

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-ninth session
28 February to 11 March 2005

High-level round table on “Innovations in institutional arrangements for promoting gender equality at national level”

Summary submitted by the Chairpersons of the high-level round table

1. At its second meeting, on 28 February, the Commission held a high-level round table in two parallel sessions on innovations in institutional arrangements for promoting gender equality at national level in the context of the 10-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. The purpose of the high-level round table, as set out in Commission decision 46/101, was to enhance the emphasis in the Commission on practical implementation through the sharing of good practices and lessons learnt, the identification of obstacles and constraints encountered in the context of implementation, as well as the identification of new challenges and emerging issues. A discussion guide prepared by the Bureau of the Commission (E./CN.6/2005/CRP.2) provided the framework for the dialogue, and the report of the expert group meeting organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women (28 November to 2 December 2004, Rome, Italy) on “The Role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women: achievements, gaps and challenges”¹ also supported the discussions.

2. The high-level round table was organized in two parallel sessions to allow for interaction among the large number of participants. The sessions were chaired, respectively, by the Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women, Ms. Kyung-wha Kang, and the Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, Mr. Gilbert Laurin. After a short presentation by the co-chairs on the findings and recommendations of the expert group meeting, referred to in paragraph 1, the first segment of the high-level round table was devoted to a discussion among ministers and high-level representatives of national machineries for the advancement of women attending the forty-ninth session of the Commission. During the second segment, invited representatives of United Nations entities, representatives from non-governmental and international organizations and academics also took part in the discussion.

3. A total of 73 speakers participated in the two sessions of the high-level round table. Participants included: 55 ministers and deputy ministers, 6 representatives of United Nations entities, 10 representatives of non-governmental organizations or from academic institutions, and 1 representative of an international organization.

¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/nationalm2004/>

4. Participants discussed recent achievements in strengthening or expanding national machineries for the advancement of women and the promotion of gender equality. They suggested that the effectiveness of these mechanisms had been enhanced when they were located at the highest level of decision-making - for example affiliated with the Office of the President/Head of State or headed at ministerial level, and benefited from strong and visible political support. Participants also gave examples of enhanced mandates and of increased human or financial resources available to national machineries. National machineries had also taken an active role in ensuring the integration of gender perspectives in national development plans.

5. An increasing number of countries had established multiple mechanisms for promoting gender equality. These encompassed, for example, mechanisms at different levels of Government, i.e. at national, municipal and local level, and gender focal points or units in different ministries, as well as inter-ministerial committees. New mechanisms had been added, such as gender equality commissions and Ombudspersons for gender equality. Parliaments increasingly were establishing parliamentary caucuses on gender equality. Special committees, national gender equality councils or boards with coordination and/or advisory roles had also been established. Such bodies frequently included different stakeholders, including representatives from civil society, trade unions, academic institutions, political parties, and the private sector. Enhanced attention was being paid to the situation of the girl child. Participants welcomed the increased involvement of men in bodies promoting gender equality. The establishment of new bodies to address discrimination on various grounds – sex, race, age, ethnicity – was also planned or under way in a number of countries.

6. Structural improvements of national machineries were frequently accompanied by increased collaboration amongst bodies at the national, municipal and local levels, as well as between governmental and non-governmental bodies and organizations. There was also a growing trend of regional networking among national machineries. There was also enhanced cooperation between human rights groups and women's groups and networks in support of gender equality. Participants noted that clearly defined mandates, responsibilities and relationships of all stakeholders facilitated enhanced coordination and cooperation on gender equality issues. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) could play an important role in supporting coordination.

7. Participants described a wide range of activities undertaken and tools developed by national mechanisms to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. These included promotion and facilitation of the use of the gender mainstreaming strategy in different sectors of Government, incorporation of gender perspectives into national and sectoral development plans and policies and support for increased use of gender-based analysis. In a number of countries, national machineries have spearheaded the promotion of gender-sensitive budgeting processes. They have developed tools for enhancing Government accountability in the area of gender equality, and provided training and capacity-building for staff and senior managers across Government. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have also been improved, including through regular reporting to Government or Parliament, and the use of gender-specific indicators

for programming and planning processes. National machineries had also collaborated with national statistics bureaux in the collection and use of sex-disaggregated statistics and data, and were also involved in organizing awareness-raising campaigns and outreach activities.

