IV

WOMEN: HALF THE WORLD, BARELY REPRESENTED

On the wall of my study at home, there hangs a picture which I value highly, albeit in a somewhat perverse fashion. It's a stunning photograph of the entire leadership of the United Nations secretariat in 1985. The Secretary-General of the time was Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, surrounded by all of his Under-Secretaries-General and all of his Assistant Secretaries-General. They're standing in a resplendent, unbroken row on the podium of the General Assembly, immediately beneath the huge and ornate representation of the logo of the United Nations.

There are thirty-two of them in all. Not one woman. Not one. It was 1985, a mere twenty years ago.

That just about says everything there is to say about multilateralism and gender. I was Canada's ambassador to the United Nations at the time, and with the full encouragement of the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I pursued a very tough line on discrimination

against women within the UN system, as well as worldwide gender discrimination on every front.

It was actually quite comical at times. On several occasions, after a series of sturdy speeches making the point, over and over again, that the denial of opportunities for women in the United Nations was appalling, some of my closest diplomatic colleagues would take me to task, cautioning me that Canada was driving the nail through the wall on this particular issue. They'd inelegantly corner me in a corridor, and say something to the effect of "enough already." I would reply, with pugnacious bravado, that I wasn't prepared to cease and desist until equality was achieved (absurd suggestion though that was).

The Canadian badgering, however, was not without value. In the 1980s, the Secretary-General actually defied the protocol of the Boys' Club and appointed a woman, Mercedes Pulido de Briceño of Venezuela, at the level of Assistant Secretary-General, as Coordinator for the Improvement of the Status of Women in the secretariat, to oversee the rights, treatment, and promotion of female employees. The position lasted but three years, from 1985 to 1988. Little of tangible note was accomplished, but it did lead to a collaboration on women's issues with the then Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management, a fellow named Kofi Annan. I think it fair to say that he was the only male member of the secretariat with whom I worked who cared one whit about access and opportunities for women within the United Nations.

It was just prior to Kofi Annan's ascension to the human resources post that Pérez de Cuéllar summoned

me to his quarters to say that he had decided to ask Canada to fill a vacant Under-Secretary-General's position in the Department of Public Information, and he and his staff were making the offer to Canada specifically because they were confident we'd appoint a woman.

We did. (Although therein lies a tale. When I exultantly phoned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to say that Canada would be leading this breakthrough on gender, and to ask whom we might appoint, they had not a single candidate in reserve. It was surreal in a way: here we were, advancing the cause of female appointments within the secretariat, and given the opportunity, we couldn't come up with a name! It was a perfect commentary on the indelible pattern of male privilege: even within the Canadian public service, there were so few women in the upper echelons that when it came to a preferred international appointment, the cupboard was bare.)

What was nuts, of course, is that there were numbers upon numbers of talented women to do the job, but they were invisible, living in the refracted shadows of the glass ceiling. Thus it was that we had a frantic search for a credible appointment. I, myself, made a number of "high-level" calls, but everyone I approached had job commitments they were unable to break or didn't want to break. Finally, a suitable candidate was found: the Canadian government put forward the name of Thérèse Paquet-Sévigny, a vice-president of communications for the CBC. It was, of course, accepted. (Back then, such nominations were always uncritically accepted, and it hasn't changed that much to this day).

The year was 1987. Believe it or not, it was the first permanent appointment of a woman to the post of Under-Secretary-General in the history of the United Nations. Thérèse Paquet-Sévigny's performance was sublimely unmemorable (to my mind perfectly understandable; you need practically a lifetime to master communications within the UN). But that hardly mattered; the barrier had finally been broken.

I want to dwell on this for a bit because it will help to explain why the broader Millennium Development Goal of gender equality has no chance of being reached by 2015.

Fundamentally, the United Nations should be driving the gender agenda. It's the world body with the greatest reach, and everything that underpins its legitimacy speaks to equality. The Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Covenant on Political and Civil Rights — they all speak to equality.

Every one of these landmark human rights instruments contains explicit clauses affirming nondiscrimination on the basis of sex and declaring equality between men and women. If they were followed, this would be a different world.

Undoubtedly, the covenant with the greatest potential influence is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was promulgated on December 18, 1979. It's as though it

were the Magna Carta for women. No other convention is quite so powerfully worded. Not only does it aggressively assert equality, but it does so, article by article, in every domain: health, education, justice, social welfare, ad infinitum. It's also the second most highly ratified convention in the history of international covenants: 181 out of 191 countries have ratified. Only the Convention on the Rights of the Child has a larger number of ratifications, at 189. It should also be remembered that when a country ratifies a convention, it effectively becomes an instrument of binding international law in that country. It speaks volumes that so many countries feel they can ignore the prescriptions of CEDAW with impunity; there are simply no enforcement mechanisms, and when it's inconvenient to uphold the convention, countries are blithely negligent.

Let me remind you of Article 3 of the Convention: "States Parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement for women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men."

What could be more categorical?

