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The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality
and the empowerment of women: Uganda experience

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Introduction

National Gender Mechanisms are widely acknowledged and accepted both globally and at national levels as central in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. Their performance is however greatly influenced by various contexts at national and global levels. In a number of cases their performance is also hindered by lack of enforcement mechanisms and funds. The changes on the ground in key areas of women's empowerment such as reproductive health are minimal on the African continent, which has greatly hampered women's empowerment. At a recent sub regional meeting on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing +10) in Lusaka Zambia, it was observed that gender mechanisms are still weak financially, technically and politically. The meeting further observed that, over 585 women die each year as a result of pregnancy and child birth related complications worldwide: 90% occur in Africa (ECA 2004). Women constitute 50% of all people living with HIV/AIDS world wide and in Africa the figures stands at 57% (UNAIDS 2004). In Uganda teenage girls are infected at a rate five to six times greater than their male counterparts (MoH 2004 report). In regard to Reproductive health, Uganda has some of the worst indicators globally. For instance, Contraceptive Prevalence for all methods stands at (22.8%), modern methods(18.2%) ,unmet need for family planning (35%), Total Fertility Rate (6.9) and Maternal Mortality Rate at 505/100,000 live births(UDHS 2001/2). This situation greatly hampers women's advancement in several areas. This concept paper highlights the role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, achievements, gaps and challenges in Uganda.

The National Machinery: Uganda's Experiences

The Government of Uganda has over the years acknowledged gender as central to sustainable development of the country and demonstrated a commitment to the advancement of women. The government has instituted various formal national mechanisms for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and facilitating gender mainstreaming. These include Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD), the National Women's Council and the Directorate of Gender and Mass Mobilisation in the Movement Secretariat, the Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC), the Uganda Law Reform Commission (ULRC), Uganda Parliamentary Women's Association (UWOPA) and the National Association of Women's Organisations in Uganda (NAWOU) are the national implementing structures. Gender focal points have also been established in various ministries to provide a link with the MoGLSD to influence mainstreaming in the respective sector policy formulation, planning and budgeting processes.

The MoGLSD is the policy making unit, its role is to plan, coordinate and monitor the delivery of women advancement and gender mainstreaming programmes. The Directorate of **Gender** within the ministry is supposed to provide technical guidance and back-up support, including the promotion of, and training in gender analysis and planning skills to

all sectors. The MoGLSD has structures at district and lower local government level to implement women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming at the grassroots level. . Under decentralized governance, local government gender officers are charged with implementation of national women's advancement and gender mainstreaming strategies.

The National Women's Council (NWC) is a statutory body that mobilises women to engage in development activities. It draws representation from all groups of women such as Members of Parliament, female youth, NGOs and Women with Disabilities. NAWOU is an umbrella organization of all women's organizations in Uganda whose major responsibility is to advocate for women's rights.

The Directorate of Gender and Mass Mobilisation in Movement Secretariat works through Local Council structures and Movement Committees at the District and lower local government levels to encourage women's participation in mass mobilisation activities and leadership. The UHRC is a constitutional body with the mandate of promoting human including women's rights in the country. The ULRC is responsible for reviewing all laws that are in contradiction with the constitution and recommend their repeal or amendment. UWOPA was established to identify and engender critical areas of political and economic concern for women emancipation in Uganda. This gender caucus brings together all women MPs to strategise and influence the legislative procedures and outcomes with a gender perspective. UWOPA also has programmes to build legislative and advocacy skills among the women MPs.

The MoGLSD constituted a National Gender Forum consisting of gender experts and advocates from government, civil society organizations, development partners and the academia. The forum meets periodically to discuss and review gender mainstreaming strategies.

Achievements

The national machinery has contributed towards the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women in Uganda. The MoGLSD developed a national gender policy that was passed by parliament in 1997. The policy provides the operational framework for mainstreaming gender in the national development process. The policy is an integral part of national development policy, complements all sectoral policies and provides a framework for designing, planning, resource allocation and implementation of development programmes with a gender perspective. The policy is currently being revised to take into consideration global as well as national developments.

