

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



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’

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

mainstreaming strategies, and in making visible the existing gaps and challenges of implementation through conducting gender audits etc. In many c

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.