In addition to the exemplary covenants of equality, it's also useful to invoke the substance of the great international conferences which were held throughout the 1990s, and actually form the basis for the agenda of the United Nations in the twenty-first century, including the MDGs. It

is sometimes forgotten that the world gathered in a successive series of conferences that laboriously etched the mandate for social progress for decades to come.

For the purposes of this discussion, the four most important gatherings were the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993; the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994; the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

These were not vast conclaves of disputation and negotiation with little relevance to the real world. These were international conferences which gave rise to cadres of women activists, in one country after another, who then spent the better part of their lives advocating for equality. The global became local with a vengeance. What is not often realized is the way in which these conferences became hotbeds of consciousness-raising for women from all over the developing world, significant numbers of them sponsored to attend by aid agencies and major NGOs. Over those years, our own CIDA paid for hundreds, possibly thousands, of local women activists to attend international gatherings, then return to their home countries to take up the cause. That process continues to this day: at all of the biennial AIDS conferences, for example (the last three were in Durban in 2000, Barcelona in 2002, and Bangkok in 2004, with Toronto scheduled to be the host in August 2006), thousands of women delegates came under the auspices of enlightened sponsors from western countries. The experience is transforming. Every-

one returns home determined to light the fires of change. The paucity of progress following those global meetings has had little to do with the women; it has everything to do with the monolithic walls of male authority, and how indescribably tough it is to bring those walls down.

Selected extracts from the conference documents are germane.

From Human Rights in Vienna; the Declaration and Programme of Action:

> Recalling the preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, in particular the determination to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women . . .
>
> [Paragraph 18:] The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life . . . and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community . . .

Having used these quotations, I can't resist saying a word about the Vienna conference itself. I was fortunate enough to attend (with my older daughter), and unlike most such conferences, where the meetings and activities and sessions are a jumble of good-natured chaos, this conclave had one all-consuming, overriding theme that

became its mantra: Women's Rights are Human Rights. It was emblazoned on posters in every conference room and corridor, the poster itself depicting women trapped behind a barbed-wire fence of oppression.

The conference activities were actually quite amazing. The women's movement was ferociously well-organized, and determined to shape the debate. The women caucused constantly, and confronted the male-dominated delegations in one spirited exchange after another — not, of course, in the formal conference proceedings (they were reserved for governments), but in separate meetings with the individual delegations, one on one. Gradually, the entire conference shifted agenda: the mantra took hold; the men ran for cover. From namby-pamby declarations of good intent, there emerged a strongly worded document mirroring the best that the international conventions had to offer.

And the conference did something else which was utterly novel and truly memorable. Under the inspired direction of Charlotte Bunch, head of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University, the women activists took one entire day, created a human rights tribunal, and received a horrifying litany of personal testimonies, from thirty-three women representing twenty-five countries, about the physical and sexual violence to which they had been subjected. The massive audience of over a thousand was transformed into a torrent of rage and tears, and the conference was on notice, from that moment forward, never again to be dismissive where the human rights of women were concerned.

But then the conference adjourned, and as is so often the case, all the promises made in the heat of anxiety and fear subsided. The promises were not entirely extinguished; the truth about the women's movement is that it builds, incrementally, from event to event, issue to issue. But it's always a struggle to maintain the momentum.

Let me turn to the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and quote from Chapter IV of the Programme of Action, "Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women":

> The objectives are:
> (a) To achieve equality and equity based on harmonious partnership between men and women and enable women to realize their full potential;
> (b) To ensure the enhancement of women's contributions to sustainable development through their full involvement in policy and decision-making processes at all stages . . . as active decision makers, participants and beneficiaries.

Cairo was an epic conference in many respects. Again I was fortunate to be there and to watch the interplay of forces. The conference was chaired by Dr. Nafis Sadik, who was then the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and is now, coincidentally, the UN special envoy on HIV/AIDS in Asia. She was superb as she adroitly steered the conference in two significant directions. First, she frontally and courageously locked horns with the Vatican, preventing it

from writing an anti-abortion plank into the platform. Second, she subsumed the old definition of family planning into a vastly broader compendium of women's rights, essentially arguing that women's empowerment on all fronts would do as much and more for stabilizing population as any traditional forms of family planning. It's not that contraception was diminished; it was expanded significantly.

But it was not Nafis alone. The conference participants were time and again electrified by the magnificent feminist Bella Abzug, ever-commanding and persuasive. Whenever Bella ventured forth into the corridors, or into the halls where the sessions were held (often sitting in a wheelchair because she was recovering from treatment for cancer, a wheelchair I sometimes joyously pushed), the scene was positively hilarious. It was like some triumphant passage of a reigning matriarch. And as she proceeded through the crowds, words leaping madly in every direction, whole delegations parted like the sea, bowing and scraping and fawning reverentially. What Bella decreed, the conference embraced. Between them, Nafis Sadik and Bella Abzug drove the conference and dictated the outcome.

Next, a quote from the document that emerged from the conference on social development in Copenhagen:

> [A. Paragraph 7:] We acknowledge that social and economic development cannot be secured in a sustainable way without the full participation of women, and that equality and equity between women and men is a priority

> for the international community and as such must be at the centre of economic and social development.

