

*United Nations*  
*Department of Economic and Social Affairs*  
*Division for the Advancement of Women*

**AIDE-MEMOIRE**

**Expert Group Meeting**

**Enhancing Participation of Women in Development through an Enabling Environment  
for Achieving Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women**

*Bangkok, Thailand, 8-11 November 2005*

**Introduction**

1. In accordance with its multi-year programme of work for 2002-2006, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will review the thematic issue of “Enhanced participation of women in development: An enabling environment for achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, in the fields of education, health and work”, at its fiftieth session from 27 February to 10 March 2006.
2. In order to prepare for the Commission session, the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), in collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), is organizing an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the same theme, in Bangkok, Thailand, from 8 to 11 November 2005.
3. The findings and recommendations of the experts will provide inputs for a report of the Secretary-General. They will also inform the deliberations of the Commission through an interactive panel discussion and through the agreed conclusions that the Commission will adopt.

**II. Background**

4. The report of the Secretary-General<sup>1</sup> on the review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, submitted to the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission in 2005, noted that the status and role of women has undergone a significant change over the past ten years, although not at an equal pace in all regions. Achievements noted included increased awareness, policy reforms, improved legislative frameworks, and institutional development at the national level in many

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<sup>1</sup> E/CN.2005/2, paras 77-81

countries. Positive developments include the establishment of national policies and strategies for gender equality; adherence to international and regional instruments for the protection of the human rights of women; increased diversity in the mechanisms promoting and monitoring attention to gender equality; attention to resource allocations through gender-sensitive budgeting; the recognition of the critical role played by NGOs in awareness-raising, advocacy, monitoring and programme delivery; and efforts to engage men and boys more actively in the promotion of gender equality.

5. Yet, ten years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, a large gap remains between policy and practice. Discriminatory practices and public attitudes towards the advancement of women and gender equality have not changed at the same pace as policy, legal and institutional frameworks. The Commission on the Status of Women, at its forty-ninth session in 2005, adopted a Declaration in which Governments pledged to undertake further action to ensure the full and accelerated implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session.<sup>2</sup>

### **An enabling environment for women's enhanced participation**

6. The challenges of implementing the international commitments on gender equality and empowerment of women in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Declaration and more recently, and the Outcome of the 2005 World Summit highlight the importance of ensuring an enabling environment. An enabling environment may be interpreted as a set of interrelated and interdependent systemic conditions such as policies, laws, institutional mechanisms, resources, etc., which facilitate the promotion of gender equality.

7. The Beijing Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 proposed strategic objectives and specific actions in critical areas of concern, which, taken together, would contribute to building an enabling environment for women's participation in development.<sup>3</sup> It also stated that it is essential to design, implement and monitor effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes and institutional mechanisms that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women.<sup>4</sup>

8. In their responses to the questionnaire for the ten year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, carried out in the Commission on the Status of Women in 2005, Governments reiterated their commitment to the involvement of women as full and equal participants in all areas of development.<sup>5</sup>

9. The broad understanding of women's participation in development expressed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action complements the concept of women's participation in all areas of public life contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has repeatedly noted the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for women's participation. In its examination of States parties' reports, the

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<sup>2</sup> E/2005/27 / E/CN.6/2005/11, p.1, para 2

<sup>3</sup> Beijing Platform for Action, para. 45

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* para 19

<sup>5</sup> E/CN.6/2005/2, para 79

Committee also noted that where there is full and equal participation of women in public life and decision-making, the implementation of their rights and compliance with the Convention improves<sup>6</sup>.

10. The Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality identified three critical dimensions of empowerment and enhanced participation of women in development: *capabilities*, for example, in the areas of education and health; *access to opportunities and resources*, for example, to employment or land; and *agency*, for example, women's ability to participate in decision-making processes, e.g. in political institutions and policy-making.<sup>7</sup>

11. An enabling environment would thus influence the capacity of women to be involved, participate actively and benefit from development processes in a sustained and effective manner.<sup>8</sup> It would also contribute to the elimination of women's discrimination and exclusion, increase their access to decision-making, their control over resources such as land and economic assets, and fully recognize their contributions as actors in the economy and other areas of public life.

