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PANEL I

Enhanced participation of women in development: an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the field of education, health and work

Written statement* submitted by

Akanksha A. Marphatia
ActionAid International

* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

Dear Chair of the CSW Panel, Members of the Panel, colleagues,

It is an honour to address this panel. I have been asked to present the outcome of an Expert Group Meeting convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women in Bangkok from 8-11 November 2005. In line with the Commission on the Status of Women's multi-year programme of work, an Expert Group Meeting on "Enhancing women's participation in development through an enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, with a focus on health, education and work" was convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women in Bangkok from 8-11 November 2005.

Twelve independent experts from different regions prepared papers and participated in the deliberations that culminated in a final report which is available to you today. This report was one of the key inputs for the report of the Secretary-General to the Commission on the Status of Women on the same topic.

The final report of the Expert Group Meeting offers a detailed review and critique of the current status of women's participation in development, specifically in the fields of education, health and work. It considers why, after so many dedicated efforts on gender equality, women continue to suffer from systematic discrimination and are denied full access to fundamental human rights (education, sexual and reproductive rights and services, protection from violence etc.) that would enable them to live a life of dignity and equally participate with men in decision-making. It concludes by offering specific recommendations for Governments, donor agencies and civil society organizations on what needs to change.

The experts recognized the noteworthy achievements of Governments, international institutions, including the United Nations, and civil society organizations in support of women's empowerment. However, a number of key concerns remain:

- With many countries having a stated goal of achieving gender equality in policies and nation plans of action, why are women continually faced with the same challenges?
- Why, after decades of programmes and international policies supporting the advancement of women, are education and health systems deficient in responding to women's needs and concerns?
- With several countries having a stated goal of mainstreaming gender, why does there remain a gulf between policy and practice / implementation?

Given the key questions raised above, the experts questioned whether further "fine tuning" of current policies and programmes will necessarily lead to greater gender equality, or whether a new approach which challenges the underlying inequalities inherent in the current political, economic and social institutions and traditions is required.

The experts began with an assessment of current development policies and how well they enhanced women's participation in development. They agreed that current policies, strategies and resource allocations have not always achieved the desired gender equality development outcomes. They have failed to enable women to become agents of change, the main reason being that the root causes and processes that create and reinforce gender inequality have been largely ignored. These include: socio-cultural constraints; the gendered nature of institutions and related

discourses; dominance of neo-liberal macro-economic policies over human rights; and the absence or slow progress towards participatory democracy.

The experts also agreed that development approaches have focused on ensuring quantitative rather than qualitative participation of women. For example, the target relating to Millennium Development Goal 3, “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels no later than 2015” fails to recognize the socio-cultural changes required to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Since the quality of the schooling experience and the (low) achievement of girls – two factors that keep girls from completing school, are not considered, it is unlikely that MDG 2, with its target of “completion of a full course of primary schooling for boys and girls alike” will be achieved.

The experts noted the concept of “women’s participation in development” needed to shift from participation in development initiatives and political processes to participation as empowerment. In light of persistent gender inequalities, the experts agreed that it is not sufficient to involve women in development processes and structures with the expectation that it will lead to social change. It was found necessary to aim at transforming power relations and eliminating socio-cultural constraints that limit women’s ability to influence decision-making and control their own development.

These changes would enable women to acquire the assets, skills, knowledge, capabilities and agency required to seize opportunities leading to greater participation in decision-making processes at all levels. These are the same critical dimensions of empowerment suggested by the Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality and explored in greater detail by the Expert Group Meeting.

However, women’s well-being, livelihoods systems and human security conditions are not determined by State and local actors alone, but increasingly by globalization. Global influences such as economic conditions brought on by transnational actors, including international financial institutions and multinational corporations increasingly determine women’s access to resources, skills and assets. The core social institutions of health and education that fulfill individuals’ rights to development are compartmentalized and commodified by privatization. Public, free and equal access to these basic rights is threatened because only those that can afford these “services” can benefit. As a result, disparities and inequalities, between women and men, rich and poor, urban and rural continue to widen.

Examination of the root causes

The expert meeting examined the key root causes in detail in order to determine the appropriate recommendations for supporting women’s enhanced participation in development and empowerment.

First, the experts noted that socio-cultural constraints, including the lack of attitudinal change towards gender equality and the empowerment of women continue to be a major barrier to women’s full empowerment. This includes the unwritten social contracts that assign unequal gender roles, rights and responsibilities to women and men in families, communities, Governments and markets, which often result in women carrying the triple burden of

reproductive, productive and community responsibilities. Persistent violence against women is another major obstacle. These unequal divisions influence political, public, social and cultural institutions and affect how well these respond to women's rights and needs.

The gendered nature of institutions and related discourses refers to the organization and mode of operation of institutions and the way they deliver services (such as education and health) to women. Policy change needs to be coupled with organizational change that seeks to reform traditional and often patriarchal cultures of institutions and challenges the underlying structures that reinforce inequality. For example, women's access to property inheritance and the income it can generate are often compromised by community members even when equitable laws have been enacted. However, these institutions do not function in a vacuum. They are influenced by global trends and policies which gravely impact women's access to resources and their participation in development.

Predominant, gender-blind neo-liberal fiscal and monetary policies largely ignore differential impacts on women and men and reinforce disparities in education, health, access to productive assets, increased time burden, etc. For example, structural adjustment programmes have prioritized economic growth over equality and equity and increased poverty and gender inequality. Globalization, while having some positive impact on women's participation in the labour force, has created barriers to expansion of women's employment in the sphere of the formal economy and their over-representation in the informal economy.

