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**“The role of national mechanisms in promoting  
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**The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality  
and the empowerment of women: achievements and challenges to the future**

**Prepared by  
Regina Tavares da Silva**

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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.

Having worked for more than thirty years in the field of equality between women and men, I have witnessed the development of the role of national mechanisms for the advancement of women and for gender equality, both at national and international level. My comments on the subject are, therefore, mainly drawn from that experience, having been head of the national machinery in my country, member and chair of the equality Committees of the Council of Europe and of the European Commission and now member of the CEDAW Committee that systematically addresses this matter in the examination of national reports of implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

I will try to give some answers to two main questions. First, what are the most important developments in the role and scope of action of national mechanisms that have occurred in the last decade? Second, what are the main challenges ahead that these mechanisms must face in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women?

I must stress, however, that my practical knowledge of national mechanisms particularly relates to European situations, although I can also see that many aspects of these developments and challenges are equally valid for other regions of the world.

#### Some recent developments

A first aspect that, in my view, is worth pointing out is the increasing number and variety of mechanisms at various levels and the increasing scope of their action. The year 1995, with the IV World Conference on Women and the guidelines issued on the subject, particularly in the Platform for Action, can be seen as a turning point in the way the role and functions of national mechanisms are envisaged and evaluated.

From a former emphasis on the advancement of women only, or mainly, they generally became more equality-oriented, in the understanding that the advancement of women is part of a general structural and cultural change that affects women and men, and society as a whole, and which requires the participation of all members of a given society. From an emphasis on specific actions, mainly aiming at women and their situation, these mechanisms are now meant to influence all areas and sectors of governance and to monitor the integration of the gender dimension into those areas and sectors.

It is a change that occurred because the issues relating to women's rights and equality between women and men also evolved in nature and importance. From marginal and limited issues, mainly of a social nature, equality matters have become, at least theoretically, central in governance and relevant to all policy areas within a political perspective of achievement of democracy and human rights. Consequently, the role of national mechanisms has acquired a more political dimension, envisaged as they are now as catalysts for political change.

Naturally, not all national mechanisms are at the same stage or phase in this process and there are differences, not necessarily between regions, but also within the same region. Some national mechanisms are still concentrating on action mainly directed at women,

others are in a transitional phase and others are openly functioning along the lines proposed by the Platform for Action.

Of course, the philosophy and the guidelines of the Platform for Action are part of a long process that goes back more than twenty years and many of the recommendations on the matter issued by World Conferences and institutional bodies at international and regional levels are still valid; but, looking back at the last ten years, we can't help acknowledging that, in these years, this process has significantly developed, both as regards the increase in the number and variety of national mechanisms, the importance recognised to their role and the new functions attributed to them.

In the past, when speaking of national mechanisms for the advancement of women or for gender equality, the term was usually applied to an institution at national level – therefore the term national mechanisms – often the only mechanism in the whole administrative structure of the country. Nowadays, however, in many countries equality mechanisms exist at various levels, national, regional or local. They also exist in several areas of governance, in different ministries and in institutions dealing with specific policies.

I would say that this is, probably, one of the most important aspects in the development of institutional mechanisms for equality and one that is common to many countries. A multiplication and decentralisation of these mechanisms has taken place, which has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension. Horizontal, with the creation of specific bodies – departments, units, commissions – in different ministries or areas of governance. Vertical, with the creation of specific mechanisms, with a variety of formulas, at different levels of power, in regions, provinces, municipalities or cities.

Linked to this multiplication/decentralisation there seems to be a general trend to create or reinforce interdepartmental structures that bring together the representatives from the various sectors to pursue a joint effort for an effective and co-ordinated mainstreaming of the gender dimension in global policy-making.

The philosophy of gender mainstreaming, clearly formulated and proposed in the Platform for Action is, thus, clearly reflected in these changes. Changes that carry with them the participation of more and more sectors and more and more persons in the work for equality, as well as the recognition of the importance of equality objectives in the different areas of social life and in a governance that aims at human development and at the achievement of democracy and human rights.

A second aspect to note, is that, after ten years, and even though all critical areas of the Platform for Action remain highly significant, the role of equality mechanisms in responding to these concerns seems to be developing in different and complementary ways, particularly in regard to what we could call the “old” policy areas and the “new” policy areas in the field of equality and women's rights.