And finally, from the Beijing Mission Statement:

> [Paragraph 1:] The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at . . . removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. This means that the principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between men and women at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace.

Beijing, of course, was the ne plus ultra for the women's movement. No other conclave in recent memory delivered such a powerful testament of human rights for women. But the experience of Beijing was also desperately difficult for the leadership of the women's movement. Allow me to explain.

The government of China was positively paranoid about the sudden onslaught of thousands of women activists. They wanted the conference, but they wanted it as a showcase and a boon to the economy, not as a hotbed of militant (and I use "militant" in the best sense) advocacy. One of the features of all the previous conferences

had been the growing place of grassroots activists. Every international conference, starting with the conference on the environment in Rio in 1992, had had an active NGO component. In every instance, a physical place, called the NGO Forum, and a great deal of time were set aside for the involvement of hordes of participants representing "civil society," the name now given to the full constellation of non-governmental and private voluntary organizations, community groups, charities, advocates and activists, faith-based organizations, and sometimes the private sector.

Twenty-five to thirty thousand women representing civil society were expected in Beijing. The government, recoiling with neurotic palpitations, decided to place the NGO Forum in a suburb called Huairou, some fifty-five kilometres from the actual site of the conference. It was preposterous. The women's movement was up in arms, but to absolutely no avail. There was not a single member government of the United Nations that was prepared to take up the cudgels on their behalf. Does that not speak volumes? It is ever thus: The women's movement rallies, but can find few or no allies amongst the male political establishment, especially if the subject matter is controversial.

I remember it well because I was personally involved in endless strategy meetings (all of them futile) to attempt to reverse the decision of the Chinese government. In advance of Beijing, I had been appointed by the then Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, to the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Group on the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. There were ten of us on

the advisory group, and we met in the most wildly improbable of places including (courtesy of Princess Basma Bint Talal of Jordan, who was a member of the group), Petra, Jordan, that absolutely amazing archaeological wonder of the world. We flew into Petra on military helicopters in formation (I was terrified), and presumably the splendid isolation of the place was to endow us with that strategic prescience necessary to bring the government of China to its senses. No such luck. We failed, just as the few others who bothered to try failed.

It is an incomparable tribute to the women's movement that despite the tortured manipulations of China's government, they still managed, even from a distance, to influence the workings of the conference to the extent that a remarkably cogent document emerged. The quote above merely gives the flavour.

Nonetheless, despite these sterling and repeated exhortations for equality, we haven't, in the aftermath, begun to overcome the discrimination, the indignity, the violence visited upon women around the world on a daily basis. Why? Because once consensus is reached and the activists disperse, no major international body steps up to maintain the cohesion and sustain the momentum. Where the rights and needs of women are concerned, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains a yawning chasm. Earlier on, I had expressed the view that the United Nations should be driving the gender agenda. On a daily basis, the UN should be identifying, investigating, documenting, and accusing those who are involved — especially governments — in the continuing systemic

discrimination against women. It doesn't happen for a wide variety of reasons.

Despite all the lip service paid by the UN member states to the importance of gender equality, only 11 of the 191 ambassadors, or 5.7 percent, are women. Worse still, the make-up of the workforce of the UN agencies — a balance over which the powers-that-be within the secretariat have some control — is similarly distorted. The funds, programs, and agencies will tell you, proudly, that up to 33 percent of their professional staff are women, but quite aside from asking why it should be only 33 percent (it's both embarrassing and indefensible, the way in which we've consigned 50 percent to some unattainable fantasy), a closer scrutiny will show that the concentration of women is invariably at the lower professional grades. There is enormous talent in these junior professional categories, but inevitably, in the absence of rigorous affirmative action, their movement upwards is halting and incremental. What is more, at this moment of writing, men head the UN Development Programme, the World Health Organization, UNESCO, the World Food Programme, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the High Commission for Refugees, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, UNAIDS and the United Nations Environment Programme. Women head UNICEF, the UNFPA, the High Commission for Human Rights, and UN-Habitat. There are, to be sure, lesser and smaller agencies, but these are the important ones. The imbalance is striking — and representative.

But that's just the half of it, and the lesser half. The other aspect of multilateralism, astonishing and offensive in equal measure, is the absence of any single, powerful agency within the UN system to represent women. Women constitute more than half the world's population, and in the extensive labyrinth of UN organizations, they are barely represented.

I say "barely" because there is the United Nations Development Fund for Women, or UNIFEM, as it's known. Its headquarters in New York has a core staff of between forty-five and fifty, with a number of non-permanent staff and consultants posted here and there internationally (a ludicrously small number on the entire African continent). UNICEF, representing the children of the world, has 8,311 full-time staff, a cornucopia of consultants and ample offices in over 150 countries. Please understand: UNIFEM is supposed to represent the women of the world with an annual core budget that was $45 million in 2004. UNICEF had an annual budget that hovered close to $2 billion in 2004. (That's a ratio of over 40 to 1.)