### **Key elements in creating an enabling environment for women's participation**

12. The Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has noted that a purely formal legal or programmatic approach is not sufficient to achieve women's de facto equality with men. In addition, the Convention required that women be given an equal start and that they be empowered by an enabling environment to achieve equality of results. The Committee noted that it is not enough to guarantee women treatment that is identical to that of men. Rather, biological as well as socially and culturally constructed differences between women and men must be taken into account. Under certain circumstances, non-identical treatment of women and men would be required in order to address such differences.<sup>9</sup>

13. Interventions to create an enabling environment may thus be required at many different levels and involving many different actors in order for them to be successful<sup>10</sup>. Actions to create an enabling environment generally take place at the macro- or meso- levels through the adoption of policies, legal and regulatory frameworks by Governments and organizations in the context of reform programmes. New policies and codes of conduct adopted at national level, however, may not be immediately enforced and their results may not be directly felt at the micro-level, i.e., by individual women, households and communities in their day-to-day activities.

14. The enabling environment for gender equality and women's empowerment may also be influenced by factors that are not easily controlled by individual Governments, organizations or communities, for example, the global political and policy environment, the availability of

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<sup>6</sup> General Recommendation no. 23

<sup>7</sup> Millennium Project Task Force on Gender Equality, *Taking action: Achieving gender equality and empowering women*, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the concept of an enabling environment in the context of civic engagement, see also: World Bank note no. 82, *Enabling Environments for Civic Engagement in PRSP Countries*, March 2003

<sup>9</sup> General Recommendation no. 25

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive discussion of elements constituting an enabling environment in the field of social development, see also: Programme of Action of the World Summit on Social Development, Chapter I: An Enabling Environment

international financing for development, and the development of new technologies. Some global trends and measures also affect women at the micro-level. Globalization, including trade liberalization for example, affects women's migration and employment. Changes in aid modalities and structural reforms, while aiming to create overall enabling environments for development, may have limited or even adverse effects if they do not take into account gender perspectives and the interests and needs of women.<sup>11</sup>

15. Some authors have highlighted the role of formal and informal institutions<sup>12</sup> in hindering impact of policies and other actions on the lives of women, and the need to change social institutions<sup>13</sup>. These institutions might include, inter alia, public, private and civil society organizations in key development sectors; the workplace; culture and religion; families and households. The Millennium Task Force on Child Health and Maternal Health has argued that service delivery systems such as health systems, comprise core social institutions for women's empowerment<sup>14</sup>. Prevailing cultural norms and men's attitudes and resistance to change also need to be taken into consideration.

### **Women's participation in health, education and work**

16. The consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women of the theme of an enabling environment for women's participation in development will take into account, *inter alia*, the fields of education, health and work. These three areas are recognized as critical for women's effective participation in development. As noted in the Report on the World Social Situation 2005, societies that do not provide educational opportunities for all, adequate health care and decent employment are doomed to fail.<sup>15</sup> Better education, access to health services, and opportunities for work, particularly outside the household, comprise a set of critical conditions for positive changes in women's involvement in development. Research has shown that a certain level of education and health strengthens women's human capital and is a necessary prerequisite for women's participation in the formal or informal labour market. Evidence shows that the higher the education, the more likely women are to have access to formal and higher-paying employment, and thus the potential to make autonomous economic choices. However, persistent gender stereotypes, which hinder women from fully utilizing their education and training, need to be explicitly addressed.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, work is an entry point for women's access to other services, such as health and further education and training. Education and health are also fields of employment for women, mostly in the public sector. However, economic adjustment policies, including fiscal austerity and the privatization of welfare services, have been threatening opportunities for work in the public sector.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> cf. Pinder, C., *Evaluation of DFID Development Assistance: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, Phase II Thematic Evaluation: Enabling Environment for Growth and Investment*, 2005

<sup>12</sup> Rao, A., and Kelleher, D. *Human rights, institutions and social change*, 2005

<sup>13</sup> Jütting J., and Morrison C., *Changing social institutions to improve the status of women in developing countries*, OECD, 2005

<sup>14</sup> Millennium Project Task Force on Child Health and Maternal Health, *Who's got the power? Transforming Health Systems for Women and Children*, 2005, p.11 ff.

<sup>15</sup> *The Inequality Predicament*, A/60/117/Rev.1, p. 131

<sup>16</sup> E/CN.6/2005/2, para 149

<sup>17</sup> A/60/162, para 55 ff.

