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

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

Since the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, many countries have expressed their commitments towards the achievement of equality for women and followed the recommendation to establish machinery for the advancement of women. The establishment of national machineries was central to the integration of women in development strategy of the 1970s. During the mid 80s, the status of women and the experience of these institutions called into questions the establishment and the activities of these mechanisms for advancing the status of women.

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) included institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women as one of its twelve critical areas of concern. It defines national machinery for the advancement of women *‘as the central policy-coordinating unit inside government’* and also provides a mandate to *‘design, promote the implementation of, execute, monitor, advocate and mobilize support for policies that promote the advancement of women’*. It also recommends a number of actions aimed at strengthening national machineries to promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming and specifies necessary actions to integrate gender perspectives in legislation, policies, programmes and projects and the responsibilities of the national machineries.

National machineries for the advancement of women have been established in the Caribbean since 1974 when Jamaica opened its women’s desk, followed by Barbados in 1976, Grenada in 1979, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica and Guyana in 1980. Since 1980 all Caribbean countries established a national machinery. They were established as a result of international obligations and commitments. Since their inception, they have proved to be weak, under resourced and vulnerable to political interference.

The term ‘National Machinery’ has been used in the Caribbean to mean Women’s Bureau or Women’s Desk with responsibility for promoting the advancement of women.

This paper reviews the achievements of the national machinery in Antigua and Barbuda. It identifies the gaps and challenges and discusses the way forward.

The Antigua and Barbuda experience:

The government of Antigua and Barbuda first expressed its commitment to the advancement of women in 1980 when the National Machinery was established. It was set up as a result of a strong influence from the Women’s Action Group, which is the women’s arm of the Antigua Labour Party, the ruling party at the time of its inception. The goal is to advance women’s equality by ensuring that the concerns of women are integrated into the overall government planning and decision-making process.

It was initially established as the Women’s Desk with one person as the Director of the Women’s Desk. This was upgraded in 1985 to a Directorate of Women’s Affairs with

responsibility for promoting the social, political and economic interests of women and consequently, their role in development. The staffing structure was strengthened and the organization benefited from two additional staff that provided clerical and secretarial support to the Executive Director. In 1999, the Directorate changed its name from Women's Affairs to Gender Affairs without much discussion with the major stakeholders including women's organizations and Ministry staff.

The nomenclature change led to some concerns that the shift was not sufficiently considered since the shift has led to some interpretation of involving men in services and programmes so as to create balance or equality in the relationship between both sexes. Some even went as far as identifying young men as being in crisis and that resources should be shifted to address that problem.

Since its inception the Directorate experienced frequent location shifts. It has been located in a number of Ministries including the Ministries of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports; Health and Social Improvement; Home Affairs and Labour and the Office of the Prime Minister. During the period 2000 – 2004, the Directorate has shifted four times and had a change of six Permanent Secretaries and five Ministers. Currently, the Directorate is located in the Ministry of Social Transformation. These shifts often result in chronic discontinuity of work plans and implementation strategies and marginalization within new ministry.

The mandate given to the national machinery is crucial in defining the scope of the activities, influence and general orientation. The mandate of the Directorate is to influence the policy environment and legal reform as well as to give visibility to issues and concerns of women. In practice the organization has a weak and unclear mandate and in order for sufficient autonomy and status to promote changes in government policy, it is important that a clear mandate is constituted and included in national development policies.

To guide the work of national machinery, an Advisory Committee was established in 1991. This comprised of a number of senior professional women in the public service and representatives of the Coordinating Council of Women - an NGO umbrella group for women. While this committee functioned it had no mandate since its appointment was not made by Cabinet or by any other legal authority.

The Beijing Platform for Action calls on governments to strengthen an inter-ministerial coordination structure. This has not occurred in Antigua and Barbuda, even though attempts have been made to set up focal points in all ministries. These were often junior levels of representation and limited influence with little or no training and established as an informal network rather than a formalized structure. A formalized structure for gender focal points can be an invaluable source of support for the work of the national machinery.

The Directorate of Gender Affairs in its attempt to encourage integration of gender in all programmes and projects has developed informal links with NGOs. As the main vehicle

for advancing the cause of women in Antigua and Barbuda, the Directorate works with various women's groups. There are approximately 60 women's NGOs in Antigua and Barbuda. Many are affiliated to different Christian denominations. The linkages with other groups and organizations give impetus to the work of the organization. They help to identify priorities and key areas of concern and they provide the necessary support for advocacy within other areas of government.