8. Participants highlighted the central importance of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals in shaping the work of institutional mechanisms. They also acknowledged the importance of international and regional treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In a number of instances, national mechanisms had been instrumental in ensuring a stronger focus on women's human rights. Participants provided information about the role national machineries had played in achieving legislative changes in civil, family, criminal and labour law and well as in regard to women's property and land rights. Examples were also provided in regard to social security, health and education. Important developments had also been facilitated in regard to violence against women in all its forms, particularly domestic violence and trafficking in women and girls.

9. Participants discussed the challenges which many national machineries continued to face. These included a lack of or limited political support for their work, limited financial and human resources, and location at a low level within the governmental structures which curtailed their decision-making power and influence. In some instances, national machineries continued to lack a clear and focused mandate, or the capacity and authority for efficient and effective coordination of gender equality policy within Government at all levels, and with stakeholders outside Government. Participants noted that a lack of accountability, including the absence of reporting, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms as well as insufficient sex-disaggregated data and indicators, also hampered the effectiveness of national machineries. Lack of tools and capacity-building efforts, including training in gender mainstreaming, were also noted. The utilization of the gender analysis methodology in non-traditional areas where the gender-differentiated impact on women and men was not immediately evident was recognized as a particular challenge. The existence of a policy or legal framework for the work of the national machinery was in itself not sufficient to achieve results. Lack of a clear understanding of the concept of gender equality and of the gender mainstreaming strategy and how to use it among Government officials and the general public was also seen as a challenge.

10. Participants commented on the continuing low number of women in political and decision-making fields and its impact on gender equality policies. They discussed the need for measures, including the introduction of quotas and/or other affirmative actions to increase women's participation in public life. Participants suggested that increases in the number of women had a positive impact on the political will of Governments to work for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Non-governmental organizations played a crucial role in mobilizing and sustaining such political will. Some speakers noted the impact of traditional values and beliefs and cultural considerations that discriminated against women, as well as the persistence of stereotypes regarding the role and responsibilities of women and men in the family and

society on the achievement of gender equality. National machineries should take a lead role in facilitating public dialogues on such difficult issues.

11. Participants recalled that the Beijing Platform for Action called for the promotion of gender equality through the use of a dual strategy – gender mainstreaming complemented by programmes and projects targeted at women to address specific gaps or challenges. While awareness-raising initiatives were needed to increase public support for gender equality, school curricula at all levels should reflect the principle of gender equality so that it could be understood and embraced by young women and men. It was also suggested that the gender mainstreaming strategy should be further explained to the general public.

12. Participants identified new and emerging challenges for enhancing the role of institutional mechanisms for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, as well as areas requiring increased attention from national machineries. The growing recognition of the link between achieving the goals of gender equality and of social and economic development and democratic governance generally called for enhanced partnerships among all stakeholders and for partnerships with men. Likewise, national mechanisms should further strengthen collaboration with non-governmental organizations and women's groups. Since the particular political, social and cultural context was crucial for the successful functioning of the national machinery, efforts were needed to further empower and support such mechanisms within their particular contexts.

13. Among the measures required to ensure the enhanced promotion of gender equality through national mechanisms, participants called for sufficient authority and human and financial resources, as well as their involvement in policy-making processes. The international community should provide assistance to the institutional mechanisms in developing countries. Emphasis was placed on the need to develop effective and appropriate approaches and mechanisms for dealing with discrimination against women, as distinct from discrimination based on other grounds.

14. In addition to specific expertise on gender equality, national machineries also needed lobbying and negotiations skills to be effective. They should undertake capacity-building and training activities, and develop tools and methodologies for gender mainstreaming, monitoring and evaluation, and for enhancing accountability, including indicators and time-bound targets. Gender impact assessments of legislation and policies, and sex-disaggregated statistics and data enhanced accountability, contributed to better monitoring of progress toward the achievement of gender equality and identification of areas where further action was required.

15. Participants agreed that national mechanisms for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women should be actively involved in the implementation and monitoring of progress towards the objectives of the Millennium Declaration, so as to ensure that gender equality and women's empowerment were fully incorporated into all efforts towards achievement of the MDGs. They should make greater use of the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in all legislative and policy initiatives.

16. National machineries were encouraged to commission independent assessments of their own effectiveness or conduct self-assessments to enhance accountability. They were also encouraged to intensify their dialogue with human rights bodies, civil society and the private sector, as well as the media and the general public in support of gender equality.

17. The exchange of experiences, good practices and challenges among high-level representatives from capitals, and the contributions of other stakeholders were seen as a valuable contribution to the 10-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Participants encouraged the continuation of such exchange at the national and regional levels, and cooperation on specific topics.