

United Nations  Nations Unies

**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fourth session
New York, 1-12 March 2010**

INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

The evolving status and role of national mechanisms for gender equality

Gender mainstreaming, including gender-responsive budgeting- the role of national mechanisms as catalysts for change *

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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

This paper is aimed at raising a discussion on issues relating to the evolving status and role of national mechanisms for gender equality in implementation of gender mainstreaming, including gender-responsive budgeting. It is a discussion that contributes to on-going debates on potentials and challenges regarding institutional mechanisms for gender equality at different levels. It starts with a brief introduction of key concepts and background to issues of national mechanisms for gender mainstreaming, and then discusses the role of the mechanisms while raising institutional factors facilitating or hindering this role to be played more effectively. As this is done, several examples are shared to demonstrate lessons and some practices in the area under discussions.

Gender mainstreaming, defined as the process of ‘assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes in all areas and at all levels’, is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Within this context, gender mainstreaming has been adopted as a catalyst process with transformative potential for addressing gender inequalities in the main discourses of development. As part of this, gender-responsive budgeting has increasingly been recognized as a significant tool for making gender mainstreaming happen at the (macro) economic policy making. In particular, there has been a progressive acknowledgement by policy makers, practitioners and gender equality advocates of the potential of gender-responsive budgeting in generating increased resources for gender mainstreaming activities within regular budgets at national or sector levels. Gender-responsive budgeting is defined as an application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process. It means conducting a gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and restructuring revenues and expenditures in order to promote gender equality.

The significant and genuine interest shown by policy makers and practitioners in adopting gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting strategies, has necessitated many governments, including African governments to move towards instituting national mechanisms for carrying out gender mainstreaming mandates. As shall be elaborated below, the adopted mechanisms vary from one country/region to another, and have taken different forms and roles. More important though, is the fact that efforts towards setting national mechanisms have shown positive indications of results, setbacks and lessons¹. For example, one of key setbacks that has been identified is the lack of transformative approaches to gender mainstreaming, resulting from weak national mechanisms that do not allow for thriving of gender equality.

Background

The *Issues Paper* guiding our panel discussion elaborates well on key issues regarding what and who constitutes the national mechanisms for gender equality and advancement of women in many countries. It provides us with details of the different structures or ‘gender equality infrastructure’, located within governments, as independent institutions,

¹ See details in Beijing at 10: Putting Policy into Practice (www.un-instraw.org)

parliaments, NGOs and the private sector. As national mechanisms, they have been shaped and influenced by different contexts and on the level of conceptual understanding of the initiators on the transformative potential on the forms and roles of the instituted structures. For example, in many African countries, ministries of women's affairs or gender equality which often are the most under-resourced government entities, serve as institutional and coordinating mechanisms to the national gender equality machinery. These Ministries are mandated to promote and monitor implementation of gender mainstreaming strategies, including promotion of gender-responsive budgeting tools. On the other hand, these ministries have been mandated to establish Gender Focal Points (GFPs) in different government sectors or ministries. The GFPs, which can be an individual, a committee or a unit, have a key role of acting as resource persons who are based at sector level and complement and supplement the work of ministries of women's affairs or gender equality, thereby extending more widely the outreach for gender mainstreaming strategy beyond the ministries of women's affairs to sectoral ministries.

In several countries, the national mechanisms have taken the form of independent gender equality bodies, of women's bureaux, commissions or national councils. These are also tasked with the role of preventing gender-based discrimination and ensuring of equal opportunities at national levels. As for non-governmental organizations or women's organizations, they have instituted their own mechanisms which include networks and inter-organization coalitions, thus providing frameworks for advocating gender equality issues such as gender-based violence, legal reforms etc. Furthermore, at the level of legislative power, in many countries, parliaments have provided mechanisms for promotion of women's rights and gender equality issues. The adopted structures at this level are located within the parliamentary formal structures as parliamentary sub-committees or committees on women's issues, while some function more informally as parliamentary women's caucuses, etc. Similarly, development partners or donor agencies have created their own mechanisms for promotion of gender mainstreaming activities, which, to some extent, have been complementing the work of national machineries.

