

Event Update: “Reforming the UN for women” with Stephen Lewis

Worldwide, women are less likely to go to school, receive adequate health care, or own property. 70% of the world's poor are women, 1 in 3 women worldwide are beaten or abused and only 9% of the developing world's HIV positive pregnant women have access to the treatment that would prevent Mother To Child Transmission (MTCT). The United Nations has a key role in working for women's rights at a global level. However, its current bodies dealing with gender equality lack the resources and coherence to really deliver for women. In 2006 women from all over the world pressured the United Nations to add the reform of its gender equality bodies to the agenda of its current reform process. ACTSA (Action for Southern Africa) has played a leading role in the GEAR Campaign, a network of more than 300 civil society organisations that aims to put pressure on governments and the UN to prioritise gender equality. Specifically the campaign is asking for the consolidation of the existing UN agencies addressing gender equality into a single improved, independent and powerful entity.

Last Tuesday, ACTSA and VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) brought together leading advocates for women's rights to hear the case for a single UN Women's Agency in a panel discussion entitled 'Reforming the UN for women' with Stephen Lewis, former UN HIV/AIDS special envoy to Africa. Stephen Lewis gave a compelling argument for “finally having a vehicle that would give voice and resources and support to the struggles of women around the world”, stating that “the struggle for gender equality has become the most important struggle on the planet.” Amanda Mukwashi, Head of Programmes for Skillshare International, spoke of the need for an agency “to represent millions of women who as society we continue to ignore” and called on DFID to lead in taking a stand against the “slow genocide” of gender inequality. Michael Shultz, speaking for DFID, responded to these calls with assurances that “getting this agreement [for a women's agency] is a high priority for DFID.” He also stressed the need for a women's agency to have good leadership and to shift the way the UN in its entirety operates. The event was attended by over 100 leading women activists from civil society and the trade union movement.

The evening was part of a series of events targeted at politicians and decision makers in the UK. The next few months are key to making a fundamental difference in securing the rights of women globally, through a UN agency with the power and resources to push governments to make gender equality a reality.

To join the campaign and write a letter to Foreign Secretary David Miliband urging him to ensure the full support of the UK to the new UN Agency for women's rights, visit the new GEAR website at <http://www.un-gear.eu>