

# Walk Beside Us

Speech delivered by **Srilatha Batliwala**, Board Chair, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), Board of Directors, PLAN International, & Research Fellow, Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University

At the High Level Thematic Debate on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment held by United Nations General Assembly

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Honourable President of the General Assembly, Honourable Members, friends and sisters from the women's movement worldwide, ladies and gentlemen:

We have much to celebrate as we introspect on the gains of the past three decades in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. We applaud the UN - and your predecessors in this august assembly - for having provided the space for women to gather globally, for listening to our voices, and responding to our various calls for your collective action for the empowerment of women throughout the world. We particularly appreciate your role – sometimes willing and sometimes reluctant! - in helping us create the first global norm structures and mechanisms for empowering women and advancing gender equality: viz., CEDAW, the Beijing Platform, the Cairo Plan of Action, the CSW, and the ratification of women's rights within the human rights framework.

But I ask you now to ponder one of the great challenges of our times: even as global commitment to poverty eradication and social justice has seemingly increased, so has the belief that there are magic bullets and quick fixes which can override the need for more fundamental but painful and longer-term interventions. We need processes that would tackle the basic structures of power and privilege and truly transform our societies in favour of women and all marginalized and excluded people.

There are some magic bullets popular in the area of women's empowerment and gender equality: gender mainstreaming, micro-finance focused on lending rather than women's empowerment, and quotas for women in formal political systems. All three are good ideas, indeed, they are interventions that the women's movement itself advocated, but they have been divested of the complex transformative strategies within which they were originally embedded and reduced to formulas, rituals and mantras. Some of these approaches have resulted in women joining a polluted stream, as WEDO's founder, Bella Abzug once said; they are leading to women disappearing from gender, and power being taken out of empowerment.

But there is growing evidence from research and grassroots experiences that mechanical and depoliticised implementation of these strategies ensures that none of these, singly or together, necessarily empower women. More importantly, these strategies have, in many contexts, merely shifted greater responsibility and burden for economic survival and political change onto women themselves, or ended up as a numbers game. They are not able to uproot the deeply entrenched relations of power between men and women, and between the dominant and oppressed.

This forces us to confront what we can achieve through systems and structures for formal equality – the international norms and instruments, and national laws, policies and machineries for gender equality and women’s rights in which have made important strides. It seems these create important enabling conditions, or the “push” factor, for gender justice from above, but they are only one part of a much larger process. Of great urgency today is programs and strategies that address the invisible, informal, traditional systems - the arenas in which the majority of the world’s women negotiate their lives - which continue to oppress and exclude women and subvert their search for justice.

Let us look, for example, at the experience of women in trying to gain and exercise political power. While we celebrate the election of women heads of state in four out of six continents, the adoption of quotas for women in councils and legislatures, and the fact that Rwanda now rivals some of the highly developed Nordic states in achieving almost equal representation of women in its parliament. But it is a sobering reality that while over half the world’s people are women, they hold only 16% of seats in parliaments.

At a meeting convened by WEDO last year to review achievements in our 50-50 Campaign for Women in Decision-making, our partners from around the world reported on multiple barriers to their entry, effective participation, and attempts to move political structures to work for gender equality. Campaign finance was a major hurdle for women standing for election; political parties were not only gatekeepers but often forced women members to distance themselves from the gender equality agenda in order to gain support and patronage. Even where significant numbers of women had gained political power, they were often advocates of the anti-women and anti-poor agendas of their parties and male patrons. What our partners were saying was that representation does not always translate into effective participation - rather than women transforming power, structures of power often isolated or subverted women’s efforts for greater gender justice. But they also found that when women candidates emerged from strong and aware grassroots constituencies, they were far better able to withstand these pressures and deliver real change for women and all citizens.

Similarly, a few days ago, my colleague from PLAN International, on whose Board I also serve, and which is dedicated to the rights of the girl child, presented an illustration of why it is important to create the pull for change from below: She spoke of the strong focus in Africa on banning the practice of female genital cutting, but other physically and psychologically violent practices that are part of initiation rites for girls are ignored. PLAN’s own experience in multiple settings demonstrates that through awareness building and empowerment of girls themselves, they can mobilize their parents and communities to end these unjust practices. This constitutes a demand – or the pull factor -- for equality and women’s human rights from the ground up, where progressive laws and policies do not reach.

Yet such initiatives are increasingly under-resourced as donors move their resources to supposedly more “concrete” approaches that deliver more “measurable” results.

This is why a renewed commitment on the part of the UN is so critical to gender equality and women’s empowerment. It is in this context that the role of the UN and its various agencies – and particularly the role of a more empowered and powerfully resourced new gender entity becomes critical. We need strong champions for a whole new phase of gender equality work – for putting

women into decision-making in far more impactful and transformative ways – For supporting the kinds of work that the magic bullet people are too impatient to invest in.

It is therefore ironic that the gender equality architecture of the UN system currently receives barely \$65 million of budgetary support – less than 5% of what UNICEF receives. It is amazing that the UN recognized the importance of an agency for protecting and promoting the rights of the world's children sixty years ago, and that donor governments and individuals resource this agency adequately, if not generously. But it took the combined power of the world's women's movements to push, thirty years ago, for the creation of UNIFEM, but for recognizing the needs and rights of the women entrusted with the care and nurturance of the world's children.

It is a matter of utmost urgency, therefore, that the SG and the august members of this assembly work for the implementation of a strengthened and unified gender entity within your system, an entity that will combine both normative and operational roles. Above all, we need an entity that will have the resources to support gender justice activists and advocates on the ground in developing innovative new approaches and strategies that can create more sustainable transformations in gender relations at the levels where these are most critical.

Many years ago I learnt a profound lesson from Sundaramma, a poor but powerful woman in one of the women's collectives I had helped build in a remote village in Bidar district in Karnataka state in South India. I asked her, what is our role in your empowerment? She said:

“Work with us, not for us; don't tell us what to do to change our lives but share your knowledge and skills so we can figure out how to do it; help us eradicate the poverty of our ideas and dreams, show us new ways of understanding the world. Help us be heard by those who don't listen to us. And when we find the path we wish to tread, first, walk in front of us, then, walk beside us; and finally, when we are truly strong, walk behind us.”

We invite you, the member states of the United Nations, to continue to walk beside us on the next phase of our journey to realizing gender equality and women's empowerment.

Thank you.