

GRASSROOTS WOMEN FRAME AN AGENDA FOR THE NEW UN WOMEN'S ENTITY

Last Friday, July 2 the UN General Assembly adopted the long debated resolution to create a new agency to represent women: **UN WOMEN**. This agency will consolidate all pre-existing women's agencies into one new organization to serve women in the years to come. This historic event means that it is now a key moment for the Huairou Commission to articulate and debate our vision for the future of this new UN entity as well as renew our commitment to the grassroots women's constituency whom this agency must serve.

Over the next few weeks and months, the shape of this agency will emerge, including the appointment of an Undersecretary General to serve as the new head. However we must all remember that new appointments and structures are not important in themselves, but only because form reflects function as well as the new culture that will eventually have a role in final outcomes. With our own networks' values rooted in grassroots women's development priorities, we must ask ourselves how we can advocate for a UN entity that will have the interests of grassroots women's organizations at the core of its agenda. What styles of leadership, formal structures and methods of operation are necessary to ensure that our concerns are addressed? What important milestones and targets should the new agency work towards and what kinds of outreach and participation must we ensure? The goals, shape and direction of UN Women will ultimately impact decisions we make on the role of the Huairou Commission, its shape, functions, operations and where our work should intersect with that of this new UN agency.

Grassroots Women Leaders at the Heart of UN Women's Agenda

The Huairou Commission believes that the new gender entity should:

- Make sure that grassroots women leaders from community-based organizations are viewed as key stakeholders in the development of UN Women.
- Engage grassroots women's organizations and networks in agenda setting.
- Allocate a significant proportion of funding targeted to grassroots women's organizations on the ground to address their priorities.
- Develop partnership mechanisms that enable grassroots women to negotiate for their own development priorities with other institutional actors.
- Position grassroots women leaders as change agents, rather than as victims and beneficiaries, particularly in the context of crises such as conflict, disaster, climate change, HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Agenda and Operational Procedures

As UN Women evolves, the Huairou Commission will continue to advocate for grassroots women's leaders and women's organizations active in our coalition. This means monitoring critical appointments, commenting on formal structures and ensuring that this new UN entity formally recognizes and resources grassroots women as a major constituency.

We believe that UN Women must maintain the past focus on women's rights and legislation and yet expand its agenda to develop operational mechanisms through which grassroots women can self-organize to develop an array of solutions that enable them to improve their communities, negotiate with local and national governments for resources, formulate programs and assess the effectiveness of these programs. We hope that UN Women's structure and functions will reflect a view of grassroots women as change agents and partners with knowledge and expertise to offer, rather than as "victims" and recipients of aid.

Our experience shows that grassroots women prioritize two things: the development of their settlements - solutions for housing, food, basic services, safety and livelihoods that improve the everyday lives of their families and communities, and the ability to influence decision making at all levels. We urge UN Women to partner with grassroots women's organizations to develop monitoring and evaluation systems that can be used by community leaders to measure the changes that matter to them.

UN Women is faced with the challenge of creating innovative institutional arrangements that honor grassroots women's leadership, constituencies, perspectives and practices. The real question is how can grassroots women leaders and the women's movement partner with UN Women to identify operational mechanisms that will transform the lives of women living and working in poor communities. If UN Women is operational at the country level, should it convene biennial national forums bringing together grassroots women and their allies? How can grassroots women be represented in consultative and advisory processes of the new women's entity? Many UN agencies, governments and civil society groups have tried to answer these questions by creating innovative decentralized mechanisms that empower grassroots women to access resources, set agendas, operationalize and evaluate projects.

This is a time for individuals and institutions committed to center staging grassroots women's priorities, to identify institutional arrangements that have worked for grassroots women and bring these to the attention of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women.