In terms of achievements, national mechanisms have been contributing to implementation of gender equality outcomes through many strategies, with key ones being facilitating capacity enhancement of different actors on gender issues, and in influencing for the adoption of the gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting strategies. More specifically, many national mechanisms or machineries in different regions have developed a variety of activities that include supporting review of legislations so as to ensure the well being of women and gender equality through gender mainstreaming in key governmental policies, budgets and programmes. For example, in the Republic of Korea, the national women's ministry/machinery advocated for the Women's Development Act, which consolidates the legal basis for institutionally and financially adequate in support for gender equality². Within this scenario, women's machineries have been playing multiple roles as policy advocates and coordinators, and in knowledge generation on gender mainstreaming.

² Quoted from a conference paper presented in EADI -12 General Conference in Geneva, 24th-28th June, 2008.

In some cases, the ‘gender equality bodies’ have been successful in promoting gender mainstreaming in national budgets. As part of this, some national mechanisms have taken the leadership in facilitating gender audits of policies and organizations, as well as in facilitating capacity enhancement for other sectors on gender-responsive budgeting. For example, it is documented that in countries such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, ministries of women/gender have been developing a series of gender-responsive budgeting training for gender focal points, and for staff in ministries of finances, including planners and budget officers, and for key decision makers such as Permanent Secretaries and Members of Parliament. It is also documented that in countries like Cameroon, budget lines for gender mainstreaming activities have increased due to promotion of the gender mainstreaming strategy through national mechanisms.

These and all other achievements from different countries/regions have been instrumental in implementing the gender mainstreaming agenda at national level. However, often the results of these efforts have been challenged by several institutional factors. These factors have included: constraining mandates of the instituted national frameworks or mechanisms which, in the main, do not ensure a transformative environment for gender equality to thrive. Such an environment would include having in place gender sensitive policies, legislation and an effective structure for supporting progressive gender mainstreaming strategy, including increased gender equality financing at different levels. Within this context, transformative gender mainstreaming calls for committed approaches, namely “using gender perspectives to transform the existing development agenda”.

The constraining environment for effective national mechanisms also includes limited realization by key implementers that existing gender mainstreaming mechanisms (within government and beyond) need to undergo major institutional changes to allow for broader shifts in the embedded power relationships and gender roles and realities. More discussions on hindering institutional factors for more radical and transformative gender mainstreaming strategies, including use of gender responsive tools is provided in the ensuing sections.

Role of national mechanisms in promoting gender mainstreaming strategy, including gender sensitive-budgeting initiatives

Within this given context of both potential and constraining implementation, national mechanisms for gender equality have been playing a key catalytic role in promoting gender mainstreaming strategy, including advocating for application of gender-sensitive budgeting tools. This role, is summed up in the following, has great potentials and needs to be further facilitated:

- Setting a national gender equality agenda and ensuring that this agenda is implemented by different sectors for impacts. Often, working under their mandates for the advancement of women’s rights and gender equality, national mechanisms assumes key responsibilities of articulating the national gender equality agenda for successful implementation of the gender mainstreaming

strategy within government and beyond. While many national mechanisms engage in this role with diligence and commitments, some have limited conceptual capacity for playing this role in a transformative way, thus allowing for continued misconceptions and marginalization in gender mainstreaming. For example, in many countries, the facilitation of gender-responsive budgeting agenda has been left to national mechanisms or more specifically to ministries of women's affairs/gender. While this approach is crucial for raising awareness of the other sectors and ministries, such as the ministry of finance on the importance of GRB, it should not be their responsibility. This is mainly because national plans and budgets have their mandates implemented by other ministries.

