

CHAPTER 13

The Role of National Women's Machineries in Financing Gender Equality

Auxilia Bupe Ponga

Governance has to do with how power is exercised, how citizens acquire a voice and how decisions are made on issues of public concern. While it may be difficult to define good governance, it certainly requires the state to act responsibly and take into account the interests of the people (Yaya Mansaray, 2004). It requires the participation of both women and men in public life as it must relate to society as a whole in its quality and functions. There must also be an effective separation of powers between the legislature, the judiciary and the executive organs of government.

Since at least the first United Nations conference on women held in Mexico in 1975, it has been recognised that women are not fully participating in governance and the development process, and that greater women's participation is needed. As a result of the 1975-85 UN Decade for Women, governments set up desks, units, departments and even ministries to address the issue and ensure that the experiences of women, their concerns and their perspectives, were incorporated in governance structures. These were to be mechanisms, processes and institutions through which women would be able to articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences. The fourth point of the 1991 Harare Declaration also affirmed women's equality and that they must be able to 'exercise their full and equal rights'.

National Women's Machineries

Many Commonwealth countries established national women's machineries (NWMs) in the period 1975-85, although these vary in size, influence and location in the government structure, as well as in the funding they receive. The NWM is supposed to take a leading role in ensuring that the government recognises the importance of mainstreaming gender equality concerns into the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes and projects. It is supposed to provide policy advice and support for capacity building for mainstreaming gender in all government sectors and coordinate a network of structures and processes that attempt to mainstream gender equality concerns in the country. NWMs work across all sectors to facilitate the advancement of gender-aware policies and programmes at all levels.

An in-depth study is currently being conducted to assess how NWMs have performed in the nearly 20 years that have passed since they were first set up. Even without this being concluded, however, it is possible to say that the activities of NWMs have had a positive impact overall in increasing public awareness of gender issues and concerns. Achievements include the formulation of national gender policies and the establishment of national women's structures for gender mainstreaming characterised by gender focal points in line ministries and departments at national and provincial level. Toolkits consisting of a collection of gender sensitisation and training tools have been developed to assist the focal points in their work. A set of checklists, criteria and evaluation frameworks for 'seeing' women's and men's participation, needs and realities more clearly have also been developed and have been used in the provision of technical support to gender focal points.

Challenges include inadequate communication systems between NWMs, gender focal points and co-operating partners, and the lack of technical back-up for the focal points from NWMs. Difficulties faced by most NWMs, especially those in developing countries, range from insufficient funding to lack of capacity in staff. Staff in NWMs usually face structures that are not supportive of gender mainstreaming. A case in point is the way in which an NWM within one ministry depends on staff in other ministries for mainstreaming gender. The members of staff of sector ministries have other responsibilities and are generally expected to mainstream gender in addition to their day-to-day work. The work of mainstreaming gender is often not captured in the job description of sector ministry staff, nor is gender one of the key result areas on which they are appraised.

The budgets that gender focal points have for their regular work do not include work on mainstreaming gender, which is treated as additional and peripheral. This makes them ineffectual and often very little mainstreaming, if any, takes place. These personnel are usually not part of the management structure and therefore do not participate in decision-making. In terms of institutions, national mechanisms are in place to promote gender concerns, but ministries of women's affairs rely heavily on donor funding and the work of gender focal points in other ministries is often unsupported by management.

Whereas much work has been done to build the technical capacity of gender focal points so that they can mainstream gender at national and regional levels, as yet not much can be seen in terms of impact. NWMs have no control over the staff of other ministries, who may be transferred, promoted or given other responsibilities, often without the NWM being consulted, leading to a high turnover of focal points.

Financing for Gender Equality

So how can countries move on to ensure that financing for gender equality is made available? This question needs to be addressed by all NWMs in Commonwealth countries. The timing could not be more opportune, as public sector reforms to make public expenditure more 'results based' are part of the good governance agenda. NWMs can play a leading role in championing a framework that looks at what governments want to

achieve. This approach fits well with the aims of gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) and its concern with the impact of budgetary allocations on women and men. To be effective, a radical change is required in the conventional model. An important aspect of this is to reassess the meanings of economy, efficiency and effectiveness from a gender perspective, and to add a fourth 'e' – equity.

The role of NWMs will be made easier if governments begin to create greater consistency between social commitments and economic goals and how they try to achieve these. The aim of this chapter is not to provide answers to the question of how gender equality can be financed, but to inspire government officials, policy-makers, donor agencies and civil society groups to engage in GRB by demonstrating both equity and efficiency gains. As Budlender et al. (2002) have argued, GRB initiatives are mechanisms for mainstreaming gender into public expenditure and public revenue decision-making, which can lead to more effective policy design and outcomes. However, they note that the technical nature of much gender budget work can obscure the political nature of the budget process and hence the need for advocacy strategies. Political support is crucial, particularly from finance ministries and officials in key sectoral ministries. While ministers responsible for women's affairs are important advocates, they often lack political influence to mobilise support and lack the capacity to address macroeconomic issues. Recommendations include the need for broad-based coalitions, sex-disaggregated indicators, the development of tools for revenue analysis, and more work at the sub-national level (*ibid.*).

In any discussion of the placement, role and functions of NWMs and their partnership with other line ministries, it is important to address the linkages with processes that bring broader public accountability for fiscal policy in ways that are sensitive to the needs of poor women and men. GRB seeks to widen governance and accountability structures by giving women a voice in discussions on public spending, revenue-raising and debt. NWMs are key players in ensuring that the debate on accountability and governance is gender responsive. Accountability in the context of budgets involves four core issues:

- Which players are involved in policy formulation and to what extent;
- How responsive government is to inputs from external stakeholders;
- How transparent the budget process is;
- How credible policy commitments are when assessed against budgetary priorities.

The representation and participation of the people, including women, who are directly affected by budget allocation decisions is important, partly because it is a way of strengthening democracy. However, GRB seeks not only to increase women's participation in decision-making but also to strengthen women's capacity for effective participation and government's capacity to undertake gender analyses and engender macro-economic policies. The key questions that GRB addresses are: What impact does this fiscal measure have on gender equality? Does it reduce gender inequality, increase it or leave it unchanged? Is there consistency between economic goals and social commitments? GRB

demonstrates the potential of participatory budgeting and analysis to make governments accountable to international and national commitments and bring about a fairer distribution of public resources (Sharp, 2003).

Conclusion

While the institutionalisation of gender concerns from 1985 onwards in Commonwealth member states is documented in *Gender Equality: A Decade of Commonwealth Action*, the challenge now is how to finance gender equality for development and democracy. NWMs are encouraged to document the work of women's/gender units and gender mainstreaming activities within the context of member countries, focusing on policy developments, organisational forms and activities over time. Second, their role is to appraise gender mainstreaming efforts at country level through an examination of the organisational set-up and gender mainstreaming efforts. Third, they should ensure that when the financing of gender equality is addressed, NWMs are strengthened and women's/gender concerns in Commonwealth countries are financed through some of the approaches discussed above. Only then can we hope for a world in which women and men have equal rights and opportunities at all stages of their lives and where they can express their creativity in all fields of human endeavour. Only then will women be respected and valued as equal and able partners. It has become clear that fiscal policies and budgets that are gender-blind potentially widen inequality between women and men in areas such as health, income, education, nutrition, democracy and peace – or the lack of it.

References

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