women, which is within DESA, and also a number of normative conventions, the Office of the Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Women's Affairs who, among other things, looks at the distribution of gender within the UN, women's placement and so on within the UN. They look at normative aspects and internal reform. UNIFEM, the agency for which I work, is supposed to be an inspirational catalytic committee. We're not supposed to be operational on the ground, we're supposed to inspire

by example and some pilot work innovations in addressing women's needs. We are the tiniest UN fund. We exist on an extraordinary \$20 million a year, which is not very much money. We raise additional voluntary contributions, for which I must acknowledge the United States which has recently doubled its contribution. Beyond that, the large operational UN agencies, the ones that deal with development UNDP, the UN Development Program, UNFPA, UNICEF, you'll be hearing next from UNICEF, the large operational organizations on the development and humanitarian side so UNHCR, OCHCR, OCHA, who we heard from earlier on Darfur. They are supposed to mainstream gender.

At the risk of boring you to death, I'm going to say a few words about gender mainstreaming. Anybody here who's worked in a bureaucracy that, among other things, seeks to advance women's rights, may have been subjected to the experience of mainstreaming. I hope you haven't, but some of us have to suffer sometimes. Gender mainstreaming, what does this mean? It means that gender is a cross-cutting issue. It means that gender is not something for which there ought to be a large operational agency. It means that gender is all of our responsibility. Anybody who's worked in a bureaucracy knows that anything that's everybody's responsibility is no one's responsibility. This is what's happened to gender mainstreaming. And it's for this reason that I believe that the work of the UN on the ground, the operational work, is not as strong as it ought to be around gender. Often, it happens that you get the development or humanitarian agencies performing very well on gender equality, when and if you have the very committed champion present. That, I'm afraid, is a random phenomenon. We cannot leave women's rights and needs to a random phenomenon. I am being quite blunt here, and I hope that that's alright. I'm saying this because in the context of UN reform, the failures of gender mainstreaming are being raised and we're hoping that the UN coherence panel will look at the problems of gender mainstreaming and address them in a systematic way. So because of this, the field I work in is peace and war. In peace negotiations, you may get women involved, you may not. Yet there's a security council resolution that says that women *must* be involved in peace negotiations, but the chances that they are involved depends on whether or not UNIFEM can get in fast enough to organize women to demand their involvement, which we did in Burundi, but we're unable to do in Sudan. So in the Southern-Northern Sudanese peace negotiations a couple of years ago, there were no women on the peace negotiation teams; similarly with development work. One example: in Namibia, the UN development assistance framework has pretty good analysis on gender relations and it acknowledges simply in relation to HIV-AIDS transmission that one of the root causes of Namibia's high HIV prevalence is the low status of women.

If you look at the activities and where the money is going, women are completely missing. There is money that goes to adolescent sexual behavior but none at all to what happens in married couples. I could go on and on. The problem of gender mainstreaming is fragmentation and something I can only call "ad hoc-ery" i.e. randomness. These views are, as I said, widely shared. It's no secret that we all feel that there has been a problem of fragmentation within the UN and we want to think through what can happen to make this more effective. I want to quote from Stephen Lewis who is the UN's special envoy to Africa for AIDS. He's an increasingly vocal and, frankly, agonized speaker about the

problem of gender mainstreaming. In a speech that he made a couple of months ago to a Harvard Law School meeting, he said that the UN has failed women and he's argued that "women 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." So he's arguing for a stronger organizational, operational presence for gender equality. He dismissed gender mainstreaming as, "a pathetic illusion of transformation leaving nothing but a cul-de-sac for women," and then he described the UN's work on gender as resulting in, "fragmentation and dispersal of efforts by a handful of under funded and maligned agencies," he included UNIFEM. He said nobody's responsible, there's no money, there's no urgency, there's no energy.

Our position, and I believe this is shared by others in the UN, is that it's time to really strengthen the gender architecture, to strengthen what's already there for women and to build more coherence. In my own personal view, there's no way around trying to develop stronger operational arms in the UN. That is, money that can be spent on the ground for women's rights. I would put to you that gender mainstreaming is to the work of achieving gender equality what trickle-down economics is to the work of achieving poverty elimination. It's a metaphor that I find helpful because gender mainstreaming has perhaps created a tiny elite and not really got money down to the ground in the same way that trickle-down economics does. It's time to build a powerhouse for women's rights, to build on our strengths. We have, as women, as feminists, been responsible in the last century for the biggest revolution in human relations that has ever been seen in the history of the world. It's not a finished revolution, and it's not entirely bloodless, but relatively. We need to start from the fact that we've been able to achieve this around the world. Yes, not entirely in a coherent way, but this is something to build on. We now have, as the previous speaker said, women in business who have a lot of money. We need to be raising a lot more money for gender equality, and this is where we do run into a problem around gender and women's rights because gender equality and the atrocities against women simply don't arouse the kind of passion and the pity of the world in the same way that violations of children's rights do. They don't arouse the panic of decision makers in the same way that environmental destruction does. This remains a huge problem in terms of mobilizing the energy and the resources that we need for women's rights but we can do it, I think.

To finish then, what do we have in terms of building on our strengths? Numbers. There are more women in high decision-making positions. There are forty-one ministers of finance in the world who are women. There are twenty ministers of defense, that's unprecedented. We can build on this. New openings, there's an appreciation of the contribution that women can make to peacebuilding and democracy building and we have to build on that. And finally, solidarity. I think there is a lot more to be made of the women's movement. Thank you very much.