

Editorial**Violence against women is a public health problem****Dr. Azhar Masud Bhatti**A. Director Health Services, EPI Punjab, Lahore
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Like civilian bureaucracies, militaries, corporations, banks and financial institutions and even many universities and centers of research all over the world, the UN too has largely been a 'boys club for all the 62 years of its life. It's a civilized way of chalking up the global hierarchy and pecking order. However, probably because the UN is ageing and still hasn't produced the successes expected from the men, it is now allowing women to take charge of their own lives.

To date, nothing essentially has changed in the world unless the head honchos represented in the Security Council said so. The exception would be when too many innocents are killed, maimed, ruined or enslaved by war and the destruction as well as the loss of lives becomes difficult to cover up. It is under these circumstances that many member-countries including the 'advanced' North demand a stop, forcing aggressors to pull back or lighten their touch to avoid looking too much like a rogue state. Also the UN doesn't want to completely lose its moral credibility.

The UN is a massive organization, with all the slowness, red-tape and waste that accompanies huge bureaucracies, perhaps the world's biggest since it is represented in multiple ways in most countries - 20 specialized agencies plus 8 expert bodies; 17 functional, regional and standing committees under the Economic and Social Council; and 11 subsidiary bodies under the Security Council including the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, which doesn't seem to have helped much. But judging from the state of the world, it is largely ineffective, partly because it didn't have enough women or the right ones in the right places.

However, over the decades, the UN has tried to compensate for its glaring core inequalities by doing its bit for women and children through UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO as well as ILO. The ILO and FAO which were expected to do much more for female labour but the urban and rural problem with both the organizations, however, is that the former does not pack enough of a punch; while the latter, despite earlier good research work, shockingly aligned itself in recent decades with corporate interests in agriculture. That sounded a death knell for healthy food, the environment and the livelihoods of women peasants practicing small-scale, organic indigenous farming.

The UN tried to improve itself by turning to other tracks as well but mostly in vain. There was the Beijing Conference on Women 15 years ago. Then Beijing+10 (years) to remind governments of their unfulfilled promises. And recently, Beijing+15, but it was already clear that the Beijing route wasn't going to get anywhere. The UN also tried the Millennium Development Goals or MDG to persuade or shame governments into doing what was their taxpayer-paid job to do anyway - like seeing to female health care, education, basic rights, etc. But shame is an alien concept in the upper echelons of many governments, our own being a prime example. MDGs proved even less interesting, although lip-service was paid to them: and even rendered impossible, since the UN's rogue siblings, the World Bank and IMF, had drowned most of the South in debt. One of the UN's biggest failures is its distance from the media. Excellent and in-depth research by various agencies and their programmes are not publicized: and if they are, the approach is too weak to grab media interest. In fact, a number of UN's humanitarian or more humane agencies could have done much better if they were less academic and more activist. In hindsight it would appear that some of these organizations were deliberately tied up in knots through restrictive mandates to keep them in line.

The action towards UN WOMEN began when some major national, international and regional women's, human rights and social justice organizations in various countries and regions became dissatisfied with the UN rhetoric not matching promises for gender equality. They began to lobby and pressurize for a meaningful outcome through a specialized agency focusing exclusively on women. It turned into the Gender Equality Architecture Reform or GEAR Campaign, a network of over 300 groups around the world launched on the 7th of June this year. Pakistani women activists were also in the action.

On 2nd July, the UN General Assembly voted unanimously to create the new women's entity, to be known as UN WOMEN. The new head (yet to be appointed) would be a woman Under-Secretary General, second only to the Secretary General. It should have made headlines in the global media, but it didn't. Was it because, as many women point out, that the media in great part if not entirely, especially the corporate media, is also male-biased? Or was it yet an-

other routine UN failure with the media? Most likely, both.

Earlier, the UN had some exclusive offices for women, too small, scattered and under-resourced to be effective. The Division for Advancement of Women (DAW), the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), Office of the Special Advisor for Gender Issues (OSAGI), and UNIFEM (UN Development Fund for Women) which was the largest of the four and chronically short on funds. But none of them, not even UNIFEM, had access to the decision-makers at the highest level, rendering them into nothing more than tokens. Now all of these offices will be amalgamated into one, while adding on others.

There's feverish lobbying for the slot of Under-Secretary General, as almost every continent wants to be represented, although it would not do if the appointee is not from the South. The women's lobby sought a billion dollars; the Secretary-General said half-a-billion for starters, suggesting that it takes off in the 80 countries where UNIFEM is already present. After all, UN salaries and New York costs are high, and gender equality requires the women to be on the same level as men.

So why is UN WOMEN based in New York when it should be more appropriately installed in a third world region where the bulk of the problems and injustices occur? That only the men can answer, or probably will not answer, because certain countries or at least one hegemonic country would like to keep it on a tight leash so that it doesn't get too big for its heels.

UN WOMEN is going to have, not a full plate, but an overflowing one. Most other UN agencies are specialized, but have not succeeded in maintaining gender parity. UN WOMEN will have to look at all those areas and more. Not just gender equality among the educated middle-class and elite, and not just for the governments and parliaments, but also for the unrepresented majority, the ordinary women of the world - peasants, home-makers, factory, clerical, domestic and service workers alike - who outnumber their better-off sisters 6 to 1, and who have been invisible for and in the UN throughout.

UN WOMEN will have to take on environmental issues in a way that UNEP, the UN environmental agency, has never been able to solve: that includes land and water issues on which women's livelihoods depend as they are the ones who produce and provide food for most families. It will also have to take on the multinational corporations and foreign investors that continue to ruthlessly exploit and poison the world, particularly the oil, agro-based industries, and pharmaceutical companies.

UN WOMEN will have to make itself more inclusive so that non-academics and unlettered women, who have achieved much for their fellow-women, can participate

and share their expertise directly instead of through jargonized documentation by people who never go into the field or sweat.

UN WOMEN has to be accessible in a way that the UN has never been for ordinary people, especially women, as it is no longer enough to hide behind the excuse that it represents governments only, especially when they fail. Too many governments are unrepresentative of the people including some hegemonic powers, and too many are corrupted by some wealthy governments and multinational corporations as well as the unaccountable, non-transparent World Bank and IMF. But women have always found ways around and have endured much. Hopefully these circumstances will change as more women come into power and are handed over the authority to make a difference.