17. Health, education and work are also included in the seven interdependent strategic priorities identified by the Millennium Task Force on Gender Equality – strengthening opportunities for post-primary education of girls; guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights; investing in infrastructure to reduce women’s and girls’ time burdens; guaranteeing women’s property and inheritance rights; reducing gender inequality in employment; increasing women’s representation in political bodies; combating violence against women; gathering data and developing indicators for monitoring progress; and financing costs of interventions to achieve gender equality. Heads of States endorsed the majority of these priorities in the 2005 World Summit outcome.<sup>18</sup>

18. The Beijing Platform for Action also provided strategic objectives and specific actions in the areas of health, education, and work. In the field of education and training of women, the Beijing Platform for Action’s strategic objectives focus on ensuring equal access to education; eradicating illiteracy among women; improving women’s access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education; developing non-discriminatory education and training; allocating sufficient resources for and monitoring the implementation of educational reforms; and promoting lifelong education and training for girls and women.

19. In the area of health, the Platform’s strategic objectives aim to increase women’s access throughout the life cycle to appropriate, affordable and quality health care, information and related services; strengthen preventive programmes that promote women’s health; undertake gender-sensitive initiatives that address sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and reproductive health issues; promote research and disseminate information; and increase resources and monitor follow-up for women’s health.

20. In the field of economy, the Platform’s strategic objectives focus on promoting women’s economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources; facilitating women’s equal access to resources, employment markets and trade, providing business services, training and access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women; strengthening women’s economic capacity and commercial networks; eliminating occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination; and promoting harmonization of work and family responsibilities for women and men.

21. The provisions of Articles 10, 11 and 12 of CEDAW stipulate the legal commitments of States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure to women equal access and equal rights in the fields of education, employment and health. The Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has recommended a comprehensive approach to ensuring the implementation of CEDAW provisions in these three areas, including through women’s active participation. For example, the Committee stated that Governments should involve women in the planning, implementation and monitoring of health policies and programmes and in the provision of health services to women.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> A/60/L.1, para 58

<sup>19</sup> General Recommendation no. 24

### **III. Objectives**

22. The commitments and roadmaps for gender equality and women's empowerment are clearly laid out at international level and increasingly at regional and national level. The main challenge is to identify concrete institutional change strategies that can transform the environment to enable the realization of women's participation in development.

23. Keeping in mind that the elements and dynamics of an enabling environment for women's participation are likely to be theme-, situation- and country-specific, the EGM will explore the factors and strategies most likely to create an enabling environment for women's enhanced participation in development. The experts will provide evidence from the fields of education, health and work with a view to identifying good practices and lessons learned.

24. The EGM will address the following questions:

- What is the interrelationship between health, education and work for enabling women's participation in development?
- At national level, which core policies, institutions, mechanisms and strategies have been proven effective in increasing women's capabilities, assets and agency in the areas of education, health and work?
- At local and household levels, which strategies have ensured that women effectively seized opportunities created by more favourable national laws, policies, infrastructure, institutions, services, etc?
- What lessons learned can be drawn on factors that facilitate or hinder an enabling environment for women's participation?

25. On the basis of its findings, the EGM will propose policy recommendations to different actors, including Governments, United Nations entities, other international and regional organizations, and civil society.

### **IV. Documentation**

26. The documentation for the EGM will consist of:

- a) A consultant's background paper commissioned by DAW, which will elaborate on the creation of an enabling environment for women's participation, and provide some illustrations in the areas of education, health and work.
- b) Papers prepared by each expert on a specific topic from her/his area of expertise;
- c) Papers prepared by observers.

### **V. Profile of the participants**

27. The EGM will be attended by ten to twelve experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The EGM will also be attended by observers from Governments, the United Nations, other inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and academia.

28. In selecting the participants, the criteria of geographical balance, and gender balance to the extent possible, will be respected. The participants will be drawn from a variety of fields and expertise, in accordance with objectives identified above.

29. The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to the experts appointed by the Secretary-General. Observers will participate at their own expense.

## **VI. Organization**

30. The EGM will be organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in collaboration with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific will host the EGM.

31. The EGM will meet in plenary and in working groups. In an opening plenary meeting, background presentations will create a conceptual framework for discussions. The plenary will be followed by an in-depth discussion of specific issues in working groups.

32. The EGM will be conducted in English and the documentation will be in English.

## **VII. Expected outcome**

33. On the last day of the meeting the experts will adopt a final report that will contain the main conclusions and recommendations of the EGM. The report will be made available to the Commission on the Status of Women.

*For further information on the expert group meeting please contact:*

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