

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

**in collaboration with
the United Nations regional commissions
ECA, ECE, ECLAC, ESCAP and ESCWA**

Expert Group Meeting

**The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the
empowerment of women: Achievements, gaps and challenges**

**Hosted by the Government of Italy
Rome, 29 November to 2 December, 2004**

**Opening statement
Ms. Carolyn Hannan, Director
Division for the Advancement of Women**

Your Excellency, Minister Stefania Prestigiacomo
Madame Director, Prefetto Zotta
Distinguished experts and resource persons
Observers and colleagues

It is an honour and privilege for me to welcome you, on behalf of the United Nations, to this Expert Group Meeting on “The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women: achievements, gaps and challenges” which has been organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with the five United Nations regional commissions.

I wish to extend my deep appreciation to the Government of Italy for supporting the efforts to further develop the role of national mechanisms for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women. I want to particularly thank the Minister for Equal Opportunities, Her Excellency Stefania Prestigiacomo for her commitment and leadership on gender equality and for the encouragement provided for this work. I am also grateful for the Ministry of the Interior for hosting this event at its splendid facilities, Scuola Superiore del Ministero dell’Interno and wish to thank the Director, Prefetto Zotta for the excellent hospitality. Special thanks go to Mr Andrea Cavallari at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations in New York for his interest and support. Finally, I would like to express appreciation for the invaluable logistical support provided by many staff members of the Ministry of Equal Opportunities in the

preparations of the meeting. While I cannot mention each one by name here I hope that they will take this as a personal thank you.

My special thanks go also to our collaborators in the expert group meeting, the United Nations regional commissions, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic Commission for Europe, the Economic and Social Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

I am delighted to welcome all the distinguished participants. You have travelled from all regions of the world to be present at this important meeting. I thank the experts for accepting the invitation of the Secretary-General. I also thank and welcome the resource persons representing a variety of national mechanisms - women's ministries, women's commissions, parliamentary caucuses, research institutions, ombudspersons offices and non-governmental organizations - who have come to share their knowledge and experience with the experts and ensure an outcome that is grounded in the concrete realities of national mechanisms. I warmly welcome all other participants - representatives of the host country, observers and colleagues from the United Nations system.

This expert group meeting builds on the outcomes of intergovernmental processes, such as the World Conferences on Women and sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women. Discussion on the role of national machineries preceded the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City, in 1975. The Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action was the first international instrument to introduce the concept of the national machinery for the advancement of women. The First World Conference on Women called for the establishment of national machineries for the advancement of women to advocate for attention women's advancement, provide policy direction, undertake research and build alliances. Following the First World Conference on Women many national machineries were established in the 1970s and 1980s.

The term national machinery for the advancement of women referred to the mechanisms established by government to promote and support the achievement of gender equality, including through implementation of the commitments made in global processes, such as the four world conferences on women. The national machineries established in the 1970s and 1980s included women's ministries and women's departments, bureaus or desks in other ministries with broad mandates covering a number of issues. Because Governments differed, so did the bodies established to promote women's advancement.

The subsequent World Conferences on Women in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) called for an increase and strengthening of national machineries to support women's advancement and gender equality. A number of constraints in the national machineries established were identified in this process, particularly related to mandate, location, power and resources. Many national machineries were constrained by 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. Other constraints included a lack of financial resources, lack of expertise and conflicting demands on their scarce time and resources. Particular problems were experienced when women/gender equality units were part of larger ministries with responsibility in a number of areas, as gender equality issues tended to be marginalized in competition for attention and resources.

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) gave specific attention to national machineries under the Critical Area of Concern "Institutional Mechanisms" and in Chapter Five on Institutional Arrangements. The Platform for Action brought a new and important element into the work of national machineries - the strategy of gender mainstreaming which aimed to ensure the incorporation of gender perspectives into all areas of development. The main task of national machinery was defined as supporting government-wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas (para 201) and encouraging and promoting the active involvement of all institutional actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors to work for gender equality (para 203).

