

ROUND TABLE GENERAL REPORT

“NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS AND NATIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN”

Introduction

A round table convened from 16th to the 18th November 2004 in Ouarzazate (Morocco) on the theme of “national institutions of human rights and national mechanisms for the advancement of women”.

This round table was jointly organized by the United Nations High Commissioner in charge of human rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations’ Division for the Advancement of Woman (DAW) and hosted by the Advisory Council of Human Rights (ACHR).

About 30 participants attended the seminar, on behalf of National Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women and National Institutions (Nis) for the protection of human rights representing 16 countries from all over the world, and two members of the the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (see list in the appendix).

EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND TARGETS

This meeting, which is part of a joint project between the OHCHR and the DAW, has focused on capacity building for National Mechanism for the Advancement of Women and national human rights protection institutions, with a view to optimizing their action in favor of the advancement and the protection of human rights and women rights. From this standpoint, the round table tackled the following items:

- Identifying the opportunities of the two parties to develop a right-based approach that abides by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international human rights devices that have an impact on gender equality;
- Starting the discussion by developing a sharing out – based relationship and exchanging information and experience among national mechanisms and bodies; creating a cooperation-based relationship between the two types of institutions in order to combat discrimination and contribute, therefore, to a better implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action ;
- Drawing, in form of recommendations, elements for a strategy directed towards the advancement of human rights and women rights.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

1. Opening session:

In his welcoming speech, Mr. Omar AZZIMAN, head of the Advisory Council of Human Rights (ACHR) - Morocco, recalled the crux that underlies the organization of the meeting, that is the fact that women rights are an integral and indissociable part of Universal Human Rights as recognized by major reference texts, especially the Declaration of Vienna and the Beijing Platform for Action.

On the one hand, the OHCHR representative has insisted on the necessity to put into practice the existing partnership between the two aforementioned types of institutions and the actions to be taken as part of national measures to advance and protect women's rights as well as human rights national institutions in order to combat jointly all forms of discrimination against women.

On the other hand, the representative of the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) has recalled the DAW mandate and its action in favor of equality, and also stressed the specific and joint role of the two institutions in terms of protecting and advancing women rights.

2. Session dedicated to identifying challenges:

Headed by Mr. Albert SASSON (ACHR), this session was devoted – following the presentation of the schedule and participants – to the introductory theme of the round table, that is "National Institutions and National Mechanisms for Woman Empowerment and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women: Overview".

Within this framework, representatives of the OHCHR, the DAW, and the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have opened the debate by statements on the role and functions of their respective structures as regards the protection and advancement of women's rights.

Subsequently, participants were invited to talk about the "major challenges" they are facing in their countries, be it at the level of mechanisms for the advancement of women or at the level of human rights national institutions. Participants from different nationalities, each one on his/her turn, took stock of the situation in their respective countries in terms of assets and constraints in addition to short-term and long-term perspectives.

The major challenges identified revolve around the following aspects:

- Cases of discrimination against women are still widespread despite the progress achieved in many countries;
- National mechanisms and national institutions lack resources in most countries, including rich ones;

- Mechanisms of woman empowerment suffer from the non-clarification of their mandates;
- Gender mainstreaming and the right-based approach are not always adopted in state policies with a view to promoting more equitable gender relations;
- Partnership between mechanisms for the advancement of women and national institutions (INs) is not effective.

3. Thematic session 1: Human Rights Education (HRE)

This session was devoted to the theme: "Human Rights Education" and to the complementary and convergent role of national mechanisms and NIs.

Statement of New Zealand and Uganda representatives opened the debate which shed light on the following points:

- Cultural resistance to the principle of equality;
- Links between human rights education and the promotion of the culture of equality;
- The role of the CEDAW in the equality education;
- Resources and aspects pertaining to the creation of supports;
- Innovatory approaches in the field of HRE and the parties concerned.

4. Thematic session 2: Improving Human Rights practice for women underprivileged groups

Statements of representatives of Ireland (Poor Women) and Panama (native population) have opened the debate. As concerns the definition of vulnerability and the groups of women that are more exposed to it, exchange among participants has particularly displayed:

- Approaches to deal with vulnerability;
- The necessity to provide structural answers to vulnerability questions;
- The role of research and elaboration of statistics;
- Means and strategies to get women belonging to vulnerable categories involved (including disabled women, emigrants, rural women...);
- Refunding structures for certain categories of women , including victims of violence;
- The role of laws in protecting women;
- The role of national mechanisms, NIs and international cooperation in facing women vulnerability.

5. Thematic session 3: Institutional dimensions – partnership work for the protection and advancement of women rights

Account of the experience of Germany, Australia and Nicaragua has given rise to a more wide-ranging debate on aspects pertaining to the session's theme. Exchange of opinions dealt with the power of institutional mechanisms in force in their respective countries.

In this respect, an assessment could be made regarding the situation of national mechanisms for the advancement of women's rights and NIs at the level of:

- Mandate;
- Organizational capacities;
- Resources available;
- Relationship with NGOs and other parties;
- Relationship between national mechanisms and NIs;

6. Thematic session 4: Role of national institutions in putting into effect the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women

The introduction of the CEDAW expert allowed participants to measure the importance and the point of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in the protection and advancement of women's rights.

During the debate, participants also stressed:

- The resort to expressing reservations in many countries, including Muslim countries, in the name of cultural "specificity";
- The non-ratification of the optional protocol;
- The hierarchy of norms that affects the way the convention is received within the internal legal order;
- The challenge of standardization of laws;
- States' reporting;
- The point and pertinence of NGOs' parallel reports.

Experiences of different countries served as lessons that have been formulated later on in form of recommendations.

7. Thematic session 5: Developing national plans of action

The experience of Zambia, Morocco, Lithuania and Costa Rica constituted a good introduction to the debate. The mainstays of this session hinged on the following points:

- The importance of political contexts and the will of decision makers in terms of the elaboration and implementation of plans of action in favor of gender equality;
- The crucial aspect of gender mainstreaming and the right-based approach of any planning action;
- The scope of the plans of action for the advancement of women's rights, as political and technical tools;
- The process for elaborating plans of action, including the participation of governmental and non-governmental parties;
- Plans of action and coherence of state policies in terms of advancing women's rights;

- Resources allowing to see the implementation of plans of action through, once elaborated.

8. strategies for a future cooperation and interactivity:

This session was essentially devoted to cooperation between national mechanisms for the advancement of women's rights and national human rights institutions.

The debate dealt, in particular, with:

- An account of the situation in this respect;
- Points of convergence between the two types of structures and the ensuing opportunities;
- The challenges to be taken up for a better coordination of efforts in favor of women.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ROUND TABLE

The round table resulted in an important declaration that takes up the major recommendations that were subject to a consensus (see text in appendix). The first draft constituted groundwork for debates and fruitful exchange of ideas revolving around issues and problematic pertaining, mainly to means susceptible to consolidate and/or reinforce the role of national mechanisms and NIs so as to face the various cases of discrimination against women and promote for gender relationships based on the respect of dignity and equality.

This session ended with a positive assessment of the round table. Besides, the fact of gathering together for the first time national mechanisms for the advancement of women and national human rights institutions has been unanimously hailed, as being the beginning of a noteworthy partnership.

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Participants took advantage of their stay in Ouarzazate to visit feminine institutions and other local development organizations.

APPENDIX

- Final declaration
- Presentation note and round table schedule
- List of participants.