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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

The evolving status and role of national mechanisms for gender equality

Parliamentary mechanisms for gender equality and the empowerment of women, and collaboration with other stakeholders at the national level*

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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.

**Chairperson
Ladies and Gentlemen**

Namibia's quest for democratic governance in the past 20 years has borne witness to significant progress in the area of gender equality through Government policies and programmes, which include the domestication of international conventions and national policies, as well as gender-related law reform.

The Government of the Republic of Namibia has assented to several international agreements for the promotion of gender equality such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Parliament approved in 1992; the CEDAW Optional Protocol, ratified in 2000; the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action and the African Regional Platform for Action that assert the need for gender equality. These international instruments contributed to the development of the National Gender Policy and Plan of Action for gender equality that serves as the guiding tool for all national gender programmes. Moreover, the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia makes it illegal to discriminate a person on the basis of gender. Furthermore, the Constitution recognizes the previously disadvantaged position of women and supports affirmative action for the advancement of women within society by encouraging women to play a full, equal and effective role in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the nation. The Constitution also makes provision for laws to be enacted by Parliament that give women equal opportunities, equal pay, maternity leave and other benefits.

Chairperson

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the UN CEDAW form the basis for Namibia's gender policies and programmes. The Ministry of **Gender Equality** and Child Welfare (MGEACW), has been guided by the National Communication Strategy in Support of the UN CEDAW. The MGEACW is also tasked with the implementation of the CEDAW.

Many of the provisions in the UN CEDAW – such as the definition of discrimination, policy measures to end sex discrimination and affirmative action provisions parallel and reinforce those established in Namibia's constitution. The implementation of the UN CEDAW document occurred at the same time as the introduction of the Beijing Platform for Action. All of these international documents provide the basis for the domestication of gender equality at the political structural level and lay the basis for nationally and locally generated definitions of the globalised gender equality movement.

Namibia is lucky to have a government that upholds and promotes gender equality in all areas of political, social and economic life. The Government of the Republic of Namibia has established various national mechanisms to address gender issues. These mechanisms include: Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare, Gender Commission, Gender Sectoral Committees, Gender Focal Points within Ministries. Government is also working in cooperation with many gender-

related NGOs and academic institutions.

Progress

Namibia has made progress in the social and legal arena to realize gender equality. There has been significant progress towards reform of discriminatory laws, but this has not occurred without resistance from the male counterparts. Parliament has passed laws that govern women's right: Married Person's Equality Act (No. 1 of 1996); the Affirmative Action Act (No. 28 of 1998); the Combating of Rape Act (No. 8 of 2000); and Combating of Domestic Violence Act (No. 4 of 2003) to mentioned but a few.

Available data also indicates that most men and women in Namibia have a good working knowledge of issues associated with gender equality. However, the internalization of both men and women of the concept of gender equality is varied.

Women have begun to advance in Government. There is now a significant number of women in top Government positions such as Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Directors, Deputy Director etc. This is evidence that women's social status has improved considerably.

Through government and political party policies, as well as pressure from civil society, there is a high number of women participating in the political process and making significant strides in being elected in some government sectors. However, women as political leaders do not necessarily translate into women moving gender issues forward. Although there has been progress in women's greater political representation, there has not been a corresponding increase in levels of political influence.

Despite the political support from Government and best efforts by gender advocates, there are still negative attitudes toward gender equality, both at community and national level, that are serious challenges to the implementation of gender policies and programmes, not to mention women's greater participation in power-sharing and decision-making. Many men, having become used to their privileged positions, desire to maintain the status quo.

It is worth noting that civil society has not been very effective in utilizing regional and local councils in accessing Parliament or pushing gender equality issues forward in the general public. Advocacy programs targeting Members of Parliament are carried out but are not always well thought through, and their strategies of action are not always clearly linked to gender equality issue. Therefore, measuring their success is not so clear cut. However, campaigns such as the 50/50 Campaign organized by the Women's Manifesto Network, have enjoyed successful influence although not necessarily through legislative results.

Women, power-sharing and decision-making

In recent years there have been campaigns, policies and programmes aimed at increasing women's position in political power-sharing. The number of women in political positions has

increased, although women are far from having 50 per cent representation in higher-level decision-making positions. At national level, the most vocal programme is the 50/50 campaign, begun by the Namibian Women's Manifesto, which advocates 50 per cent of elected candidates to be women. The method advocated by the 50/50 campaign is 'zebra' style lists, whereby political parties have lists that alternate women and men candidates for all elections.

Government enacted the Local Authority Act Nol. 23 of 1992, which make provision for an Affirmative Action for 30% inclusion of women in politics in local authorities

Political parties have been active in advocating women's rights, especially in the area of political power-sharing. However, there is no political party headed by a woman. Women are also under-represented in political parties at national, regional and local levels.

An Inter-Parliamentary Union report shows that, in 2002, Namibia ranked 23rd in the world for women representatives in parliament. In Africa, only Mozambique (ranked 10th), South Africa (ranked 11th) and Rwanda (ranked 21st) outperformed Namibia in the number of women represented in parliament. In 2002, 18 out of the 72 national assembly members were women. This data indicates that, although Namibia is in good standing as far as Africa is concerned, and despite political commitment to gender empowerment, Namibian women are still inadequately represented at most levels of government.

According to the global gender gap study Namibia ranked 4th in SADC and was ranked 31 in the world in 2008.

Constraints

The greatest challenge to women's advancement in gender equality, power-sharing and equality in decision-making is men's negative attitudes and behaviours to maintain status quo. While women struggle for social, economic and legal equality, most men still continue with the outdated patriarchal beliefs, which not only form a stumbling block to this equality, but can also impede women's greater participation in power-sharing and decision-making. Such attitudes also impede women's greater participation in political power-sharing because men with such ideologies are less likely to vote for women candidates. Men used to being in positions of power are not going to readily accede to women sharing control.

Ladies and Gentlemen

This presentation has demonstrated significant governmental and community-level determination for women's greater participation in Namibian society. However, it also exposed men's negative attitudes towards gender equality as a significant challenge in achieving gender equality. Most men, having become used to their privileged positions, desire to maintain the status quo. In Namibia, women are no longer silent on their needs and desires, both as individuals and as social beings. Indeed, women have said 'enough is enough'. In the political arena, women are participating in voting and are politically active. There is also a growing culture of women who aspire to political power-sharing positions. However, social structural obstacles mean that there

are still a limited number of women in power-sharing and decision-making positions. If gender issues are to be more aggressively addressed, the government needs enough women in positions of power to form a 'critical mass' so that women can overcome patriarchy and become the voices for those women who are still at the periphery.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to conclude by saying that despite the progress made by Namibia since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, women cannot obtain gender equality in the social, economic and legal spheres of Namibian society without greater participation in power-sharing and decision-making structures. In Namibia, the struggle for gender equality is not only played out at the social and legal levels, but also in the political arena. Therefore, development of greater gender equality must simultaneously occur at the social, legal and power-sharing levels.

Thank you for your kind attention