

National machineries for the advancement of women in Africa: Are they transforming gender relations?

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National machinery (or machineries) for the advancement of women are defined by the United Nations as “a set of coordinated structures within and outside government, which aim to achieve equality in all spheres of life for both women and men” (United Nations, 1999). National machineries were designated as central to implementation of commitments made at various UN women’s conferences and given the task of reporting progress to UN agencies.

An eight-country study on national machineries for women in Africa was conducted by NGOs and academics in Botswana, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe and published by Third World Network Africa. This essay discusses the findings of the eight-country study in the light of the prevailing wisdom within the UN about national machineries in Africa.

Two decades of economic crisis and structural adjustment, the triumph of neo-liberalism and the demobilisation of mass political organisations have changed many African countries dramatically. These changes have generated new challenges for implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA). Not surprisingly, the optimism that characterised the 1970s when the national machineries for the advancement of women were established in many African countries has long since evaporated.

Problems only partially identified

The Beijing + 5 report explicitly recognises that globalisation has adversely affected the lives of women and increased inequality, especially in developing countries. Together with structural adjustment programs, the high costs of external debt services and the declining terms of international trade, the policies and processes of globalisation have increased gender inequalities and reduced the resources available to tackle these problems.

Among the many constraints facing national machineries in Africa, the most common were identified in the eight-country study as follows: lack of consistent and clear government support; a general lack and instability of human and material resources; dependence on donors; and lack of credibility with civil society organisations. Other constraints are the unhealthy and stifling competition from other sources of power, *e.g.* first ladies and ruling party women’s wings; lack of influence, autonomy, legitimacy and clear mandates; and the general absence of consistency among their functions, structure and powers.

These findings confirm earlier expert studies and past UN statements on the subject. The BPFA noted that national machineries are “frequently hampered by unclear mandates, lack of adequate staff, training, data and sufficient resources and insufficient support from national political leadership” (Section H, Paragraph 196). The Beijing + 5 report also notes that inadequate financial and human resources and the lack of political will and commitment are the main obstacles facing national machinery. These failures are further exacerbated by insufficient understanding of gender equality and gender mainstreaming within governments, poor attitudes, unclear mandates, a marginalised location within national government structures and lack of gender disaggregated data in many areas, insufficiently applied methods for assessing progress, paucity of authority and insufficient links with civil society as well as structural and communication problems within and among government agencies (Section H, Paragraph 25).

These summary formulations conceal as much as they reveal. Some of the central issues facing national machineries do not get a hearing. This is partly because of the compromise character of such documents. Most problematic, however, is the uncritical acceptance by the UN, governments and many civil society organisations of some debatable notions about what needs to be done. These include widely held beliefs that national machineries have to be located at the highest levels of government and that gender mainstreaming is their most important function. Some of these neglected issues and dearly held notions will now be examined.

Undemocratic governments make undemocratic institutions

Many national machineries were established in the 1970s by undemocratic governments—coup d’etat regimes, military governments or one-party state regimes. The broad lines of the UN mandate gave governments the flexibility to decide on the

location and structure of national machinery. Many of the institutions established or designated as national machineries were part of government bureaucracies. One result of these undemocratic processes has been the instability of location and structure of many national machineries. Ghana’s national machinery, the National Council on Women and Development (NCWD) has since its establishment in 1975 operated from no less than five different locations under five different branches of government, and that will change again in 2001 with a new government in power.

Despite their locations in various ministries, the national machineries studied were not involved in policy-making. Instead, they were engaged in implementing donor-funded projects as a way of shoring up their income base and also taking the line of least resistance. In many cases, they also had to navigate minefields strewn with first ladies and their organisations, women’s wings of ruling parties and powerful NGOs. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in Ghana and Nigeria, first ladies and their organisations reduced national machineries to poor cousins of these better-funded, better-connected and more elaborate organisations.

Donor dependence exacerbates this problem. The BPFA and the Beijing + 5 report do not discuss the political implications of this. Donor dependency leaves national machineries vulnerable to questions about who is driving their agendas. Functions that have not attracted donor support, *e.g.* policy work, are neglected. In some cases, the nature of donor support has robbed national programs of coherence, continuity and sustainability.

Competing with civil society organisations

The Beijing + 5 report cites insufficient relations with civil society as a constraint facing national machinery. Again, there is more to this than meets the eye. Relations between national machineries and NGOs in particular are affected by the larger issue of government-civil society relations. As part of government, most national machineries have inherited some of these tensions. Also, national machineries have to compete with NGOs for limited donor funding.

The claims and counterclaims made by NGOs and national machineries in the course of the eight-country study manifest these tensions. Civil society organisations considered many national machineries to be undemocratic. Claims by national machineries to have consulted NGOs on issues were usually dismissed as attempts to silence NGOs, to play them off against each other or simply to pay lip service to consultation. NGOs disputed reports made by national machineries to UN bodies. National machineries in turn raised questions about the representativeness and integrity of NGOs. In some cases, there was no clarity on either side about what national machinery-NGO relations should be.

In the absence of any structures to adjudicate these tensions, they have become the hallmark of national machinery-NGO relations. As a result, the more influential and established NGOs have tended to carry on their work without much interaction with national machineries, especially in situations where there is a history of government co-optation and repression.