In traditional areas of concern, like education, employment or health, and social policies in general, that correspond to specific, well-established areas of governance, the role of

equality mechanisms is mainly one of sensitising and motivating those who are responsible in those areas, in order to get the gender/equality dimension integrated into the respective plans and policies; it is also one of helping and training the agents involved in this process and of monitoring and evaluating the actions undertaken in the regular functioning of their sectors, in order to fulfil that responsibility.

As for the more recent areas of concern - gender-based violence and trafficking or the access and exercise of power and decision-making by women, as well as all aspects of cultural change in regard to women's and men's roles - in these areas the role of national mechanisms seems to be one of more direct initiative and intervention. The fact is that these matters are not exactly specific to one area of governance; they imply action in multiple areas being, as they actually are, problems of a more horizontal nature.

For example, political participation implies education and socialisation aspects, but also civic and political awareness and a general culture of democracy and human rights. As for gender-based violence, whether domestic or sexual violence, exploitation of prostitution or trafficking, violation of women's human rights in conflict situations or any other form, action to counteract these situations is a global type of action to be undertaken in various fronts and by different sectors in government: education, including civic and human rights education, health, justice, internal and external affairs, etc.

The same type of observation could be made in regard to the problem of discriminatory situations and attitudes expressed in stereotyped views of sex roles mainly affecting women, whether they may be found in the media or in social thinking in general. Here again there is no specific institutional sector that may be rendered accountable for changing this situation.

Other new and emerging areas, namely the ones recalled in the Outcome document of Beijing+5 are also significant in this perspective. Migration and refugee problems, often linked to globalisation, demographic changes and conflict situations, also require a multiple type of action where the gender dimension must be fully integrated and considered from many angles.

In regard to all these problems and situations, national mechanisms for the advancement of women and for gender equality have a particular role to play. Not only to motivate, sensitise or monitor the action of others, but also to promote, co-ordinate or carry out actions, projects and programs on its own to counteract such problems.

We might rightly say that a twofold perspective of action for national mechanisms assumes particular relevance at the present time. A relevance that, in my view, also points out to the challenges that national mechanisms are facing in their task to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. And what exactly are the challenges ahead?

## **Challenges ahead**

A first challenge is linked to what I would call the urgent need to develop gender expertise and provide gender training at all levels. Gender expertise requires a serious knowledge-building in gender issues, the sound establishment of a know-how that can be used and passed on to others; it requires also the creation of methods and instruments of analysis and evaluation, in order to assess the gender mainstreaming process in all its phases – in devising and planning of policies, in implementing them or in monitoring their implementation and in assessing their impact and success or failure.

Elaboration of checklists and guidelines, handbooks or other types of instruments is necessary and, in my view, is a particular responsibility of national mechanisms, together with researchers and academics with expertise in the field of gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Gender proofing of laws and policies, gender budgeting or the inclusion of a gender concern in resource allocation, gender audit included in routine auditing processes, all of these are necessary aspects of such an exercise and for all of them a sound expertise needs to be systematically developed and applied.

We have definitely moved from a time of mere awareness-raising and sensitisation in regard to gender equality to one of serious dealing with all aspects of the organisation of social life and of social functioning, taking gender fully into account; moved from a time of mere good will, interest and sensibility towards women's issues to one of technical expertise on gender issues.

Such perspective requires an accurate knowledge of the situation of women and men in all aspects of social life and of the evolution of that situation; and for such knowledge sex-disaggregated statistics and other indicators are needed, on the one hand, and, on the other, time-bound targets and benchmarks to measure progress.

Gender training is the complementary aspect to pursue; both of those working within the mechanisms themselves and also of those responsible for gender mainstreaming in the various sectors. Capacity-building of all involved in equality work and gender training of decision-makers, senior staff in official departments and other social actors at various levels are fundamental tasks for national mechanisms at the present time.

A second challenge for national mechanisms, nowadays, lies in what I would call the need for a systematic forward-looking attitude, a close attention to new issues and new problems in a society that is changing fast; a moving society where all emerging issues must be looked at in a gender perspective, trying to figure out, from the very start, the specific impact those issues can bring into women's and men's lives.