The UNFPA does address women in significant ways, but mostly on targeted issues of family planning and sexual and reproductive health. Its mandate is far too narrow to pretend to deal with the vast array of women's concerns, and rather like UNIFEM, it is wildly underfunded for the job it wants to do. Partly because it's been financially penalized by the Bush administration — on grounds that UNFPA was promoting abortion in China, grounds so dishonest as to be actionable — UNFPA has barely a fifth of the finances of UNICEF.

All the other agencies named above tend to deal with themes — governance, health, education, food, housing, and so on — and do not dwell, with any consuming focus, on women.

No, if women were to be taken seriously, it would be via UNIFEM. But UNIFEM is little known beyond UN circles, and is not taken seriously by the hierarchy within. How could it be? Apart from the minuscule budget, neither the executive director of UNIFEM, nor UNIFEM itself, is senior on the UN grid; it's so embarrassing and so objectionable that I can barely talk about it with equanimity.

UNIFEM is not a free-standing agency. It's simply a section or division of the UNDP, and the woman who heads it is eclipsed in status by many of her UNDP colleagues working in other divisions. In fact, she's superceded in standing not only by every single other agency head in the UN family, but by every special representative (my part-time self included) appointed by the Secretary-General. In a system where hierarchy is everything, where everyone defers to the person above in the twisted gradations of bureaucratic aristocracy, to be at the level of the head of UNIFEM — a D2, it's called — is to have no greater status than, say, a person who heads up a UNICEF office in one large country.

But this isn't a large country we're talking about. We're talking about more than half the world's population. And it's rank, really rank, to treat women's issues in such a scandalous manner. Let me make it clear: In my over twenty years working directly or indirectly with the United Nations, I can safely say that only a tiny

cadre of voices speaks strongly for women. Admittedly, it has proven next to impossible to get the member countries to work towards the advancement of women; they always have such mixed and freighted motivation. But nothing excuses the dilatory indifference of the UN agency leadership.

I'm speaking this strongly because the matter has been closeted for long enough, my views on it are well-known, and they are views for which I will never apologize. It seems to me absolutely inexcusable that women have been given such short shrift in the UN constellation. And please spare me the defensive assertions that the agencies themselves look after women's issues, that the issues are "mainstreamed" into the agendas of the agencies. First of all, I've travelled more than most people from country to country, and I'm prepared to argue till doomsday with anyone who pretends that women are a top priority in UN agencies' country programming. They never have been and are not to this day. The proof is in the reality: just look at the toll that AIDS has taken on women.

Instead of bona fide, specialized programs, women get "gender mainstreaming," and gender mainstreaming is a pox for women. The worst thing you can do for women is to fold their concerns into the mandates of UN agencies, or bury them under the activities of government ministries. Once you've mainstreamed gender, it's everybody's business and nobody's business. Everyone's accountable and no one's accountable. I don't know who thought up this mainstreaming guff, but I often wonder what the motives were. And even if the motives were

well-meaning, surely experience has proved how damaging to women mainstreaming truly is. We've mainstreamed women's needs into some kind of shibboleth, and can someone tell me how those needs have been better served by doing so?

Gender mainstreaming might work if we had what the sports and financial enthusiasts call a "level playing field," that is to say, if there were real equity and equality between women and men. Then gender mainstreaming becomes a way of maintaining that equality. But when you start from such gross inequality, mainstreaming simply entrenches the disparities. Hence the need for a totally separate vehicle to carry women's rights forward until that hallowed day (I can practically hear the chorus of hallelujahs rising up behind me) when equality is achieved.

So the only way to deal with these issues is to preserve for them pride of place — to construct for women an edifice, an institution, an agency whose sole preoccupation is to advance the position of women. Or more accurately, to support women to create their own such entity. Then you couldn't mainstream, mute, or dilute it in any way because it would be separate — separately responsible, separately accountable. Its voice would always be heard because it wouldn't be subsumed into the miasma of uniformity.

Ah, yes, some will say, but you're missing something, Mr. Lewis. Isn't there a Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) right in the secretariat, cheek by jowl with the Office of the Secretary-General? The answer is yes,

although, like many others, I've never been sure what the office actually does. Presumably it is a liaison point with treaty bodies and commissions, serving as the secretariat for some conferences, and advising the Secretary-General when advice is felt to be needed.

The senior position in DAW is registered at the level of Assistant Secretary-General, a significant notch above that of the executive director of UNIFEM. I can say with confidence that when I last stopped paying attention, instead of a productive and energetic collaboration between the offices, there was nothing but bad blood. At its most absurdly elemental, DAW didn't want any prominence for UNIFEM, and played interference wherever possible. And UNIFEM, understandably, devoted a great deal of time and energy fighting back. It was nuts, really, because UNIFEM was operational and DAW was conceptual; there should never have been any competition, except that destructive internal rivalries are the nemesis of UN functioning.

Now let me say, before proceeding further, that I must record what some would deem a conflict of interest: my daughter, a human rights lawyer, worked for UNIFEM for seven years before returning to Canada. But frankly, you will simply have to accept that I'm capable of making measured judgements regardless the delicious frippery of coincidental connection.