National machinery is not a substantive issue in the BPFA, although institutional mechanisms fall in one of the twelve critical areas. This also explains why NGOs tend to ignore them in their work on implementing the BPFA. Many NGOs work on the substantive

issues such as poverty, education and decision-making. And yet, national machineries need to be taken seriously because NGO efforts cannot replace the role of government. NGOs do not have the power and mandate to take charge. Furthermore, national machinery is part of the broader question of governance and accountability that should concern all members of civil society.

Another constraint is the growing depoliticisation of gender equality work. In some cases, the very need for such work is being questioned. Furthermore, civil society is a complicated space for women's organisations because men dominate its agendas and cultures.

The study found that the structure, functions and powers of national machineries rarely ever matched, *i.e.* that national machineries had many more functions than they could ever be expected to implement in the light of their structure and powers. National machineries come in many institutional forms: councils, government departments, ministries, sub-ministries and very rarely constitutional bodies. Nevertheless, they generally engaged in similar activities and tried similar approaches. Thus they had similar problems with country specificities. Some of their functions are too difficult or inappropriate for many national machineries as presently constituted.

Challenging some long held beliefs

Some interesting questions have been raised on issues of location and capacity of national machineries. Both the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (NFLS) and the BPFA demanded that national machineries be located at the highest levels of government. In the Beijing + 5 document, this demand has been slightly modified. Paragraph 61 states that "strong national machinery for the advancement of women and promotion of gender equality require political commitment at the highest level." This may or may not be a retreat from the highest levels of government rhetoric.

"Highest levels of government" means something different from country to country. In some cases it is the Office of the President. For others, the criteria are budgetary (the finance ministry) or functional (the planning ministry). A problem with locating national machineries at the "highest levels" is that, while it may give visibility and influence, it may undermine the machineries' ability to perform some of its functions. For example, the policy-making process may not be located at the highest levels of government and liaising with NGOs is not best done from the Office of the President. Moreover, critics have argued that the Office of the President is the catchall location for hard to define concerns that are competing for attention and resources. The study concludes that the best location and structure for national machineries has to be determined relative to their functions and powers.

A related question is whether a women's ministry is the best form and structure for national machinery. Typically, in the countries that have never had a ministry for women, activists tended to feel that a ministry would be more effective. In places that have had a ministry, there is increasing scepticism about whether a ministry is the best structure for national machinery. The most significant question raised in the context of this debate was 'when is a ministry really a ministry?' In Uganda in 1998, a Ministry for Women in Development was formed under the Office of the President, while in Zimbabwe a minister was appointed without a ministry. The budget of Ghana's new Ministry for Women's Affairs casts doubt on its ambitions to be a ministry.

Other issues are the political orientation and capacity of staff and the quality of leadership. Staff members of national machineries are often first and foremost bureaucrats who have no roots in national women's movements. Often, they are not up to the highly political task of advocating for gender equality. This has been called the "femocrat" phenomenon. The jury is still out on femocrats. Some consider them to be part of the women's movement operating on a different terrain. Others condemn them as careerists working their way up in the bureaucracy. The study found that most women working in the national machineries were neither highly paid nor on a fast career track. Indeed, high turnover of staff in the national machineries was attributed to a combination of poor service conditions, a sense of marginalisation within the bureaucracy, and the political problems confronting many national machineries.

Leadership is also an issue. Those who argue that senior government figures should oversee national machineries are implicitly giving up on the need for leaders with vision and commitment to gender equality. More often than not, people with gender sensitivity are not in high office and *vice versa*. The study showed clearly that many national machineries suffered from poor leadership and this did not help their ability to influence government policy for gender equality.

Recommendations

The study made several recommendations to address these difficult issues. It recommended the democratisation of the processes of conceptualisation, establishment and governance of national machinery. This should address the questions of effectiveness and stability of national machinery as well as promoting accountability to and better relations with civil society. Also recommended is that national machineries should be non-partisan so that they can represent the views of women across the political spectrum.

The Beijing + 5 report recommends that governments consider establishing effective commissions or other institutions to promote equality. The TWN study proposes an integrated package of institutions to deal with the many and complex functions of national machinery, with clarity about coordination, powers, functions and relations among the institutions to avoid duplication and confusion. One of the institutions in the package should be a constitutional body with powers to enforce its decisions and perform a watchdog role. This is seen as necessary to prevent arbitrary government interference, protect its autonomy and reputation, and allow it wide effective powers.

Staffing criteria should include commitment to both gender equality and gender analytic skills. Governments should fulfil their obligations and prove their commitment to gender equality by providing sufficient resources. Greater cooperation between national machinery and NGOs and other civil society organisations is needed. A stronger, more watchful and more supportive women's movement and civil society will contribute to the quest for more effective national machineries. Identified problems have to be solved in an integrated fashion, since tackling one weakness to the exclusion of others cannot bring fundamental change.

Recommendations of the Beijing + 5 together with the BPFA commitments are a good beginning. They do not begin to address the central problems of national machineries, however. From the foregoing, it is clear that a more serious review and action are needed to put national machineries on the road to recovery and usefulness. ■

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