

# **Gender mainstreaming in economic development in the United Nations**

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I would like to firstly express appreciation to the Nordic Council of Ministers and the OECD, on behalf of the Special Adviser to the Secretary General on gender equality, Ms Angela E.V.King, for the opportunity to share some of the experiences of the United Nations in gender mainstreaming.

This presentation will discuss the rationales and the strong intergovernmental mandates for gender mainstreaming in the area of economic development which have been established over the past few years, as well as provide some concrete examples of what the United Nations<sup>1</sup> is doing to bring gender perspectives to the centre of attention in economic policies, planning and institutional development.

The definition and approach for gender mainstreaming within the United Nations is elaborated in the Agreed Conclusions of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) from 1997.<sup>2</sup> The rationale for the gender mainstreaming strategy is both one of social justice and human rights - achieving equality between women and men - and of promoting and facilitating development. Sustainable and effective development can only be achieved in any area of societal activity, including economic development, if the interests and needs of all groups in society are taken into account and the potential of all groups is released. The role of the mainstreaming strategy in promoting and facilitating the full contributions of both women and men to social and economic development has been clearly identified, including in the Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women between 1996 and 1999 (Commission on the Status of Women, 2000). Gender mainstreaming involves, however, much more than increasing women's participation; it involves identifying and addressing the gender perspectives in all areas of

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<sup>1</sup> In this presentation "United Nations" refers primarily to the Secretariat.

<sup>2</sup> Gender mainstreaming is 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. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality." (ECOSOC Agreed Conclusions 1997/2, p. 28).

societal development. The limitations of approaches which ignore gender perspectives have become increasingly clear. Gender perspectives should be made integral to research, analysis, policy making, planning and institutional development in all areas of development, including economic development.

The links between gender mainstreaming and effective development are very clear in some sector areas, especially in areas where both women's and men's roles are visible, for example in health, education and agriculture. However, even when the broader development impacts of gender mainstreaming are understood within these sectors, the direct and indirect interconnections with economic growth are not always drawn out explicitly. In other areas the interlinkages between gender mainstreaming and effective development, or achievement of sector goals, are not as clear. The area of macro-economics is one such area where there is still considerable lack of clarity on the importance of gender mainstreaming.

It is worth noting here that warnings have been raised on the risks of using gender mainstreaming simply as a strategy to achieve other goals than gender equality goals. Care must be taken in the use of the gender mainstreaming strategy not to become too "instrumental", so that the objective of promoting gender equality is neglected (Razavi, 1997). Gender equality is a goal in its own right. Gender mainstreaming must be seen as a process for promoting gender equality, which in turn can facilitate the achievement of other developmental goals, including economic goals.

### **Rationales and mandates on gender mainstreaming in economic development**

Since the work of the United Nations is guided by the intergovernmental mandates established by the Member States, it is important to look at the mandates developed for incorporating gender perspectives into economic development. Gender mainstreaming was clearly established as a global strategy for promoting gender equality in the area of economic development through the Platform for Action at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Paragraph 58b of the Platform for Action calls on Governments to: *"Analyze from a gender perspective, policies and programmes - including those related to macroeconomic stability, structural adjustment, external debt problems, taxation, investments, employment, markets and all relevant sectors of the economy - with respect to their impact on poverty, on inequality and particularly on women; assess their impact on family well-being and conditions and adjust them, as appropriate, to promote more equitable distribution of productive assets, wealth, opportunities, income and services."* In the chapter on Women and the Economy, paragraph 164 specifically addresses gender mainstreaming: *"In addressing the economic potential and independence of women, Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively."*

The report of the Secretary General to ECOSOC in 1997 pointed out the importance of bringing gender perspectives not only into socio-economic areas where the role of women has long been recognized, but also into areas where gender perspectives have previously not been taken into account (United Nations, 1997, para 3). The agreed conclusions from the discussions of the Commission on the Status of Women on women and the economy in 1997 stated that: *"The interlinkage between national policies at the macrolevel and economic and social gender roles and relations at the microlevel should be clear in order to make the policies more effective. The impact on women of liberalisation policies, which include privatisation, financial and trade policies, should be assessed"* (1997/3, para 23, contained in Commission on the Status of Women, 2000).