From its inception until the late 1990s, the Directorate was involved in income-generating projects in the form of needlework, crafts, food preservation and participation of unemployed women. The programme emphasis was on two levels, the first aimed at improving the home and the family and the second was to develop skills that can be used in enterprise development.

One of the challenges faced by the organization is the many potential roles and strategies that it has adopted which often lead to overburdening. Given the wide array of potential roles that the organization has adopted, it is important that priority areas be selected to prevent a dissipation of resources and energy which may result in poor performance and loss of credibility.

However, given the lack of resources – both financial and technical the organization works in collaboration with other ministries and organizations to implement its programme.

The strength of the organization determines the manner in which issues are addressed. The range of roles and activities adopted by the Directorate include advocacy and advisory work, research and data collection, co-ordination and liaison, training and education, programme and project planning and implementation.

Structure:

The staffing complement is relatively low. The present staffing structure consists of an Executive Director, a Research Officer, two programme officers and three support staff. The Executive Director is answerable to the Minister responsible for Gender Affairs, through the Permanent Secretary and the Senior Administrative Officer. Obtaining a full complement of staff has been difficult from the outset.

If the Directorate is expected to function as the catalyst and lead agent in the area of gender mainstreaming, formalized training is absolutely necessary. While the Executive Director and Research Officer received formal training in gender and development, the remaining staff are not professionally trained. This is one of the challenges that the Directorate is faced with. The staff are usually committed and motivated but lack the necessary skills and knowledge in the area of gender and development.

Achievements:

In 1990, a National Policy on Women was approved by the Cabinet. The policy points to the responsibilities of Ministries within the Government Sector to take responsibilities for

addressing women's concerns in their programmes but has had little or no effect on the actions of these departments.

A major achievement of the Directorate was the conducting of a household survey 1994 on the situation of women in Antigua and Barbuda, which resulted in an expansive data base on women

Since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the BPA forms and informs the work of the Directorate. As a consequence of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Directorate has also prioritized and re-focused areas of concern and attention, to keep in line with international policies in respect of women. The Directorate has seen its function evolve to include advocacy, policy development and gender sensitization as a means of promoting gender mainstreaming in addition to the traditional training and education offered.

In reassessing its work, the Directorate identified the following priority areas of concern

- i. eliminating violence against women;
- ii. education and training;
- iii. eradicating poverty;
- iv. encouraging more women in the decision-making process;
- v. expansion of general health and reproductive health programmes mainly targeted at young women.

In collaboration with other ministries and non-governmental organizations, the Directorate has and implemented programmes of activities and strategies for enhancing its effectiveness. It has coordinated national, regional and international programmes and projects, which affect and involve women.

It maintains links with women in the community and encourages community support on gender issues. It provides support for the organization and development of women's groups.

In addition, the Directorate collaborate with all ministries on the following:-

- Training and education in all areas by a variety of strategies which take into account women's multiple roles.
- Providing support for programme/project design and implementation, including efforts to integrate programme approaches;
- Data collection and analysis on matters affecting women and the formulation of plans and programmes to counteract situations of gender inequality;
- Dissemination of information and data on the status of women, with emphasis on areas of concern in the plan of action.

In consultation with NGOs and the private sector, the Directorate revised its national Plan of Action for Gender Affairs in 1997, which is modeled on the Commonwealth 1995 Plan of Action for Gender and Development, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) as well as the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Directorate of Gender Affairs initiated and lobbied for the enactment of legislation. These include the Sexual Offences Act of 1995, the Domestic Violence Summary Proceedings Act 1999 and the improved Maintenance Act. The organization also lobbied for the promotion and appointment of more women to public and statutory boards and have developed plans and programmes to promote women into politics and decision-making.

Training and education are strong areas for the Directorate. It has provided a number of training to promote awareness to the issue of gender and empowerment training for women. Training and education are provided in such areas as Women's human rights including the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to sensitize people to the Convention.