I readily acknowledge that a lot of what I've described as evidence of cosmic indifference to women is internal United Nations and process stuff. But process is important because it prejudices everything else. For example,

take a look at the MDGs themselves. The third goal, the one that deals with gender, measures the attainment of equality by establishing a target to "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015." Now, how curious is that? Were there no other indices available? Since when did equality and empowerment of women rest solely on gender disparity *in primary and secondary school*? It's frankly ridiculous. What happened to the measures of equality as defined in all the conventions, in terms of every aspect of civil, economic, social, and political life?

To be sure, when it came to publishing the Millennium Task Force monograph on that particular goal (every goal had a task force), the measures were expanded to include all the usual suspects, from property rights to sexual violence. But why was all of that not part of the original goals and targets, since the prescription for achieving gender equality had been set out unequivocally in both the Cairo and Beijing Programmes of Action? The drafters of the MDGs were a thousand times better on the myriad targets for the goal on the environment, and the goal on global partnerships, than they were for the goal on women. I'm writing this in advance of the debate on the MDGs at the United Nations in September 2005, but there is not a scintilla of doubt in my mind that the needs and rights of women will receive short shrift. Nothing in the preparation for the debate leads me to believe that anything has changed. The world's governments will make the required comments, and then pretend that words alone

stop violence, end oppression, and guarantee economic opportunity. There is no greater emblem of international hypocrisy than the promise of women's rights.

And there is no more reprehensible "oversight" than what was missing completely from the mix of MDGs from the outset — namely, a goal for sexual and reproductive rights. It wasn't explicitly identified under gender equality or touched upon under maternal mortality, and yet it constitutes one of the great issues of our time. Again I ask, how could that happen? Easy: When so few in the secretariat or in the agencies have the power (or inclination) to influence policy around women, the issues are easily slighted.

I well remember a meeting in June 2004, under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation, held at their headquarters, designed to somehow overcome this glaring omission within the MDGs. Peter Piot, the executive director of UNAIDS was there, as was Thoraya Obaid, the executive director of UNFPA. So, too, everyone from the head of the population council to the minister of health of Namibia. The focus of the meeting was to figure out why the communities dealing with HIV/AIDS on the one hand, and the communities dealing with sexual and reproductive health on the other, functioned in such discrete silos when tackling sexually transmitted diseases. It made no sense. They should be working in integrated harmony.

That case was most eloquently made by Thoraya Obaid, clearly smarting from the marginalization of the issues that form the mandate for her agency. In a carefully

worded statement, Thoraya made the case for the integration of HIV/AIDS and sexual and reproductive health, noting, with regret, that the two operated in separate compartments, which made no sense whatsoever. Both, after all, required dealing in significant ways with all the difficult issues raised by sexually transmitted diseases. Much of the subsequent discussion bemoaned the absence of sexual and reproductive health from the MDGs, and several participants argued that the HIV/AIDS MDG provided the vehicle through which sexual and reproductive health could be thrust into the vortex of the MDG debate.

It was evident that everyone hoped that the meeting would stimulate a far more widespread discussion of sexual and reproductive health, whenever and wherever the MDGs were being addressed. It didn't really matter whether that happened within the context of AIDS, or poverty, or maternal mortality, so long as it happened. I don't doubt, therefore, that sexual and reproductive health will occupy a significant place at the UN Millennium debate in September 2005. But it's absurd — if symptomatic — to have to insert an issue of such centrality into the mix in so roundabout a fashion.

It reminds me of the unsuccessful attempts made by UNIFEM to become one of the co-sponsoring agencies of UNAIDS. There are ten co-sponsors, everyone from UNESCO and UNICEF to WFP and the ILO. Unfortunately, however, there was no room for UNIFEM: the women of the world had to settle for a memorandum of understanding with the UNAIDS secretariat. Undoubtedly it was argued that

UNIFEM, as a division of UNDP, was already represented. Forgive me, but it says something about the way the rights of women are viewed within the UN family that a procedural, but entirely contrived argument should prevail.

There's just no way around the constant neglect in addressing the priorities for women. Perhaps the most recent glaring example of that truth is the report of the celebrated Commission for Africa, appointed by Prime Minister Tony Blair.

I can't get over it. Let's start with the commissioners. There were seventeen in total, three of whom were women. Three, or 17 percent. Prime Minister Blair had the whole world to choose from, and he could come up with only three women. Tony Blair claims to be a social democrat; socialists are supposed to have greater sensitivity to such matters. But you see, when it comes to women, sensitivity goes out the window. That commission was fatally flawed from the outset, simply by way of gender representation.

And the report showed it. This is a report that ploughed new ground on foreign aid, on debt, on trade, on climate. It was justly saluted on all those issues for the sweep of its progressive recommendations in areas where others had always feared to tread. It recommended an immediate doubling of foreign aid, a cancellation of the debts of the poorest countries, and a vast reduction in agricultural subsidies as the centrepiece of a new trading regimen. Everyone applauded. As a matter of fact, the report even went so far as to challenge the intellectual underpinnings of the World Bank and the International

Monetary Fund in their dual adherence to fundamentalist monetarism. On all those fronts it was bold, oh so bold.