The mandate for gender mainstreaming in macro-economics was strengthened considerably in the General Assembly special session to follow up the implementation of the Platform for Action in June 2000. Governments are explicitly requested in the outcome from the special session to mainstream gender perspectives into key macro-economic policies (ibid, 73a). The special session re-emphasized the need to continue to review, modify and implement macro-economic policies related to structural adjustment and external debt problems, in a manner which gives consideration to gender perspectives (ibid, para 54). Particular emphasis is also given to the importance of gender perspectives in relation to budgets and resource allocation. Governments are requested to incorporate gender perspectives into the design, development, adoption and execution of all budgetary processes (ibid, para 73b).

In some areas of economic development there is considerable awareness of the negative impact of gender inequalities, particularly in terms of hindrances to the economic empowerment of women and the elimination of poverty (Platform for Action, 1995, paras 47 and 48; General Assembly, 2000, para 101e). These gender inequalities which hinder equitable and sustainable economic development include imbalances in economic power-sharing; unequal distribution of unremunerated work between women and men; lack of adequate support for women's entrepreneurship; unequal access to and control over capital and resources such as land; and inequalities in access to labour markets as well as in conditions of employment (ibid, para 8). In addition, there is recognition of the need to reconcile employment and family responsibilities if women's economic potential is to be released (ibid, para 20), although little progress has been made in terms of identifying the policy and institutional changes required to make this possible. Failure to recognize and measure in quantitative terms the unremunerated work of women, which is most often not valued in national accounts, has meant that women's full contribution to social and economic development remains underestimated and undervalued. Human capital rationales for investing in women and developing their economic capacity are, however, increasingly utilized by economists.

There has been much less recognition of the importance of a gender perspective in other areas of macro-economic policies and institutions (ibid, para 21 and 53). An increasing number of economists, particularly feminist economists have, however, begun to highlight that macro-economic policies and institutions which do *not* take gender perspectives into account not only often impact negatively on women relative to men, but

through the perpetuation and exacerbation of gender inequality can also impact negatively on the achievement of the macro-economic goals set. There has been an important shift from focusing on how economic policies have affected welfare in a gender-specific manner, to illustrating how gender biases negatively affect the outcome of these same economic policies. Efforts are being made to show how gender is relevant to macro-economic policies and institutions because of the impact of gender inequalities on the major concerns of policy makers, for example, economic growth and structural adjustments (Beneria, 1995; Elson 1991 and 1995; Palmer 1991; Sen and Grown, 1988).

Gender based distortions have been recognized at the level of state, market and households (Palmer, 1991). These distortions occur because of socio-economic biases which discriminate against women, and which are not normally taken into account in economic models and theories. Examples of such biases include discrimination against women in relation to land and credit markets. This discrimination represents a market distortion because resources do not get to those who could make the best economic use of them (ibid). Within the household, exploitative relations between women and men where, for example, men monopolize women's labour for cash crop production, can also lead to distortions. Women's labour could perhaps be put to more economically rewarding uses (ibid).

Other innovative research in this area includes work by Palmer (ibid) on reproductive labour as a form of "reproductive tax". This "tax" limits women's capabilities to engage in remunerative work in the market and actually distorts the production labour market, impacting directly on economic efficiency. Calls for greater sharing of reproductive roles by women and men and ensuring better balance of home and work responsibilities are important for economic development as well as for gender equality. Research by the OECD/DAC Working Party on Gender Equality on programme assistance in a number of areas has revealed significant gender biases in public bodies which affect gender equality outcomes as well as sector goals (OECD/DAC, 1998). These include biased and narrow perceptions of the roles of women and men and lack of representation of the interests and needs of all groups in society. Gender mainstreaming should therefore move beyond descriptive approaches - "women/men in the sector" - to more analytical approaches which assess the sector from a gender equality perspective, recognizing the gender biases in sector structures which are always present even if women (or men) are not visible (ibid and Goetz, 1995). Such an approach would also identify that these gender biases impact negatively on the effectiveness and sustainability of development in all areas, including economic development.

There is recognition that focusing on gender perspectives in budgetary processes can improve transparency and accountability, leading to equitable and efficient allocation of resources for promoting sustainable economic development. There is also a possibility that gender sensitive budget processes can also support reduction of corruption by requiring greater transparency and accountability to all stakeholders.