The national machinery in consultation with other stakeholders developed a National Action Plan on Women (1999-2004), a follow up to the Beijing Conference is aimed at achieving equal opportunities for women by empowering them to participate in and benefit from socio-economic and political development. The Plan provides a setting to guide and assist key players in identifying and implementing gender responsive interventions at community, district and national levels. The Plan prioritizes five areas of concern namely: i) Poverty, income generation and economic empowerment; ii)

Reproductive health and rights; iii) Legal framework and decision making; iv) the girl child and education; and v) Violence against women and peace building.

As a result of the country-wide awareness creation by the national machinery in collaboration with the women's movement including the women's caucus in the constituent assembly, Uganda promulgated a Constitution (1995) that is regarded to be one of the most gender sensitive in the region. The Constitution gives equal rights to women and men with specific focus on the historically disadvantaged position of women among other marginalised groups. The Constitution embraces the principles of equality; gender balance; affirmative action in favour of the marginalised; recognition of the role of women, hitherto ignored; recognition of the Constitution over laws and customs; rights of the family; and rights of women. The Constitution provides for one district woman MP.

With a legal mandate derived from the Constitution, the ULRC has undertaken research on a number of issues that has resulted into the drafting of gender sensitive bills, some of which have been enacted into law. The ULRC compiled a report on the family law that resulted into a Domestic Relations Bill (DRB) being tabled in Parliament in 2003. The DRB intends to reform the Marriage Act, Divorce Act and the Succession Act, all of which discriminate against women in the family and perpetuate their oppression. The Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) was drafted and consultations for its enactment are on going. In April 2004, a taskforce was instituted to oversee a nation-wide study on domestic violence. The UHRC has provided an avenue for women to access quick justice without paying the fees demanded in the mainstream Law courts.

Women are particularly visible in politics due to affirmative action. The nation's Deputy Chief Justice, Deputy Commissioner of the Electoral Commission are women. Women chair statutory bodies like the UHRC. The first female Vice President served from 1994 – 2003. In the legislature, the number of women MPs increased from 48 (18%) in 1993 to 75 (25%) in 2003 and many are increasingly taking up positions of leadership. Of the 19 Parliamentary committees, women chair and deputise four and eight, respectively. In 1991, there were two women cabinet and two state ministers. The number has since increased to three and twelve, respectively. The appointing authority (President) nominates the ministers from amongst the MPs. Affirmative action has also contributed to women's participation in regional political decision-making. Women hold four of the nine positions of Ugandan representatives in the East African Legislature Assembly (EALA) and two of the five Uganda members of the African Parliament.

The 1.5 extra points awarded to girls entering institutions of higher learning, since 1990, and the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy have greatly contributed to reducing the gender gap in education.

The enabling laws derived from the 1995 Constitution have seen the need for affirmative action, largely as a result of UWOPA and other women's CSOs' activism. The Land Act of 1998 provides for the protection of the land rights of the poor, the majority of whom are women. The Local Government Act of 1997 explicitly states that women shall form

one third of all local councils at all levels. As a result of this the proportion of women in local councils rose from 6% in the early 1990s to 44% in 2003.

The women leaders' perspective has brought new issues on the political agenda. As a result of their networking, lobbying and advocacy, the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP), the overall national planning framework and the central focus of governmental policy recommends that all national policies, plans and programmes must demonstrate a clear sensitivity to gender. For instance, the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA), a multi-sectoral strategy and operational framework for poverty eradication recognizes that gender inequalities constrain agricultural production. Plans are also underway to develop guidelines for mainstreaming gender in the PMA.

A PEAP Gender Team constituting of the MoGLSD, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED), NGOs, Sector Gender Focal Points and Gender experts from development partner agencies was established to monitor the implementation of gender priorities identified in the PEAP and Sector Plans. The team identifies issues to be included in the periodic PEAP revisions and reviews sector Budget Framework Papers for gender sensitivity.

Under the PEAP framework, the MoGLSD developed a Social Development Sector Investment Plan (SDIP, 2003-08), which promotes issues of social protection, gender equality and equity and human rights of the poor and vulnerable. Promotion of gender mainstreaming in other sector plans is one of SDIP strategies.