But on women? The report is an absolute throwback. Other than the occasional paragraphs paying obligatory obeisance to women's rights, there's a feckless failure to recognize that women sustain the entire continent of Africa, and should have a definitive role in every single aspect of social, economic, political, civil, and cultural life, from peacekeeping to agriculture to trade to AIDS. If there had been a Commission for Africa with fourteen women and three men, I can absolutely guarantee that the final report would have differed root and branch from the report we now have in hand. One day — probably in the next millennium — such a commission will be appointed.

And just to demonstrate the absolute, unwavering consistency in such matters, allow me to mention, however heretical it may seem, the communiqué issued in July 2005 by the G8 meeting in Gleneagles. Honestly, it's like a parody. From my impeccable desktop printer, the document emerges as eighteen pages in length, thirty-five paragraphs in all, five thousand to six thousand words, with two full appendices. There are five references to women: two in that most common linguistic fusion of "women and children," one mandatory reference to "pregnant women and babies," one in conjunction with youth employment, and one throwaway line, entirely neutral, incorporating "gender equality." It is my contention — a contention with which many commentators would take issue — that the stun-

ning absence of emphasis on women in the official pronouncement of the G8 is an ominous omen for the delivery of commitments made. You simply cannot be serious about Africa and treat women with such contempt. It won't work. Mark my words: Come 2010, G8 excuses will be the order of the day. Bush, Blair, Chirac, Schroeder, perhaps even Martin, will all be out to pasture, shrugging shoulders of insouciance. Read the document, note the void, and weep.

But when all is said and done, the ongoing struggle to embrace gender equality was most poignantly brought home to me in confronting the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. And in particular, one specific memorable experience.

In January 2003, I travelled with James Morris, the executive director of the World Food Programme, to four countries in southern Africa: Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, and Lesotho. Southern Africa was then (as now) in the grip of a brutal food shortage, and the combination of hunger and AIDS was something we wanted to investigate. Apart from the evidence of catastrophe which was flowing from the reports of UN representatives in the field, there was also a newly current academic thesis called "New Variant Famine." The name had been coined by Alex de Waal, a gifted and knowledgeable Africanist, who, upon close study, had evolved the argument that food shortages were the result of illness caused by AIDS as much as they were the result of climate.

We were interested, if skeptical. It seemed far more likely that the driving force would be erratic rainfall and drought.

I had been in the region only the month before, and experienced a kind of renewable shock, but James Morris, on his first extensive trip to the region, was absolutely stunned by what we encountered. There was hunger and starvation everywhere, and while the actual famine or near-famine was clearly influenced by successive droughts, there was no question that AIDS was playing havoc with agricultural productivity. So many farmers — overwhelmingly women — were sick, or had died, or were busy coping with the dying and orphaned, that they simply couldn't have tilled the fields, tended to the crops, or gone to market, even had the weather patterns been hospitable.

The state of the health of the women in the villages was ghastly. Household income was ransacked, and time once spent on walking to distant fields and growing a variety of foods had been given over to caring for the sick. AIDS leads to hunger; hunger exacerbates AIDS. It's a merciless interaction. The numbers of orphan children are beyond belief, in fact, so beyond belief that when we drafted our report, we actually said, "The situation of orphans represents a humanitarian catastrophe and a violation of the rights of children. The apparent inability of the United Nations system and the international community to adequately support national governments in their response to the needs of the huge numbers of orphans in the region is unacceptable." That's UN-speak for saying, "You've failed lamentably: for God's sake get your act together."

We travelled with eighteen colleagues from eight different UN agencies and the Southern African Develop-

ment Community (SADC), and I vividly remember the repetitive sense of numbed incomprehension as we boarded the WFP plane to fly to yet another country.

One of those travelling colleagues was my advisor on women's issues, Paula Donovan. Paula and I had worked together at UNICEF headquarters for four years, and after I left, she'd headed off to Nairobi as regional advisor for UNICEF's AIDS programming in East and southern Africa. Having her on the trip with Jim Morris meant that the situation of women was always front and centre, and it was Paula who ultimately drafted the sections on women of the final report which were so tough and so trenchant. If she had not been along, our indignation and concern would undoubtedly have been expressed in more muted terms. Considering what flowed from the report, it was a piece of extraordinary good fortune that her pen and her conscience were at hand.