It is not enough, though necessary, to pursue national action plans defined in advance and well-established projects and programmes. National mechanisms must have nowadays a much more dynamic, global and open vision and mission. One of attention to what is happening in their own countries, in society at large and in the world. Some emerging issues have been identified in the Beijing+5 Outcome document and new strategies have been proposed to face them. This type of exercise must continue at national and international level.

Efforts to liaise with mechanisms in other countries and with the competent international fora may help to have a clear view of what the future is already bringing into the present of women's and men's lives. This attitude of listening to the signs of the times certainly has implications in regard to laws and policies, but also in regard to the scope of action of national mechanisms themselves.

A third challenge, also in line with this view of a broadening role for national mechanisms, is the present trend of increasing recognition of the role of civil society that we can witness in many countries and regions.

Co-operation with civil society, in regard to national mechanisms, is not a totally new issue; on the contrary, establishment of links with civil society organisations, particularly with women's organisations, has always been considered as a significant aspect in the work of national mechanisms. The new role of these mechanisms as catalysts for gender mainstreaming requires that such co-operation be reinforced and, I would even say, institutionalised.

The participation of women's NGOs in consultative bodies dealing with equality issues is a reality in many countries; in others, regular consultation procedures or establishment of partnerships for specific projects are the formulas adopted for co-operation, often in regard to the drafting and implementation of national action plans for equality.

Whatever the formula may be, a policy of dialogue, and even of networking, and the existence of channels of communication between national mechanisms and organisations of civil society are fundamental aspects of the work of these bodies. Not just women's NGOs, although in the present situation they could still be considered as privileged partners, but also of human rights NGOs, researchers and the academic community, social partners, professional organisations and special interest groups and, of course, the media. The media have, not only a social responsibility in this regard, but also an increasing power and influence that can really help, or hinder, the cause of gender equality and the promotion of women's human rights.

Interesting to note is the fact that the question of equality for women started as a civil society concern, in the women's and civil rights movements, far away from the governmental sphere and marginal to political power. It was later institutionalised as a matter for the State, the so-called State feminism, particularly in the decade after the International Women's Year and the I World Conference on Women in 1975. Now the circle is closed with the clear recognition of the importance of close co-operation between State institutions and civil society movements and organisations for a common purpose in addressing equality issues as societal issues.

The "new" role of national mechanisms is also linked to these changes and requires new ways to relate to and co-operate with NGOs, namely an institutionalised relationship, in which these organisations have a relevant role to play. A role that means both challenging and supporting national mechanisms in their struggle for equality, in particular by

bringing the touch of reality, that is their own, into the political vision, priorities and plans. A relationship that can work both ways with advantages for both partners – the State and civil society; and certainly for women.

A fourth challenge that, not being new, seems to me to be particularly relevant at the present time is linked to the presence of women in decision-making bodies and to the possible innovative views they may bring to policy-making in those bodies that have historically marginalised them.

We could say that the present role of national mechanisms includes a particular component of challenging political choices and political priorities; of re-thinking current concepts and values on women's and men's roles, needs, capacities, expectations, ambitions and dreams. These challenges and this process of re-thinking must find an echo at decision-making level; and women can voice these concerns there and help to convey a new vision of politics and of social organisation.

The philosophy and practice of gender mainstreaming, in the long run, poses the question of women's empowerment and equal participation in decision-making at all levels and in all areas of life. It is a decisive question that national mechanisms for gender equality must also address. By questioning the traditional male order of things and the rigid stereotypes on women's and men's roles that hinder change towards the achievement of equality and women's human rights.

To conclude, I would emphasise that the challenges envisaged above and the implications for action contained therein, in regard to the role and functions of equality mechanisms, do not deny or diminish former requirements, as expressed in recommendations and guidelines, namely contained in programmatic documents adopted by the World Conferences on Women of the United Nations. It is still required that national mechanisms be located at the highest level of government, that mandates be clear and focussed, that resources be adequate, that political will be strong and committed.

All former requirements for effective functioning of national mechanisms are still absolutely necessary; but we have to go further now. Further in the way of gender expertise and of gender training; of facing emerging issues of a global nature and impact; of involving all sectors of society in the search for solutions; of guaranteeing that the ways of the future are planned in equal terms by women and men as the two components of society; and above all, we have to guarantee that gender equality, an objective that encompasses and requires the advancement and empowerment of women, be seen in the framework of human rights and of the achievement of democracy.