

## UN Women Celebration Marks Next Stage for GEAR

[New York, February 24, 2011] On Thursday evening GEAR (Gender Equality Architecture Reform) advocates and representatives from the women's rights movements celebrated the new gender entity at the official United Nations launch of UN Women. Hundreds of women made their way into the UN General Assembly to mark the occasion and show support for UN Women. Seated on the ground floor of the General Assembly with the UN Secretary General and the Under-Secretary-General of UN Women, civil society was replete with excitement and high energy.

Since 2005 women's rights advocates have monitored the gender equality architecture reform process, and finally, after years of campaigning activists worldwide have reason to celebrate albeit cautiously. It remains to be determined how UN Women formalizes its partnership with civil society and what will be its' level of funding. Two critical areas which will either weaken UN Women's mandate if the status quo is maintained or harness the entity's highest potential if these issues are fully realized.

Many prominent and high level speakers joined in the celebration. Ban Ki-moon reaffirmed his support for UN Women and thanked the NGO community, "whose relentless advocacy led to success." He noted that the, "negotiations were tough, but we knew why we needed UN Women and we prevailed." Following Ki-moon, Bachelet enthusiastically welcomed the entity and shared her excitement about the organization's focus. She concluded by saying that 2011 brings hope as "the beginning of a new era of gender equality and a better world for all."

Bandana Rana, GEAR Campaign Regional Focal Point for South Asia, spoke about civil society demands for UN Women. Rana highlighted the importance of the entity delivering results that make real impact on the ground and the significance of UN Women institutionalizing meaningful systematic engagement with women's groups and grassroots organizations. During her statement, she gestured to a group of GEAR activists holding up letters which spelled, "GEAR UP WITH US," which calls attention to the importance of working with women's rights activists in preparation for the June 2011 board meeting and beyond.

The final act was a performance of the UN Women song "One Woman" and during the encore women stood up, linked arms and shared a sense of achievement. Bachelet joined the advocates swaying and singing, perhaps a sign of her real interest in working with women's rights groups?



Though this event did not address substantive issues or holistically represent the women's movement it was a momentous occasion in which women could celebrate what the campaign worked long and hard to create. During the CSW, Bachelet showed that she was listening and taking note of women's concerns regarding the new entity, but other issues still remain. There is no set mechanism in place to engage with civil society and GEAR advocates have presented a proposal for this that includes the appointment of civil society independent experts, the creation of thematic working groups and other suggestions that highlight the importance of having women's groups and grassroots organizations formally involved. Many are also increasingly concerned with the minimal reference to human rights in Bachelet's presentations on UN Women. Women's rights groups find the human rights framework to enable progressive discussions regarding the status of women at the national level and language that undermines this lens will backtrack on advancements made.

GEAR Campaign advocates and women's rights activist have struggled over the last years to get UN Women established. Now GEAR will have to push UN Women to go beyond the status quo and universally impart gender equality while using a human rights framework.