Let me quote the key paragraph at some little length:

> The mission was struck in particular by how food shortages appear to aggravate the impact of HIV/AIDS by accelerating the progress of the disease in HIV-positive individuals . . . Perhaps the most disturbing realization came with a better understanding of the impact that this crisis is having on the region's women. It was evident to the mission that although the prevalence of HIV infection is highest among women and girls — who also take on nearly all the responsibilities of caring for the sick and orphaned, in addition to their regular obligations such as providing food for their households — very little is being done to reduce women's

> risks, to protect them from sexual aggression and violence, to ease their burdens or to support their coping and caring efforts. The apparent lack of urgency, leadership, direction and responsibility in the response of the United Nations, national governments, and the international community to the pandemic's effects on women and girls is deeply troubling. For example, the early adoption of mainstreaming approaches to gender within United Nations agencies, funds and programmes has made gender issues everyone's concern but no one's responsibility. Whereas gender policies and principles are widely discussed by the United Nations, governments and NGOs, the urgent actions flowing from those discussions must be implemented. So far, that does not appear to have happened.

When we drafted our final press release, we abandoned the measured language and made the findings even louder and more conclusive: "While responding to the severe food crisis in southern Africa, an even greater disaster has been unearthed. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is compounding the premature death of thousands of productive people — particularly women — across the region, and is wrecking the livelihoods of millions more while sowing the seeds of future famines . . . The incredible assault of HIV/AIDS on women in particular has no parallel in human history. Women are the pillars of the family and community — the mothers, the care-givers, the farmers. The pandemic is preying on them relentlessly, threatening them in a way that the world has never yet witnessed."

So shaken were we by what we'd seen that upon our return we appealed to the Secretary-General to intervene. On my part, it wasn't the first time. He would be more than ready to acknowledge, I believe, that I had raised the plight of women over and over again in the preceding year and a half. In fact, yet again it leads me to a digression which, in this instance, I cannot resist.

Earlier on, at the end of October of 2002, on one of my regular reporting visits to the Secretary-General, I had raised the question of the excruciating vulnerability of women in the face of AIDS. In July of that year, at the international AIDS conference in Barcelona, I had observed during a press conference that "the toll on women and girls is beyond imagining; it presents Africa and the world with a practical and moral challenge which places gender at the centre of the human condition . . . For the African continent, it means economic and social survival. For the women and girls of Africa, it's a matter of life and death." I was consumed by what was happening to women (and there are virtually no improvements to this day; if anything, things are worse); anyone would have been similarly consumed. Everywhere I went it was a scene out of Dante.

On this particular occasion in the fall of 2002, my plea to the Secretary-General was this: I told him that with his permission, I was prepared to draft a plan of action for the United Nations to respond to the predicament of women. I argued that further amassing of evidence was unnecessary; what was desperately needed was intervention. He agreed. In fact, he went further. I remember it

well because he said that I should proceed, but make sure that the plan was long-term, and that he himself felt so strongly about the issue that he would go out and raise money to make sure that the plan could be implemented. (He even mentioned the Gates Foundation as a possible source.)

I left feeling quite elated, determined to put something on paper as quickly as possible. I was more than somewhat surprised, therefore, when, a week or ten days later, I got a call from the office of the Deputy Secretary-General inviting me to join a meeting (given my schedule, I joined by conference call) to discuss, amongst other things, the response to women and AIDS in Africa. There were a number of people on the call (it was eventually held on November 22), including Mark Malloch Brown, then head of UNDP, Eveline Herfkens, the Secretary-General's coordinator of the MDG campaign working through UNDP, Peter Piot, head of UNAIDS, one or two aides from the thirty-eighth floor (as the offices of the Secretary-General were known), and me. The meeting was chaired by Louise Fréchette, the Deputy Secretary-General.

The conversation meandered from women, to the role of civil society, to the general raising of money for UN priorities (I was quite baffled about the content, although I participated when asked), and at the close, Louise Fréchette assigned — I repeat, assigned — Eveline Herfkens and Peter Piot the job of jointly coming up with a plan to address the question of women and AIDS. I did not protest. It was not my place to protest. It was clear

that the understanding I'd struck with the Secretary-General had been superceded by the specific assignment of the Deputy Secretary-General.

This actually raises a point with which I've often wrestled. To what extent should I put up a fight with the powers-that-be? It's a very tough call. I've always felt that the work I do is taken seriously by the United Nations, but never quite seriously enough to override the normal bureaucratic rhythms. I knew that I had been finessed on the women's issue, but I felt that I could still influence it from other points on the UN compass and beyond, rather than causing a ruckus internally, getting nowhere, and alienating everyone along the way.

To be fair, it may well be that upon further reflection on the thirty-eighth floor, it was felt that I was not the appropriate person to draw up a draft proposal for any kind of planned response. After all, I had no institutional base: I was a part-time envoy, reporting to the Secretary-General, but working very much on my own. It may also have been felt that I was too radical in my views and pronouncements. Whatever the assumption, I was effectively taken out of the mix.

What deeply troubled me at the time, however, was my conviction that nothing would come of the alternative. Success would require the engagement of all the major agencies, not to speak of governments and other partners. Eveline was relatively new to the UN bureaucracy, and though she had been an inspired minister of international co-operation in the Dutch cabinet in a previous incarnation, she would need time to figure out the

Byzantine ways of the United Nations. Peter Piot was, at that very moment, running for the job of director general of the WHO in a very difficult race, and it was frankly absurd to imagine that he could possibly find the time to help fashion an entirely new approach to an issue of such complexity and importance. In fact, he was on the verge of announcing a leave of absence to focus on his campaign.

