

World's women have an advocate

More than half the globe's people need their own UN agency:

Stephen Lewis

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When Stephen Lewis visited the central Kenyan town of Thika last month, he heard a disturbing fact. Rapes of women and girls were escalating every month, and half the girls sexually assaulted were under 12.

Even more startling was a new pattern; "a significant number of women aged 65 to 80 were also raped. The men who did it were confident they could have unprotected sex with them without getting AIDS," Lewis said.

For the United Nations special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, it was just one more reason to accelerate his campaign for the idea that now obsesses him — creation of a powerful new UN agency to defend women's rights, health and security, just as its children's agency does for the young.

If he succeeds, that would be Lewis's legacy to the world body, where his term as envoy ends at the close of this year.

"I am completely consumed by this," he admits. "For 20 years I've felt that the rights and needs of women in the UN system were largely unattended. They make up more than half of the world's population but efforts to address their problems have been a travesty. "When you look at the horrific facts of violence against women, and the ravages of the AIDS pandemic, it's totally unacceptable."

Next week, Lewis will take the proposal to Geneva, where a UN high-level panel is studying ways to make the world body's development, humanitarian assistance and environment sectors more coherent. If the panel endorses the idea, the new women's agency would be on the agenda for 191 member countries when the UN General Assembly opens in September — the first step toward making the scheme a reality.

The women's agency would cost around \$1 billion a year, and employ several thousand staff. It would consolidate scattered projects now under the wings of the children's fund UNICEF, the UN population fund, the World Health Organization, and the UN Development Program.

Lewis has already lobbied leaders of European, Latin American and African states to support the women's agency. Major Canadian groups have signed onto it. He hopes the new Tory government will follow suit.

Lewis's friend Graca Machel, a prominent children's advocate and wife of Nelson Mandela, travelled to Britain to convince finance minister Gordon Brown to join the campaign.

"My experience with AIDS accentuated the need for an agency completely devoted to women," Lewis says. "In the midst of this carnage of women — who are losing their lives in such heartbreaking numbers — there has to be something in the world that has a voice for them, and an operational force on the ground that can respond."

**'The high-level panel
... is made up of 12 men ... three women.'
Stephen Lewis, UN special envoy**

Lewis cites dire statistics on the global plight of women:

According to UN estimates:

- Up to 3 million women a year lose their lives to gender-based violence or neglect.
- Some 600,000 die in childbirth, many for lack of medical attention or sanitation.
- Millions more are victims of infanticide in countries that value male over female children.
- Women account for almost half of all HIV/AIDS cases worldwide, and in Africa, close to 70 per cent of infected people are women. Elderly women, often the poorest, are left to care for the children of AIDS victims.
- As many as 4 million girls and women a year are sold into prostitution.
- Two million suffer genital mutilation, often in conditions that lead to lifelong pain, infection and premature death.
- One woman in five is a victim of rape or attempted rape during her lifetime.

UN social statistics are also daunting.

- The number of women over 60 is growing, but they are more likely than men to end their days in poverty.
- Women are more insecure in the working world, unemployed longer and more frequently than men.
- They are educationally handicapped; two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women.

**'Women have brilliant plans but can't
execute them.'
Taina Bien-Aimé, of Equality Now**

Would a women's agency be able to reverse some of these daunting figures?

"If it is done properly, with experienced women on the ground steering the course, it could succeed," says Paula Donovan, Lewis's senior adviser on women's and children's issues, and the woman he credits with conceiving the idea of an agency exclusively devoted to women.

"All those programs and projects that women have designed, but could never get off the ground because of lack of staff and resources could be implemented," she said in a phone interview.

"They haven't been sitting around waiting for outside help. They've been doing what they can to help themselves. These women know what needs to be done and they just need support to do it."

Donovan, a career humanitarian official who worked with both UNICEF and UNIFEM — a modestly funded department of the UN development program that focuses on women's issues — says she has attended too many frustrating meetings with international officials and politicians who treat women as an afterthought.

"You finish the meeting and find that half of the country's population wasn't being addressed. If things continue that way, we won't have a chance of reaching the

Millennium Development Goals (for ending world poverty and reaching gender equality by 2015)."

Donovan and Lewis know the road to a new women's agency could be a bumpy one. Many of the world's countries are dominated by conservative men who oppose women's autonomy, although they pay lip service to women's rights. Others want to cut, not increase the world body's budget.

Within the UN itself, Donovan points out, little more than a quarter of top-level appointments go to women, and their numbers declined in the past year.

"The high-level panel itself is made up of 12 men and three women," Lewis notes. Rachel Mayanja, Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special adviser on gender issues and advancement of women, has doubts about a new women's agency, arguing it might "create a ghetto for women's issues, which will be put into it and forgotten." Instead, she argues they should be given equal attention in existing agencies. Others who deal with women's issues on a daily basis believe such a new agency is not only desirable, but vital.

"I think Stephen Lewis is right on target as to the dire and critical need for the UN to establish a fully-fledged women's agency that has the same power and support as others have," says Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of New York-based Equality Now.

"Development can't happen without women's equality. All over the world, women have brilliant plans but can't execute them. What we need is political will to make this happen."