UN Women: an agency for change
11 November 2010 by Liz Bolshaw

Yesterday saw the election of 41 United Nations member states to the executive of a new “super agency”, UN Women, to promote women’s rights.

The agency brings together four existing UN bodies into a single force under its head, Chile’s former president Michelle Bachelet. Campaigners hope this will help push women’s rights up the international agenda and focus funding on one place.

Saudi Arabia’s automatic representation has inevitably drawn fire from critics who ask how the country can promote women’s rights when it does not allow its female citizens to drive or make a range of important decisions without the approval of a male relative.

Iran had incited similar ire, fuelled by the worldwide condemnation of its decision to sentence a woman convicted of adultery to death by stoning. She still awaits her ultimate fate, now reduced to a hanging sentence. Speaking with news reporters in New York earlier this week, the 2003 Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, said the possible election of Iran and Saudi Arabia would be a “joke”. The US opposed Iran’s representation on the executive, which led to Iran being replaced by East Timor.

By the UN’s Gender Empowerment Measure, neither country is highly placed, with Saudi Arabia at 59th and Iran at 88th out of 182 ranked nations.

I’m not sure trying to judge the relative merits or otherwise of these two countries’ record on equality rights is worthwhile. There is a different question, which applies to membership organisations in general. If you are going to limit membership by historic track record, where do you set those limits? Who decides what constitutes the inner circle? If equal pay were a criterion, the new agency would have a very tiny representation indeed.

The other question is more pragmatic. Are governments more likely to be persuaded to dynamic change by being part of a forward-looking debate or by being excluded? You might argue that the spotlight will now be on Saudi Arabia’s gender politics more keenly than before, strengthening the voice of the liberal minority within the country.

Yet while it remains to be seen whether UN Women can effect change, we should applaud its aims – and at least give it a fighting chance.