The ECOSOC agreed conclusions following up on the global establishment of the gender mainstreaming strategy, highlighted the important role of national machineries. The agreed conclusions emphasized that the responsibility for gender mainstreaming did not lie with specialist individuals or entities, but with management and staff in all bodies. This had implications for national machineries. Rather than focusing solely on separate projects for women, national machineries had a new catalytic role to play in promoting, supporting and monitoring the efforts of other parts of government to give attention to gender perspectives in all areas of their work. This required developing new relationships with line ministries and other key actors. Strategic alliances and partnerships are critical to the effective role of national machineries in relation to gender mainstreaming.

Following the Fourth World Conference on Women, discussions on the role of national machineries were held at the regional and sub-regional levels. In 1998, the Division for the Advancement of Women, 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. The expert group meeting aimed to create a better understanding of 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. The main conclusions included, among other things, that the structure and functions of national machineries should be appropriate in the prevailing national social and cultural context, and that an important role of national machineries was effective implementation of gender mainstreaming.

The Commission on the Status of Women, at its forty-third session in 1999, where the critical area of concern on institutional mechanisms was considered, 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”. 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 fulfill their mandates. It further recommended structuring the functions of national machineries to ensure their effectiveness in establishing gender mainstreaming.

The outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled: “Women 2000: Gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century” pointed out that in many countries national machineries had been instituted or strengthened and recognized as the institutional base for promoting gender equality, gender mainstreaming and monitoring of the implementation of the Platform for Action (para 24).

While there have been many important achievements over the past decade, many constraints and challenges persist. A large number of those identified in 1995 still remain. Many national machineries still have very unclear mandates and are uncertain about their functions. They are sometimes caught between awareness of the need to work more constructively with gender mainstreaming and influence policy and programme development at national level from a gender perspective, and the more concrete demands of local constituencies of women who would like to see the national machinery play a more traditional role and implement concrete projects. Many national machineries lack the explicit support from political leadership which would ensure that their roles and work was taken seriously and that there was real potential for developing collaboration with other parts of the government. In some cases, the political leadership leaves everything relating to women and gender equality to the national machinery, which works against gender mainstreaming.

Many national machineries are still marginalized structurally in the government. This impedes their access to critical information and decision-making processes. It lessens the potential for successful implementation for gender mainstreaming. in terms of access to power and authority. Many are not actively involved in partnerships with other line ministries and are not involved in national policy making. For example, very few national machineries are currently involved in formulation of national ICT policies, which are both critical for their effective functioning and for succesful promotion of gender equality in a knowledge-based society.

Many national machineries continue to have serious resource constraints. In terms of financial resources, many are still very dependent on donor funding and compete with NGOs for these limited resources. Human resources are limited, both in terms of numbers and in terms of the competencies and skills required to effectively implement the goals of the national machineries. The lack of staff with relevant qualifications skills for advocacy, analysis, research, training and monitoring and reporting is a serious constraint. Staff in national machineries are expected to address a broad range of sectors and issues or to have developed the alliances and partnerships necessary to facilitate access to the expertise and competencies required.

In a number of countries, national machineries have suffered from a lack of continuity. They have been subjected to frequent restructuring and experience high staff turn-over which affects stability and sustainability. In some cases reliance on high profile leaders rather than a broad base of competent staff, makes the national machineries very vulnerable when changes in leadership occur.

Staff in many national machineries do not understand the gender mainstreaming strategy or how to implement it. As a result, too few national machineries successfully play a catalytic role in fostering gender mainstreaming in line ministries. Gender focal points have been established in line ministries in some countries. However, these gender focal points are often at a very junior level and lack support from national machineries, for example through effective networks. While many national machineries have very well developed structures which reach down to the grassroots level these are not always effectively utilized in support of gender mainstreaming.

There have, however, also been major achievements in relation to institutional mechanisms for gender equality in a great number of countries since the Fourth World Conference on Women. One achievement is clearly the increased diversity in types of national mechanisms established in countries to promote gender equality. These include gender equality commissions, parliamentary caucuses, ombudspersons, gender focal points in line ministries, and government research institutes. The term *national mechanisms for gender equality* is used to refer to this broader group of institutions.