In the upshot, I never heard another word of it again. And the fact that nothing came of it was manifest in the need two months later, in early 2003, to raise the issue all over again. I would argue that this is what always happens where the rights and needs of women are concerned: an inexplicable willingness to let things slide, an inescapable drift to inertia.

But James Morris and I couldn't allow institutional rigor mortis to set in after what we had just seen in southern Africa — not after our joint horror at the plight of women — and so we appealed to Secretary-General Annan to take unprecedented action.

And he did. He called a meeting in February, which was held in the small conference room adjacent to his office. He assembled a number of heads of agencies and his own senior people headed by Iqbal Riza, his chief of staff. He also had James Morris on teleconference from Rome, with other UN dignitaries from Geneva. I was asked to comment and did so as feelingly as I could summon. But the main intervention came from James Morris who, because of his standing as head of a major agency, made a tremendous impact on everyone. With

quiet eloquence, he drew a picture of women and orphans so beset by pain and trauma that the United Nations must surely intervene. The tide was turned, or so it seemed.

The Secretary-General, fully seized of the imperative, said that he wanted to strike a task force and looked anxiously around the table for someone to chair it. Catherine Bertini, James Morris's predecessor at the WFP, and the then Under-Secretary-General for Management, said that no doubt Carol Bellamy, the executive director of UNICEF, would want to chair it and should be appointed. Carol Bellamy was not there, but the Secretary-General agreed, and on the spot struck the task force with Bellamy in charge.

It took an inordinate amount of time to get things going, but eventually it was decided to promulgate the Secretary-General's Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa, and to begin by studying the situation in nine countries. Originally, of course, it was meant to be a worldwide plan of action, or one focused at least on the whole continent of Africa. But somehow, it all got whittled down. (It's odd, though: everything the United Nations undertakes expands in Topsyesque fashion — everything, that is, except initiatives on women.)

Over several months in 2004, the study proceeded with the participation of many excellent people in the countries concerned, and the report was released in July 2004. It's actually a very good document, and if anything comes of it, real strides might be made. But as of this

writing, very little has come of it, and the situation for women remains as perilous as ever.

On a number of occasions, in subsequent visits to several of the nine countries covered by the report, I've raised the question of whether or not the recommendations have been or will be implemented. In some countries, there's even a program of action following on the report, but as yet there's no funding available. And just as a wearying footnote, the United Nations also lost Sisonke Msimang, a truly remarkable young African woman, responsible for large parts of the task force report, who was based at the United Nations in Johannesburg, and who might have single-handedly made implementation possible if she'd had the necessary support from within the UN system. It didn't come. In a spirit of considerable regret, she left to work for George Soros, but it's a huge loss. And it's a further commentary on the multilateral priorities for women.

I never feel more agitated than in the face of what's happening to women. The atmosphere of benign neglect, compounded by the rooted gender inequality, all adds up to a death sentence for countless millions of women in the developing world. For whatever reason, we can't break the monolith of indifference and paralysis.

I've tried in this lecture to give you a glimpse, experienced or discerned on a personal basis, of the struggle for women's human rights. I can't pretend that it's more than a glimpse, and it doesn't begin to approximate the frustrations and heroism, tenacity and despair, progress and setbacks faced by the leaders of the women's movement

itself. I've concentrated on Africa, as I have before in these lectures, because it's the continent I know best, and because it yields such vivid examples.

Governments in Africa do not do well in the protection of women's rights. In fact, as I shall momentarily demonstrate, they are profoundly deficient. I've been completely taken aback, on more than one occasion, by the wall of indifference thrown up by cabinet ministers when I raise, for example, the plight of women in the era of AIDS. At one point, in the case of Angola, a very senior member of the administration lapsed into locker-room smirking at the mere mention of women. My argument is quite simple: They would not be allowed to indulge in such asinine and/or negligent behaviour if there were a watchdog, a full-fledged agency or institution as part of the United Nations, whose job it was to ride herd on the recalcitrants. Governments get away with it because no one cares enough to prevent governments from getting away with it.

And what is the upshot? In the UNDP Human Development Report for 2003, there is a gender-related development index which rates most of the countries of the world according to a number of economic and social indices, taking into account, in particular, performance on the overall status of women. Let me identify the 20 countries at the bottom of the list of 145 which are ranked for gender, starting with the country right at the bottom, and working up: Sierra Leone, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Burundi, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Democratic Republic of the

Congo, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Zambia, Malawi, Benin, Tanzania, Rwanda, Senegal, Eritrea.

Twenty countries. All are African. While it is appalling that Africa occupies a place of such dishonour, showing how so many leaders are beyond redemption on issues of gender, it should also give everyone pause about the role of multilateralism. It's not possible for the UN family in any of these twenty countries to grab the heads of state by the scruff of the neck and shake them into equality. But it should be the role of the UN family to shame, blame, and propose solutions, all the while yelling from the rooftops that inequality is obscene. Only then will change have a chance.