

**Revised version
18 October 2004**

Expert Group Meeting

“The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women: achievements, gaps and challenges”

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

**in collaboration with
ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA**

Aide Memoire

I. Introduction

The forty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2005 will focus on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action¹ and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century".²

In order to assist the Commission in its work, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) will convene an expert group meeting on “The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women: achievements, gaps and challenges” which will be hosted by the Government of Italy, in Rome, from 29 November to 2 December 2004.

The findings and conclusions of the meeting will provide inputs for the discussion at the forty-ninth session of the CSW on the critical area of concern on the institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women.

The full report of the expert group meeting will also be made available to the Commission at its forty-ninth session from 28 February to 11 March 2005.

¹ A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1

² A/Res/S-23/3

II. Background

The first World Conference on Women, in 1975 called for the establishment of national machineries for the advancement of women. By the end of the World Decade for Women (1976-1985), 127 Member States of the United Nations had established some form of national machinery.³ As of 2004, 165 countries have established national machineries.⁴

CSW considered the role and structure of national machineries as a priority theme at its thirty-second and thirty-fifth sessions in 1988 and 1991, respectively. The Secretary-General's report provided to the thirty-second session of the Commission defined the national machinery as being a body "recognized by the Government as the institution dealing with the promotion of the status of women".⁵ Its functions were described as inter alia: supporting the effective participation of women in development; promoting women's education and participation in political decision-making and the economy; ensuring the highest level of Government's support; combating negative cultural attitudes and stereotyping of women in the media; and facilitating research on the status of women and collecting sex-disaggregated data.

The report to the Commission in 1991 focused on information systems and identified the acquisition, analysis and dissemination of information on the advancement of women as essential factors for the success of national machineries.⁶ It further suggested that location, improvement of staff access to modern communication technologies and networking, especially with non-governmental organizations and with the United Nations system, were also important for successful work of national machineries.

During the thirty-fifth session of the CSW, many representatives of Member States drew attention to the efforts undertaken in various countries to restructure the national machineries to increase their status and improve their technical potential. Others highlighted the obstacles to the success of national machineries, including lack of human and financial resources and clear mandates.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995) the Platform for Action defined the main task of the national machinery as being "to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas" (para 201). Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women were identified as one of the twelve critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action. The Platform for Action proposed strategic objectives with concrete actions to strengthen national machineries.

³ As listed in the Directory of National Focal Points for the Advancement of Women, quoted in *Women2000*, No. 3. 1987:7.

⁴ As listed in the Directory of National Machineries for the Advancement of Women, DAW, March 2004

⁵ E/CN.6/1988/3, para. 21. The definition is based on the outcomes of the Seminar on "National Machinery for Monitoring and Improving the Status of Women", 1987, Vienna, Austria, 28 September-2 October.

⁶ Report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.6/1991/3).

Discussions on the role of national machineries have also been held at the regional and sub-regional levels. In 1996, the Division for the Advancement of Women, jointly with the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, organized a sub-regional conference on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in Central and Eastern Europe. Recommendations were elaborated on strengthening national machineries in the region. In the same year, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific held a Regional Meeting on Strengthening National Machineries for the Advancement of Women.

In 1998, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, organized an expert group meeting on “National Machineries for Gender Equality” in Santiago, Chile.⁷ The expert group meeting aimed, inter alia, to create a better understanding of the institutional and other factors which would stimulate actions, policies and the allocation of resources to strengthen the role, efficiency and effectiveness of national machineries in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. One of the recommendations of the expert group meeting was the compilation of a United Nations publication on good practices in order to facilitate exchange of information on enhancing the role of national machineries in different countries.⁸

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) agreed conclusions 1997/2 emphasized the need to enhance interaction among UN entities and national machineries for the advancement of women. ECOSOC adopted resolution E/2004/L.14 which reinforced the role of national machineries as key actors in promoting gender mainstreaming.

The agreed conclusions 1999/2 adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women in 1999 on institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women stressed that “the effectiveness and sustainability of national machineries are highly dependent on their embeddedness in the national context, the political and socio-economic system and the needs of and accountability to women”.⁹ The Commission recommended that national machineries be placed at the highest possible level of government and be invested with the authority and resources needed to fulfil their mandates. It further recommended structuring the functions of national machineries to ensure their effective work on gender mainstreaming.

The outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly on “Women 2000: Gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century” pointed out that in many countries, “national machineries have been instituted or

⁷ Expert Group Meeting on “National Machineries for Gender Equality”, 1998, Santiago, Chile, 31 August-4 September (EGM/NM/1998/Rep.1).