Violence against women, one of the priority areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, has also become a high priority issue for Antigua and Barbuda. It is prevalent and as such is a cause for concern among many in our society. Some of the violence is domestic but violence in the society has increasingly been directed against women in the form of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, battery, rape and murder. Very little reporting of domestic violence had taken place until the early 1990s when the Directorate began a programme of activities to address this problem. Today, the Directorate has a comprehensive programme of action working with other agencies addressing the issue of violence against women. This programme includes training and education, support services and legal reform. The organization remains active in combating violence against women and planned activities to commemorate International Day for the Elimination of all Forms of Violence against Women. It recently planned and organized a very successful March and Candlelight Vigil as part of this years activity for the observance of this Day.

The BPA has also provided the impetus for the Directorate to include plans for the mainstreaming of gender into the development process. The concept of gender mainstreaming was initially introduced in 1997. Antigua and Barbuda was fortunate to have secured the services of International agencies such as the Commonwealth Secretariat and UNIFEM, in preparing the country for the implementation of a Gender Management System (GMS). The expectation for such a system to be put in place was that the GMS will enable the Directorate to guide, manage and monitor the process of gender integration into mainstream culture, policies and programmes. Regrettably, the recommendations were never implemented.

The Planning and Development Unit within the Ministry of Finance worked with the Directorate to integrate gender in all public sector workplaces, departments and divisions to ensure that women play a participatory and equal role in the development process. During the year 1997, the Directorate started a series of training workshops involving heads of ministries, local government officers, including the Barbuda local Council, non-governmental organizations, and heads of departments with a view to establishing focal points in all Government ministries.

Women in politics and decision-making is one of the priority areas of action in the BPA. It was selected as one of the priority areas for Antigua and Barbuda. Prior to the last general elections which was held in March of this year, Antigua and Barbuda has never had a woman elected into politics and decision-making. Notwithstanding, there is a preponderance of women in the public service, many of whom have risen to the top of the public bureaucracy and the teaching services. To address this situation of women in politics, the Directorate developed a programme of action and sought funding from the Organization of American States (OAS) for its implementation. This is a multinational project and includes the countries of Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, St.Kitts and Nevis. The goals of the project are to increase the effective participation of women in politics and decision-making and to create effective women politicians.

Activities include training and education, networking and advocacy and research and data collection on women in politics and decision-making. As a result of this project, Antigua and Barbuda had its first female elected into politics in March of this year.

Constraints and obstacles:

While some gains have been made between the period of inception and the present time in measures to advance the status of women, there are still barriers, limitations and obstacles. A range of political, institutional and financial constraints limits the effectiveness of the national machinery. As pointed out by Rowley, 2004 in a study conducted on national machineries in the Caribbean region, fiscal constraint is one of the primary obstacles that face national machineries. This results from the persistent belief that gender equity can be addressed as a discrete matter within existing national machineries. As pointed out in the study¹, this approach lacks the awareness that the socio-economic crises, which are usually given precedence over 'gender issues' are themselves already gendered. This is a point already made by feminists' analyses of structural adjustment programmes, gender based violence and the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

The small scale projects that the Directorate tends to engage in give the impression that they function as a social service agency. This type of service requires very detailed and busy activities without any sense of impact on the delivery. They also can be time consuming.

Other constraints include:

- Financial – Budget implication – insufficient funds
- Human resources – Strengthening of the national machinery. Government unable to absorb through system. Low staffing level
- The lack of a strong mandate. This often results from the lack of a high level commitment.
- Conflicting roles with tension between advisory, advocacy and policy oversight. This often leads to overburden

¹ Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women: Regional Assessment - Dr. M. Rowley, Feb.2004

- Political patronage and interests and electoral demands can be very influential over the activities of the NWMs and the appointment of staff.

Strategies for building on the achievements and addressing the gaps and challenges

Efforts should be made to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the activities and strengthen the capacity of the machinery to engage in policy, research and advocacy work. The experience of Antigua and Barbuda demonstrates that a number of factors are essential to the development and evolution of a strong and effective national machinery.

These include:

- Expressed political will and commitment at the highest levels to improving women's social, economic, legal, cultural and political situation;
- A senior organizational position at the policy level for the national machinery and adequate resources to achieve its goals;
- An increased complement of staff, motivated and trained;
- A focused, strategic approach, possibly with a plan of action to provide direction;
- A mechanism for monitoring progress on the status of women;
- Coordinated actions across the twin island state;
- Policy research and assessment of the impact of policies on women; sex disaggregated data and information on the situation of women and research on issues of concern to women;
- Well informed and dynamic women's organizations;
- Gender impact assessments and gender budgeting;
- Institutional strengthening.