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The evolving status and role of national mechanisms for gender equality

Strengthening National Mechanisms for Gender Equality and the
Empowerment of Women: A Global Synthesis Study *

Submitted by

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

Introduction

A major development since the *Fourth World Conference on Women* (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995 has been the establishment of new mechanisms, in addition to national machineries, to promote the goal of gender equality and the empowerment of women. There has been little documented research on the roles, relationships, achievements and challenges of these multiple and diversified mechanisms. Therefore, in preparation of the fifteen year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (PFA), the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) decided to undertake a comprehensive study of the national mechanisms for gender equality based on the review of experiences in all five regions of the United Nations: ESCAP, ESCWA, ECLAC, ECA and ECE. The global synthesis study (the 'study') presents key findings from six studies commissioned by the five regional commissions.

The study analyses the trends in the evolution of national mechanisms for gender equality in terms of their structure, mandate, role/function and main areas of work. It explores how the various mechanisms coordinate and collaborate with each other as well as with other stakeholders. It elaborates the achievements as well as the constraints and challenges of the mechanisms. Finally, based on the findings, the study recommends a few priority actions for the future.

The contexts and trends in the evolution of national mechanisms

The regional studies highlight the political, social, economic and institutional contexts which influence the work of national mechanisms in their respective regions. A number of contextual factors are identified, some facilitating an enabling environment and others creating challenges for the work of national mechanisms. The visibility of the gender equality agenda, democratization processes, and the policy framework of human rights and human development have been positive influences. In contrast conflict, globalization, economic liberalization, and the rise of social conservatism have created challenges for the national mechanisms.

Despite regional and sub-regional diversity, certain common trends can be discerned in the evolution of national mechanisms in the last two decades. Mechanisms have multiplied and diversified horizontally and vertically. Their mandates and roles have expanded. They have adopted a variety of strategies and instruments. Gender mainstreaming has become more institutionalized. The stakeholders of national mechanisms have expanded.

¹ The present paper contains the Executive Summary of the Global Synthesis Study, to be issued later in 2010.

Status of national mechanisms

Four indicators can be used to classify and compare national mechanisms: (1) type of structure and location; (2) mandate; (3) role/function; and, (4) resource.

Type of structure and location

One major differentiation in the type of structure is that between national machineries and other mechanisms, the former being officially mandated by the government to be the lead agency. Another way of differentiating the mechanisms is to classify them by their location. Yet another way of differentiation is according to their status, whether autonomous or under government control.

A. National Machinery

There are variations in the types of structure and location of the national machineries. They can be stand-alone ministry or part of a ministry; department/division/services under a ministry; and, unit in the office of the head of government or autonomous bodies.

B. Other types of national mechanisms

The mechanisms which are increasingly being established since the FWCW include focal points/working groups in sectoral/line ministries; inter-departmental/ministerial/multi sectoral bodies; decentralized mechanisms in state, municipal and local governments; committees/commissions/caucuses in parliament; committees/working groups within judiciary; accountability institutions; and, advisory/consultative councils.

Mandate

Increasingly, the trend in all regions is to formulate the mandate of national mechanisms, particularly that of national machineries, with an emphasis on their gender mainstreaming role. Notwithstanding this general trend, the mandates are sometimes formulated in a way that highlights the traditional areas of family, children and other social welfare types of activities.

In several countries where national mechanisms have been restructured and integrated within general equality or general anti-discrimination bodies, the mandates have been amended to encompass all forms of discrimination and all equalities.

Role/function

The mechanisms perform a wide variety of roles and functions. These include promotion of legislation; policy and strategy development; formulation and implementation of national action plans; gender mainstreaming; research, statistics, and data collection; capacity development (training, and development of tools); monitoring and accountability including implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and PFA and reporting of national efforts to comply with international commitments on gender equality; coordination and collaboration; and, social mobilization and provision of direct services to people.

Resource

Resource has been conceptualized in a multi-dimensional way by the study to include financial and human resources; leadership quality of national mechanisms; and, political support from the top leadership as well as powerful constituencies and mass base.

All the studies indicate resource constraints. Some note heavy donor dependence which creates sustainability risks for the mechanisms. However, some highlight positive developments in political support and the quality of leadership of the national mechanisms.

Main areas of work

Strategies and instruments

The four most important strategies pursued by the mechanisms are: gender mainstreaming; temporary special measures; promotion of legislation; and, consultation. In addition, they have used some of their roles as effective instruments for work, the most noteworthy being preparation of national and sector plans; training; sex-disaggregated data and statistics; research; and, monitoring and evaluation.