- Influencing policies, prioritizing policy choices, initiating/formulating and reviewing legislation, monitoring implementation and conduct policy analysis for gender sensitivity and women's empowerment. This role, if played well, is key for allowing transformative gender mainstreaming agenda into policies and processes such as PRSPs. In this way, it is an influential role that provides space for gender equality concerns and experiences to become an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes at different levels. However, for this role to be played effectively, many national coordination mechanisms need to develop new sets of skills and knowledge base on policy analysis and budgeting.
- Advocate for adequate resources for implementation of gender mainstreaming strategy. This role has often have been played in partnerships with agencies such as UNIFEM, UNFPA and other donors for resourcing gender-focused activities within national mechanisms/sectors and beyond. Though such funding approaches have been potentially challenged by sustainability issues, they have benefited women of different categories. For example, through women's projects/ funding, women have been organizing themselves nationally and locally, around explicit agendas, to challenge not just the inequities of resource allocation outcomes, but also the underlying institutional frameworks and organizational processes through which resources are distributed. As part of this, poor women are engaging in a variety of forms of community action and creating alternative organizations and movements in response to processes of economic, social and political exclusion.
- Provide data and gather information on government-wide policy issues, a role which is yet to be played effectively in many countries, but is potentially very influential. For this role to be played more meaningfully, it calls for national mechanism to become a key resource to other government sectors. Currently, much of this work is done by women networks and research institutions. However, more coordination with the national mechanisms in this area will add value to the processes of data collection, usage and policy analysis for application.

The above-articulated roles are under implementation by national mechanisms, though differing in extent and results. As part of this implementation, national mechanisms have succeeded in raising awareness and capacities of various stakeholders on gender

mainstreaming strategies, and in making visible the existing gaps and challenges of implementation through conducting gender audits etc. In many countries, the national mechanisms have also succeeded in ‘integrating’ gender equality issues in ‘mainstream’ institutions and processes such as Constitutions, Poverty Reduction Strategies, mobilizing funds through donors for gender mainstreaming activities, and increasingly in promoting gender-responsive budgeting initiatives at national levels.

On the other hand, these roles have often been implemented within a scenario of a lack of strong, well placed, well-resourced and effective institutional mechanisms, national bodies for gender equality. This scenario, especially in Africa, has resulted in many national mechanisms falling in the trap of becoming service providers rather than articulators and conceptual leaders in promoting a transformative vision regarding gender mainstreaming strategies. This situation has had major implications and effects regarding impacts and achieved results from gender mainstreaming processes. Furthermore, as the role of national mechanisms gets confused and marginalized, many national machineries continue to carry the ‘burden of gender mainstreaming’ alone, while also reinforcing existing misconceptions on gender mainstreaming. For example, the belief that gender mainstreaming is only a technical process, which is the designated responsibility of a few institutions and actors only.

Institutional factors facilitating a transformative gender mainstreaming agenda, including use of gender responsive budgeting tools

The above sections have highlighted some of the hindering institutional factors for effective use of the gender mainstreaming strategy, including gender-responsive budgeting. Though there are several other hindering factors not mentioned above, this section will concentrate more on discussing key institutional factors facilitating mainstreaming strategies for transformation. These factors include: existence of national progressive legal and policy context for gender equality which many states have been working towards achieving. Literature review indicates that the constitutions of some countries in Africa (and beyond), provide for recognition of equality of persons. In countries like Tanzania, the Constitution requires the government and all institutions to provide for equal opportunity for both women and men. This already is a key opportunity for strategic implementation of gender mainstreaming agenda that is yet to be utilized to the maximum in relation to promotion of gender mainstreaming agenda. For example, national machineries, in collaboration with other agencies, are yet to utilize the opportunity that is provided in the Constitution in relation to equal distribution of national resources. This is important because an institutional mechanism for implementation of successful gender-responsive budgeting starts with Constitutional guarantees on equality for both men and women.

Additionally, many governments are also signatories to many international and regional instruments which bind them morally and legally to adhere to equality and non-discrimination policies in their development processes. As members of the United Nations, States are morally bound to adhere to principles of equality as spelt out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The vast majority of States are also party to the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC). Outcomes of the World Summits, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the four World Conferences on Women are also relevant. Also many have signed regional and sub regional instruments which includes the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), as well as the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000) for African states for example. These conventions bind states to pursue non discriminatory policies and programmes, and thus offer an opportunity for concretizing the gender mainstreaming strategy that is transformative in nature and impacts.

Additionally, as countries take measures to translate the constitutional and international commitments of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment into national policy frameworks, laws, and regulations, an opportunity arises for effective gender mainstreaming strategies, including gender responsive –budgeting application. The summary below, which uses Tanzania's experience as an example, highlights some of these opportunities.