Today many countries have several mechanisms. One country could have a women's ministry, a gender equality commission, a parliamentary caucus, gender focal points in line ministries, and an ombudsperson. The gender equality commission, for example, may be a multi-stakeholder body, with high level participations focused on monitoring and reporting to top political leadership. Parliamentary caucuses can be caucuses of both women and men, or of women alone. Human rights commissions giving attention to women's human rights, specific women's rights bodies and statistical offices focused on gender equality within national statistical bodies are examples of other mechanisms which exist in some countries. Temporary bodies may also be established, for example, inter-departmental committees set up to prepare the report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, sometimes chaired by the Ministry of Justice. With different mechanisms operating in different contexts, the potential for promoting and monitoring gender equality should be increased. However, an essential precondition for success is that there is good collaboration and coordination among these different mechanism.

Collaboration with NGO has also improved significantly in many countries but constraints and challenges still exist, particularly because of competition over scarce resources and lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities. Greater attention to developing effective partnerships with NGOs and civil society groups is critical, particularly because of the increased strength and importance of women's groups and networks over the past decade.

Many new opportunities exist for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment which should be used strategically by national mechanisms. These include strategically utilizing the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals as instruments to ensure a stronger focus on national level implementation through targets and indicators. National mechanisms could also be more effective in utilizing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as a framework for work on promoting gender equality and Effective use of ICTs for achieving goals needs to be enhanced. The role of national mechanisms should also be considered in the context of the changing macro-political and institutional environments, including the increasing interest in effective, transparent and accountable government, including decentralization, democratization and civil service reform. The full potential of gender mainstreaming has not yet been achieved. One approach which could move implementation of gender mainstreaming forward significantly, if utilized strategically and effectively, is gender mainstreaming in budget processes at different levels.

When discussing national mechanisms it is very difficult to generalize and to compare progress across countries. The mandate, location, and role of national mechanisms has to be looked at in terms of the overall governmental structure and context, the existence and relationships with other national mechanisms, and the civil society context. It is not possible to develop a blue-print for national machineries or other types of national mechanisms. Despite these differences, however, exchange of experiences and good practice examples is critical to ensuring greater progress in effective functioning of national mechanisms and achievement of the goals set in the Beijing Platform for Action.

In implementing common goals, it is important to clearly establish the roles and inputs of different mechanisms. In relation to effective gender mainstreaming in budgets, as one example, it would be important to establish what the different roles of the various mechanisms would be to ensure successful implementation and to ensure collaboration, exchange of information and coordination. For example, how can the women's ministry support gender mainstreaming in budgets; what would be the role of the parliamentary caucus; how can the gender equality commission contribute strategically; what inputs can gender focal points in relevant ministries make; is there a role for the ombudsperson; how can research institutions be engaged; in what way would NGOs and civil society groups be involved?

Finally, it is also important to know and establish constructive relationships with the institutional arrangements at regional level. Exchange of experience, methodologies and good practice at this level is very useful. Regional and sub-regional meetings of national machineries and other national mechanisms have provided important opportunities to develop capacity and skills.

The Division for the Advancement of Women traditionally holds two expert group meetings prior to each session of the Commission on the Status of Women as a

means of ensuring access to the latest thinking on the themes before the Commission. This expert group meeting has special significance as it is being held prior to the ten-year review and appraisal of implementation of the Platform for Action in the 49th session of the Commission from 28 February to 11 March, 2005. Specific attention was given to national mechanisms for gender equality in the questionnaire submitted to all Member States of the United Nations. In the 134 responses received considerable attention has been given to achievements, gaps and challenges and future actions. The theme of the high-level roundtable to be held at the Commission on the Status of Women will be innovations in national mechanisms for gender equality and empowerment of women.

Participation in this expert group meeting thus carries an important responsibility. Your analysis of the current situation in relation to national mechanisms - achievements, constraints and challenges, as well as potentials and future actions required, to be incorporated in the report of the experts, will provide a critical input into the review and appraisal. The experts have the opportunity to present comprehensive recommendations addressed to actors at different levels, Governments, international organizations, including the United Nations, non-governmental organizations and civil society.

We are privileged to have in attendance so many distinguished experts and resource persons, as well as observers. You are all leaders in this field, and I am fully confident that your knowledge, experience and expertise will provide important insights on strengthening national mechanisms as a means of promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.

I would like to conclude by again thanking the Government of Italy, in particular Your Excellency, Minister Prestigiacomo, who has honoured us by her presence at the opening of the Expert Group Meeting. I wish you all a very successful meeting and assure you of the full support of myself, and my colleagues, Roselyn Odera and Natalia Zakharova.

Thank you.