Finally, the experts noted the absence of or slow progress towards participatory democracy, and the challenges presented by conflict. These include situations such as cross border conflicts, ideological, ethnic and religious clashes, humanitarian disasters, natural disasters, resulting displacement of persons, and global pandemics such as HIV/AIDS.

In light of the constraints highlighted above, and the factors required to support women's full empowerment, the experts arrived at a common understanding of the kind of enabling environment it would take to support women's empowerment and advancement. This includes consideration of interrelated factors such as legal and regulatory policies (both national and international); resources allocation and investments; institutional and organizational arrangements; and socio-cultural issues.

Recommendations

An enabling environment also necessitates improvement and advancement in education, health and work opportunities for both women and men. Men and boys play a critical role in addressing gender stereotypes that can transform discriminatory practices in communities. The experts noted that education, health and work needed to better respond to women's rights, concerns and needs. They need to be improved along the following lines:

Education should promote equality and rights. Schools should offer knowledge leading to self-empowerment and provide the skills to critically challenge unequal social, cultural, political and economic status of women and men.

Effective health systems should provide women the opportunity to express their needs and exercise choices that enable them to promote their health, prevent disease and access acceptable and appropriate health care, including in the area of sexual and reproductive health.

Work should increase women's mobility and enable them to acquire greater capacities and skills, access, agency, greater economic independence and mobility.

Education, health and work are mutually dependent and beneficial but one does not automatically guarantee the other. In an era of multiple providers and erosion of State capacity, Governments must re-establish their role as primary providers of education, public health and maintain minimum standards of access, quality and equality to protect and promote women's rights and principles of non discrimination. Finally, sex-disaggregated data needs to be systematically collected in all sectors, including on financial matters, and should inform changes in policy and programmes. Indicators that track the quantitative achievements are important and should continue to be collected systematically. However, indicators and measurements that consider the processes and differential impact of policies and programmes on women and men must be collected in order to paint a complete picture of the current status of women, and what specifically needs to change in order for empowerment to take hold and transformation of inequalities to occur. Experts also recommended mainstreaming gender-responsive budgeting in all sectors, including the fiscal and monetary frameworks of each country. The experts suggested specific recommendations for each of these fields:

Education

Governments should ensure the right to free, accessible and high quality education in the Constitution.

Policies should address immediate and strategic needs of women, challenge underlying structures and biases that reinforce and reproduce social inequality. Consistent, clear messages should promote equality and empowerment in curricula, training, interactions, etc.

Longer term, sustained aid for education and appropriate investments to promote girls' participation should be advocated.

Indicators to monitor the quality of educational experience and longer-term empowerment of women through education should be developed.

Real representation in governance of girls and women should be ensured by engaging parents, children, young people, institutions, networks, and trade unions in defining and monitoring schools and education systems.

Health

Governments should abide by primary health care principles of accessibility, affordability (free), acceptability rather than cost sharing, privatization, and decentralization.

Policies/Strategies should promote retention of health staff and outreach to vulnerable and poor women.

Accurate information and access to sexual and reproductive health, as well as to HIV/AIDS services should be provided to women and girls. Messages of abstinence and use of condoms do not account for women's lack of ability or power to negotiate.

The impact of health sector reforms on women and girls should be assessed to ensure new infrastructure and technologies take into account gender perspectives and health services are responsive to women's needs, combating stigmatization (violence, feminization of HIV/AIDS).

Public awareness campaigns on the root causes of gender discrimination in health, including legal, economic, socio-cultural and sexuality issues should be conducted, and men and boys should be involved.

Work

Gender equality legislation, standards and accountability mechanisms for protection and promotion of women worker's rights should be adopted and enforced, regardless of the sector of employment or place of work.

Wage gaps and occupational segregation should be eliminated.

Corporate social responsibility for gender equality, affirmative action measures, quotas for decision-making roles for women, and formal sources of credit should be promoted.

Economic and productive value should be assigned to unpaid care, reproductive work, and work in the informal sector.

Services and infrastructure at the workplace should be provided for women, including transport, health, child care, and education.

Institutions defining macro-economic policies should undertake gender-responsive budgeting and planning, and collect and use sex-disaggregated statistics. Data should be disaggregated in national accounts, and time-use studies undertaken.

Conclusions

The experts stressed that all disabling conditions discussed above and the enforcement of the recommendations call for adopting an integrated, rights-based approach to development. This implies a harmonization of national laws and regulatory frameworks and national development strategies with global commitments on gender equality and women's human rights. This approach would deal with the root socio-cultural constraints as identified earlier in this report and lead to gender-sensitive policies that specifically have as a goal the empowerment and advancement of women. In order to achieve this goal, all stakeholders may need to concretely consider what type of underlying changes need to take place in political, economic, social and cultural institutions and organizations that continue to perpetuate inequalities. Further efforts at

mainstreaming gender perspectives are required. These changes will also require a substantial increase in resources and investments in health, education, work and other sectors.

This substantial increase in investment will require Governments to garner greater domestic resources (without penalizing the poor in terms of greater taxes) and challenge donor agencies and Governments to meet their stated goal of 0.7% of GDP of official development assistance. It also means harmonizing macro-economic policies with international human rights commitments. For example, Governments should challenge the strict fiscal and monetary policies (low fiscal deficit levels and low-single digit inflation, prioritization of debt repayment) adopted in accordance with guidelines by International Financial Institutions and ministries of finance and central banks, which restrict spending on social sectors. Governments should adequately consider the trade offs and sacrifices undertaken to achieve the macroeconomic goals and increase spending on women's empowerment.

Governments stated commitment to create an enabling environment for enhancing women's participation will more than likely require transforming the make up of current institutions and structures in addition to better policies and programmes which respond to women's rights, needs, and concerns.