⁸ “National Machineries for the Advancement of Women: Mainstreaming Gender, Democratizing the State”, edited by Shirin M. Rai, Manchester University Press, 2003, (commissioned by the Division for the Advancement of Women)

⁹ Commission on the Status of Women. Report on the Forty-third Session, 1999, 1-12 March and 1 April (E/CN.6/1999/10):18.

strengthened and recognized as the institutional base acting as ‘catalysts’ for promoting gender equality, gender mainstreaming and monitoring of the implementation of the Platform for Action...” (para 24). While it was pointed out that “progress has been achieved in terms of the visibility, status, outreach and coordination of activities of these machineries”(para 24), obstacles to the effectiveness of the national machineries were also revealed in many countries. These included inadequate financial and human resources, lack of political will and commitment at the highest level, insufficient understanding of gender equality and mainstreaming among government structures, unclear mandates, and structural and communication problems within and among government agencies (para 25).

In 1996, DAW conducted a survey of national machineries among Member States to assess the situation of national machineries in terms of their location, authority to review legislation, activities, access to internet and resources. The Division established a global directory of national machineries for the advancement of women which is updated biannually

Over the past decade the role of national machineries has evolved in many countries. National machineries have attempted to play the catalytic roles in facilitating gender mainstreaming as elaborated in the Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session. Some national machineries have had major successes while others have been constrained by lack of clear mandates, political support and resources. In some cases national machineries have experienced problems in balancing the demands for implementation of projects on the ground, including from their constituents at grassroots level, and the need to actively influence policy and programme development at national level from a gender perspective. Many national machineries are constrained by lack of financial resources, with decreased external support, lack of expertise and conflicting demands on their scarce time and resources. This is particularly so when women/gender equality units are part of larger ministries with responsibility for a number of issues. Women’s and gender equality issues may be marginalized in the competition for attention and resources. The expert group will attempt to capture the developments in the evolution of the role of national machineries and the potentials for enhancing their roles, as well as the challenges faced in this respect.

In addition, new mechanisms for promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment have been set up at national level over the past decade. Focal points have been established in many line ministries and networks of such focal points have been set up in some countries, facilitated by the national machinery. In some countries parliamentary caucuses – of women parliamentarians or of male and female parliamentarians – which focus on gender equality in the work or parliaments, have also been established. Other countries have established separate Gender Equality or Women’s Commissions. In a few countries ombudspersons for gender equality have been appointed. There has been little documented research on the roles of these commissions, the achievements as well as their relation to the existing national machineries. The expert group meeting will discuss the achievements and challenges of these new mechanisms

and the interrelationships between the different bodies at national level, and the implications for the future roles of national machineries.

III. Objectives

The main objectives of the expert group meeting are to:

- Identify the different types of formal mechanisms established at national level and the specific roles played in formulation, implementation and monitoring of national strategies for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, and in particular facilitating gender mainstreaming in all national policy areas;
- Identify the types of inter-relationships between the different national mechanisms, good practices in terms of synergies and collaboration as well as the constraints experienced over the past decade;
- Identify and analyse the achievements, gaps and challenges of each of the types of mechanisms, as well as strategies for building on the achievements and addressing the gaps and challenges, and the potential for enhancing the roles of each mechanism in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women strategies in the coming decade;
- Identify priorities and strategies for increased collaboration between mechanisms for gender equality and women's empowerment at national and regional levels, including with civil society and NGOs.

IV. The background documentation

The documentation for the meeting will consist of:

- A background paper prepared by DAW;
- Short papers prepared by each expert on a specific topic from her /his area of expertise;
- Papers prepared by resource persons and observers.

V. Profile of the participants

The expert group meeting will be attended by 10-12 experts appointed by the Secretary-General. Approximately 6-8 resource persons from national machineries, gender equality commissions and parliamentary commissions or caucuses will also be invited to make presentations on the basis of their national experience to the experts. The expert group will also be attended by observers from Governments, inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and academia.

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

The United Nations will provide travel and daily subsistence allowance to the experts appointed by the Secretary-General.

VI. Organization

The meeting will be organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The Government of Italy will host the meeting and provide logistical support.

The meeting will be conducted in English and the documentation will be in English.

The meeting 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.

VII. Output

The outcome of the meeting will be a report by the independent experts which contains the main conclusions and recommendations, based on the presentations and discussions during the expert group meeting. The experts will adopt the report on the final day of the expert group meeting.