Priority issues

Several issues have been highlighted as priority in all regions. They are violence against women, mainly domestic violence but also other forms of physical and sexual violence or sexual harassment; human trafficking; representation of women in politics and administration; women's health, particularly sexual and reproductive health; and, poverty and economic development.

Coordination and collaboration

With multiplication and diversification of national mechanisms, coordination and collaboration becomes an important but challenging task. Some regions report positive trends in coordination and collaboration between mechanisms as well as with other stakeholders. Others highlight weakness.

Coordination and collaboration between mechanisms can be formal institutional arrangements or informal and ad hoc arrangements. Where coordination arrangements are formalized, the mechanisms enjoy greater authority. A major problem faced by national machineries is their relatively weak status and budgetary constraints vis-à-vis other line ministries. The regional studies note that there is little real coordination between different departments due to unclear mandates.

There is, however, increasing collaboration in all regions with other stakeholders including civil society, NGOs and women's movements. Again, collaboration with stakeholders is strong in some regions and weak in others.

The weakness in coordination and collaboration remains a matter of some concern, as this frustrates the building of a critical mass of resources and institutional support which need to be invested in the challenging task of addressing gender equality and promoting women's empowerment.

Key areas of achievements

The regional studies highlight several areas where noteworthy gains have been registered. They include legal reforms; awareness raising and political visibility; increase in women's political representation; gender mainstreaming; and, capacity-building.

Several factors have contributed to these achievements. They include the growth and maturation of mechanisms; strong leadership; synergy among multiple mechanisms; strengthened civil society voice; and, regional level cooperation and exchanges supporting the work of the national mechanisms.

Constraints and challenges

National mechanisms still face continuing constraints and challenges. The internal constraints include resource limitations particularly of staff and budget. In many cases the mechanisms are heavily donor-dependent for funding support. Institutionally they are marginalized and unstable. Coordination, monitoring and accountability are weak. And collaboration with other stakeholders is limited.

The most frequently cited external constraints are lack of political will; resistance and negative attitude of powerful constituencies, including social conservatives; role of "First Ladies"; lack of harmony between gender equality policies; and, other macro policies.

The mechanisms face many challenges ahead, the most important being their sustainability which is at risk because of lack of political will and resistance to the agenda. To address this challenge, national mechanisms need to establish strong partnership with the women's movement and civil society to develop an autonomous base of political support that can guarantee their defense in moments where they may face a depreciation in their authority within the machinery of government.

Key findings of the study

- The horizontal multiplication and diversity of structures has, on the whole, been a positive development facilitating gender mainstreaming and keeping the gender equality agenda alive in multiple institutions and levels, as well as in the public domain.

- The resources available to national mechanisms do not match their expanded mandates and roles. Donor dependence for funds creates risks from the perspective of long term sustainability.
- Gender mainstreaming strategy is gaining visibility and acceptance but there is still no solid understanding about the use of the strategy and there are gaps in capacity development.
- The strategy of temporary special measures, particularly quota laws, has contributed towards enhancing women's political representation. Special measures have also been effective in addressing emerging specific issues.
- Legal reforms have been the most widely used and effective strategy.
- Data, statistics and analysis are improving in all regions but there are still gaps; particularly lacking are indicators for monitoring and evaluation.
- Accountability is weak despite the establishment of accountability institutions.
- Coordination and collaboration between mechanisms is weak which has constrained them from achieving synergy and optimal results.
- Collaboration with multiple stakeholders, particularly with civil society and women's movements strengthens national mechanisms. Women's movements provide the key support but in many countries the movement appears to be weakening or is in conflict with national mechanisms which can erode the latter's constituency base and imperils their survival.
- Regional and international processes and institutions lend legitimacy, help in exchange of knowledge and experience, and thereby strengthen capacity of national mechanisms.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following priority actions to strengthen the national mechanisms:

- Institutional arrangements for coordination need to be formalized and their application needs to be monitored to improve coordination.
- Collaboration with civil society, women's organizations and other social partners, particularly alliances with new stakeholders such as youth needs to be built.
- Staff capacity, especially its gender equality expertise, needs to be improved. Budgetary allocation from national sources needs to be increased.
- Work in the area of law reforms should be expanded to combat discrimination against women in all sectors as well as to promote gender equality legislations.
- Additional efforts are needed to clarify strategies, strengthen policies and design practical tools for gender mainstreaming.
- Special measures will have to be designed to address emerging issues which do not fit into established policy frameworks.
- Sex-disaggregated data, statistics and gender equality research will need continuing promotion and support as they are essential for development of policy instruments and monitoring of actions.
- Monitoring indicators need to be developed to better assess performance of diverse mechanisms.

- Collaboration and exchange with regional and international institutions and processes need to be encouraged as they have been proven to be effective in strengthening national mechanisms.