## **Efforts underway to mainstream gender perspectives in economic development**

Entities in the broader United Nations system, which includes the agencies and funds, are working to incorporate gender perspectives in many areas of economic development, including poverty reduction, labour markets, entrepreneurship development and micro-credit, as will be illustrated later by the presentation by Ms. Jane Youyun Zhang, the Director of the Bureau for Gender Equality in ILO. The work of the United Nations in bringing gender perspectives to bear in other areas of development, such as health, education and agriculture, also contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of economic policies. These brief comments will, however, concentrate on two areas where the United Nations Secretariat is attempting to mainstream gender perspectives in economic development.

Firstly, in keeping with the recent strong focus on gender and budgets, the United Nations is currently working to incorporate gender perspectives into its own internal programme budget process. A taskforce of the Interagency Committee on Women and Gender Equality (chaired by the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, Ms. Angela E.V. King) carried out an initial survey of the efforts of all United Nations entities to include gender perspectives in their programme budgets, as well as more in-depth studies in five entities (December 1999 - June 2000). This work aims to develop methodologies for bringing gender perspectives to the fore in planning and resource allocation, both to better promote gender equality and ensure effective development in all areas of work in the United Nations. Further indepth studies will be carried out in early 2001 in five more entities. Generic guidelines on incorporating gender perspectives into programme budget processes, including budget codes, will then be developed. Although the work is still at an early stage, some results of the focus on the programme budget process can already be seen in the increased clarity on gender mainstreaming in instructions for the programme budget and the growing number of sub-programmes in all sectoral areas where gender perspectives are incorporated. (A separate paper summarizing this project is available).

A second area of activity attempts to come to grips with one of the major constraints to incorporating gender perspectives in macro-economic policies and institutions, that is, the lack of understanding of the interlinkages between gender and macro-economics. When requested to implement gender mainstreaming, economists often respond with questions as to *why* and *how* gender perspectives should be taken into account in areas of their work such as fiscal policy and trade liberalization. To facilitate the development of thinking on these issues among economists within the United Nations, "briefing notes" on a number of key issues in macro-economics and trade discussions are being prepared. These notes, which are very short and concise (four to six pages), illustrate the gender perspectives in current debates in these areas and how incorporating gender perspectives can actually support the achievement of economic goals; begin to discuss how economists could utilize this knowledge in their work; and provide a resource listing of relevant literature, websites and organizations working on these issues. Briefing notes will be available on fiscal policy, international financial flows, domestic financial reforms, debt management and debt relief, private capital flows,

international financial architecture and the policy implications of economic crisis. A second set of notes will focus on trade issues - trade liberalization, international and regional trade arrangements, trade and investment and trade and work. It is hoped that these briefing notes will be utilized in competence development programmes, briefings of staff and consultants and for dialogue with partners, as part of the development of more effective strategies to bring gender perspectives to the centre of economic decision-making, which both increase gender equality and, directly and indirectly, contribute to the sustainable achievement of economic goals.

To further develop the necessary awareness and commitment for bringing gender perspectives into economic discussions, a training programme on gender mainstreaming is being developed for economists in the United Nations. This training will take a very practical and participatory approach, guiding economists in identifying and addressing gender perspectives in their day-to-day work. Consideration is also being given to gender mainstreaming in relation to trade statistics and financial statistics - looking at both the need for increased sex disaggregation of statistics where possible and assessing whether the right kinds of data are being collected to answer key questions relating to gender equality and economic development. Greater efforts could also be made to link the on-going work in gender statistics, particularly on labour markets, to the work in economic and trade statistics.

## **Conclusion**

Since the work on mainstreaming gender perspectives into macro-economic policies and institutions has only recently begun, it is too soon to report on concrete results. However, with gender-sensitive internal programme budget processes in place and greater understanding among economists of the interlinkages between gender and economics and the practical implications for their work, it is anticipated that there will be increased potential to bring gender perspectives to the centre of attention, increasing both gender equality and ensuring people-centred and sustainable economic development. A key challenge, in economic development as in other areas, is translating research and knowledge on gender perspectives at micro-level into macro-level policy, planning and institutional development decisions.

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