The MoGLSD developed gender analysis manuals and trained Local Government to aid mainstreaming gender in their plans. The ministry has also developed Gender Planning Guidelines (2004) and an inventory of the existing guidelines at district and lower levels. A number of NGOs are also engaged in capacity building of women leaders in decision-making. These include: NAWOU; Forum For Women in Democracy (FOWODE); Akina Mama Wa Africa; Council for Economic Empowerment for Women of Africa – Uganda Chapter (CEEWA –U), Action for Development (ACFODE) and Uganda Women's Network (UWONET).

UWOPA has provided a forum for Members of Parliament to discuss, share experiences and support activities that have the potential to enhance women's participation and leadership performance in politics, as well as economic and social activities in Parliament. This is done through sensitization workshops, seminars, civil education, lobbying and advocacy. UWOPA runs a programme to build the skills of women members of Parliament in effective leadership, legislative procedures, and advocacy.

As a result of a petition by the Law and Advocacy for Women in Uganda (LAW-U), the hitherto discriminatory divorce law was this year (2004) declared by the Constitutional Court as null and void.

Gaps and Challenges

Despite the aforementioned achievements, a number of gaps remain and the challenges are many.

- The ever changing structure of the national machinery is a real challenge. The MoGLSD started off as a Ministry of Women in Development (WID) in 1988. In 1992, the ministry structure was broadened and became a Ministry of Women in Development, Culture and Youth. The ministry was renamed, Gender and Community Development in 1994. In 1998, the ministry was merged with that of Labour to become the current MoGLSD. With such a wide and sometimes conflicting mandate, women's empowerment and gender equality many times become marginalised. This is evident in the SDIP and in the reduction in the number of staff with a gender mandate from 30 to the current 10.
- The national machinery experiences difficulties in coordination due to the stakeholders' lack of awareness of their roles in the advancement of women and gender mainstreaming.
- The MoGLSD receives the least funding from government and yet it is saddled with all cross cutting issues and issues related to the marginalised socio-economic groups in the country.
- The gender focal points in the ministries have been a strategic entry point for the sectors to start thinking about gender. However, they are either too high up in the hierarchy to devote time to gender, or too low down to be listened too. In addition, they have other mainstream functions which they give priority. Furthermore, the establishment of gender focal point has not been institutionalised in the public service.
- At the local governments level countrywide, Gender Officers have not been confirmed and many have to double as Community Services officers. Just like their parent ministries, their offices are grossly under funded. The majority of these officers have never undergone any gender training.
- The deputising syndrome has caught on. For instance, in the local governments, only one District Chairperson out of 56, is a woman.
- Despite the adoption of affirmative action, the proportion of women amongst the top national decision makers: Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Under Secretaries, Heads of Departments and Managers of development programmes is only 21%. This is below the 30% critical mass essential for them to make effective change in the way things are done.
- Many gender insensitive laws remain in the books. The Land Act (1998) caters for women's security of occupancy and access to land but denies women ownership of land.

- Despite a civil society DRB coalition of about 40 NGO's lobbying government for the enactment of the DRB over the years, this is yet to be passed.
- Affirmative action implemented as a 'maximum' and not 'minimum'.

Priorities and Strategies for the Future

Priorities and strategies for increased collaboration between mechanisms for gender equality and advancement of women at national and regional levels, including with civil society and NGOs should among others include the following:

1. National Machineries should develop effective enforcement procedures and mechanisms that will ensure gender is mainstreamed and prioritized in all sectors.
2. National machineries should be strategically positioned to have the right legal instruments to monitor, coordinate and evaluate other ministries.
3. Government should ensure adequate resource allocation to the gender machineries and sector specific areas for gender mainstreaming. All sector ministries should be assessed for gender budgeting.
4. Strong political commitment is required to support the national gender machineries in their work of coordination a, monitoring and evaluation.
5. Governments should prioritize and address HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health concerns as major hindrance to women's empowerment.
6. Mechanisms for effective coordination and collaboration among the different types of national gender machineries should be developed and implemented. These may include joint meeting, plans and annual reports.

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