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UN women's entity may face long delay

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A leading women's group has challenged the United Nations to commit to a workable program on gender equality at next week's General Assembly. A number of women's groups, including the UN's own body UNIFEM, are angry at some countries which may now vote against the creation of a new women's body within the UN system.

Presenter: Geraldine Coutts

Speaker: Elizabeth Cox, Regional Program Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women, Suva, Fiji

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COX: I understand that several countries are renegeing; not letting the proposal for a new entity which people felt was pretty much secured in this General Assembly. There are people who are trying to prevent it going through and there seems to be negotiations and deals going on with regard to other resolutions. Yes it's quite distressing and I think everybody felt that this was going to happen this round and it's very disappointing indeed to hear that in fact it may not.

COUTTS: And do you know who the countries are that are renegeing and why they are?

COX: No there's a set of countries, four or five countries, I know that Egypt has been mentioned. I can't recall, as I said I'm in the process of travelling these three days, and I haven't read the latest news. But I know it's a group of countries and I know that there's still active lobbying going on, and I'm not sure at all what the chances are, but yes it's a very real concern to all of us.

I think in UNIFEM we felt confident that this resolution would go ahead, and I know that there's been many, many years of lobbying by the civil society organisations, especially the women's human rights organisations and other individual lobbyists and activists, and I think we thought we had this secured. It will make a world of difference to the way we can function on the ground in terms of delivering services and supporting programs, to promote gender equality and women's human rights. And we are the main organisation doing that in the UN, and if we're going to be kept small than yes, this sends out a very strong message about how member states feel about the work that needs to be done and how it needs to be financed.

COUTTS: Well what is the disagreement then with this bloc that is not going to vote for it this time, what do they want or are there amendments to the charter that they want?

COX: Again I have to say because I'm travelling I don't have this news at hand. I'm not clear whether this is just a general lobby against equal rights for women and gender equality or this is just some politicking within the UN and that there's some kind of trade-off going on among countries regarding some other resolutions. So unfortunately this is not clear to me. It seems to me strange that four or five countries could hold the rest of the UN to ransom and it's tragic because again, women are going to pay the price of that kind of politicking, which is really not at all about the matter that we're concerned about, and that is about the condition and the situation and the suffering of women worldwide.

COUTTS: What will this entity do when and if it does go through?

COX: Well the entity will establish a fully funded program within the UN system and a program for example I always help people to understand, that as UNICEF is a specialised agency for children, UNIFEM is a specialised agency for women but the current situation is such that you're talking about the difference between the size and the resources available to UNICEF as an organisation and to UNIFEM as an organisation, it's huge. So this was an effort to amalgamate different parts of the UN system, some of them small secretariat offices, UNIFEM being the programming arm, we program out in-country in response to government requests. And as I said we do that through 16 sub-regional offices. But we're severely under-resourced and I can tell you that I've been running the UNIFEM office for three years in the Pacific, I'm a very experienced development worker, I've worked with governments, NGOs and international NGOs, and the struggle within the UN system to be adequately resourced so that we can respond adequately to requests coming from our member states - it is extremely difficult, and this is not the case for many other entities within the UN system.

So we need to be a larger entity, we need to be better resourced and the UN in general needs to put its money where its mouth is in terms of work on gender equality, and it's over to the member states and I say again it's a tragedy if a few member states are going to hold the rest of us to ransom over this because of issues unrelated to the concerns for women of the world.

COUTTS: Well there is a faction within the group that is campaigning for a coalition to be formed and consolidate four existing women's' entities into a single body. Are you familiar with that and is it a good idea?

COX: Yes that's the general recommendation that the four entities will be amalgamated into one body, yes, and this makes a lot of sense because at the moment the work, the gender equality is scattered in different parts of the organisation. There's been a big move towards coherence in the UN system so the coherence across parts of the UN system that are focused on gender equality is extremely important. So the research arm, the secretariat for the Commission on the Status of Women and the special advisor to the Secretary General would be amalgamated with UNIFEM. And yes this makes sense and this is what we're all in favour of, and this is what we were counting on happening at this General Assembly.

COUTTS: Well the Secretary General Ban Ki Moon admits that the UN gender, this is his words; architecture lacks a recognised driver and is probably in danger of heading in different directions. That's exactly what we're seeing now?

COX: Well I think what happens is, I think that the various entities within the UN who work on gender equality do extremely well under the present conditions, even though it's a kind of fragmented system with the four different entities located in different places and the lack of coherence. We all acknowledge that that coherence needs to be there but the bottom line is the resourcing of the entity and we're comparatively under-resourced. We feel that, I feel that in the operations of the Pacific.

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We're dealing with 15 countries and we do not have a very large budget, we're very much dependent on our staff working with other donors to raise money for programs. So I know that coherence is important but the resourcing is the fundamental issue. We need to be adequately resourced to do our job and that's what's the strongest lobbyist, that's the strong message that they have been carrying for the last four or five years.

COUTTS: Well if you don't get this entity through this time is the women's group and agenda likely to dissolve within the UN and become even weaker?

COX: No I don't think that's going to happen, I think the fight will become even stronger for another year but it's very unfair that this has to happen and it's disappointing that the member states are still leaving this lobby to a small group rather than owning the responsibility for gender equality and this is our work. Governments sign up to all kinds of treaties and we expect the member states to have a concern, not only about the condition of women in their country but worldwide, and that this should be moving forward now. What we're doing is keeping the work for gender equality under-resourced and therefore limiting our ability to achieve what we're all committing ourselves to do, committing ourselves at the level of the United Nations General Assembly but also as member states and also as government. In order to implement those commitments we need to be adequately resourced like the other larger entities within the UN.

COUTTS: How long will it be before you know whether you can get it through or not or whether this renegade bloc is going to block it again this time?

COX: Well I think this is something that everybody's monitoring by the hour at the moment, and as I said because I'm travelling it's not all that easy for me to monitor, but I am monitoring what's coming across in the email exchanges in the region. And I cannot speak on behalf of the whole of the UN but I know that women worldwide who are working to improve the condition of women are going to be very, very disappointed with this. We will not give up and the tragedy of it is that we have to another year ahead of yet again working in a manner where we don't have adequate resources. We're just replicating in the UN system what we're criticising in nation states, and that is that governments they give lip service to women and gender equality but they do not resource them. They have small ministries who are trying to serve all of the women of countries, likewise within the UN we have a very small agency, we have a lack of coherence as well as does many other parts of the UN. But it's time now to solve this problem and get real about promoting gender equality worldwide.



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