- **National Development Visions** which envisages that by a certain period of time (e.g. 2025 for Tanzania) a country or countries would have graduated from the status of a least developed country to a middle-income country, with key attributes on how this can happen. The development processes of national visions need to be utilized more effectively for bringing in gender equality as one of the key underlying principles and objectives. For example, for Tanzania the Vision reads as follows "... by 2025, racial, and gender imbalances will have been addressed such that economic activities will not be identifiable by gender, or race...All social relations and processes which manifest and breed inequality in all aspects of society- i.e. law, politics, employment, education and culture will have been reformed" (Vision doc.pg.3).

- **Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSPs)**

Many countries, at least in Africa, have had successive poverty reduction documents since the late 1990s. Many of these PRSPs aimed to reduce absolute poverty by a certain period of time, but more provide a basis for increasing public resources to poverty-related sectors. These frameworks need to be utilised more for instituting principles of gender equality that shall allow for increased financing to address practical and strategic gender concerns in relation to poverty. While some countries (e.g. Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya and others) have attempted to do so, more need to be done to make the link between policies and gender-responsive budgeting a reality.

Another key facilitative opportunity for gender mainstreaming strategy at national level is the new financing architecture, in the form of **New Aid Modalities (NAMs)** and related others. In countries where a large proportion of the national budget is dependent on development aid, such new aid modalities present an opportunity for gender mainstreaming with transformative impacts. However, much work has to be done both by national mechanisms, gender equality advocates and ministries of finance to ensure that within the new aid financing framework, national dialogues and management of aid

issues in the country do not marginalize gender equality actors or the gender equality agenda.

Unfortunately, on-going efforts by governments and development partners (DPs) in this area have not placed achievement of gender equality goals in the ‘mainstream’. In this way, the gender equality agenda has been treated separately from the main initiatives at national levels. This is despite the fact that the Paris Declaration states that donor financing should be in line with the recipient country’s national development goals.

In respect of process, there has been, in many countries, limited participation in NAMs processes by gender equality actors, including the ministries of women’s affairs, gender focal points or sector experts within line ministries, and women’s organizations and CSO representatives. Even when gender equality actors are involved, they often have limited capacities in respect of policy and budget analysis.

Furthermore, efforts by gender equality groups to engage with NAMs processes have mainly been through gender desks in government sectors, whose role in influencing GBS related processes is very minimal. In terms of implementation, this approach places much expectation on the role of gender desk officers in support of gender mainstreaming. While all these are important efforts and should be continued, when critically analyzed, the use of gender desks as points of entry for gender mainstreaming in sectoral areas provides a weak link for ensuring that the agenda for financing gender equality becomes a reality. This is mainly because, ministries of women’s affairs/gender and the gender desks at sectoral level are not in the “mainstream” of the policy dialogue nor do they take active part in the annual GBS review processes. Furthermore, often, within these ministries there are generally few actors (mainly economists and planners) who are involved in GBS-WGs processes. Similarly, gender desk officers are seldom involved in key decision making processes in relation to annual GBS reviews.

Meanwhile, the mainstream NAMs actors themselves continue to have limited or no gender equality expertise. Thus, though these modalities have been operational in many countries only for few years, this situation suggests that there is a need for deliberate gender mainstreaming efforts to ensure that the gender equality agenda does not ‘disappear’ or ‘evaporate’ from the new funding approach. As UNIFEM (2006) rightly points out such equality through adequate financing for programmes that respond to women’s needs.

Conclusion

This paper shows that gender mainstreaming, including gender-responsive budgeting, is a principal strategy with great potential for promoting gender equality issues at different levels. However, it has been argued that this potential is yet to be substantively implemented in many countries. This is mainly because gender equality is an ambitious goal, which needs innovative ways and approaches to allow for transformation and changes. Currently, efforts to achieve equality through mainstreaming are often taken to be very technical processes. This often misses the point of gender mainstreaming, and

leads to under-utilization of all the potentials of the gender mainstreaming strategy, including adoption of gender-budgeting responsive tools. .

Several factors have been identified as instrumental in influencing effective implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy, with substantive outcomes, and the role of national mechanisms has been identified with progressive mandates and positions to enable them to use their full potentials.