

Institutional Mechanisms

Definition and vision

The Beijing Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace (“BPfA”) defines Institutional Mechanisms (“IMs”) as one of the 12 critical areas of concern, *crucial* to development in all areas.

IMs (“national machineries” or “gender architecture”) are:

- (a) “central policy-coordinating units inside government [designed] to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas”;
- (b) the means, method, and power to improve women’s and men’s lives, enabling stronger, more resilient and egalitarian societies, compelling governments to sustain gender equality as a priority;
- (c) the structures wherein processes including “gender mainstreaming” are developed.

Sustainability of substantive change requires a collaborative relationship between Government and Civil Society, monitored and empowered through an IM. Wherever change occurs, a strong IM exists.

Approach

This statement incorporates research and analysis of UN CSW Agreed Conclusions and 5-year reviews.

Achievements

Context affects achievements related to IMs: policy making, healthcare, environment. IMs are pivotal in addressing complex challenges and achieving positive outcomes across sectors and disciplines.

By far the most common IM is the administrative agency (in 30 of the 42 participating States).¹ In 23 of them, agencies exist within a specific ministry (say, Ministry of Social Affairs), or in the Prime Minister’s Office.

Civil Society is central to establishment and effectiveness of a national women’s IM in every State, to bring women’s distinct voices to Government in consultative partnership. Frequently, civil society has supported IMs under threat.

Gaps

Gaps in creation and strengthening of an IM:

1. Lack of strong and resilient IM leadership.

Leadership is vital to effective IM development, sustaining collaboration with and openness to a range of voices, from powerful political elites to grassroots feminist activists. IM heads must persuade reluctant but powerful actors, whilst remaining strategic about focus. Persistence, determination, and capacity to withstand discouragement are essential. Facing internal, external

¹ OSCE 2023 survey (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/556587_1.pdf).

and global challenges, the most important quality across IM leadership is continued resilience and adaptability.

2. International standards

Without domesticated international standards IMs are less effective. Codification in national policy of international standards, international frameworks and guidelines provides a road map for IM and other stakeholders, advancing goals for gender equality domestically.

3. Dual-track approach

Combining gender mainstreaming (every policy analysed for its effects on women and men, girls and boys) with specific gender equality approaches, policies and actions in an institutionalized dual-track approach, is fundamental. Addressing equality one-dimensionally (gender-mainstreaming alone, or specific gender equality approaches only) curtails success.

4. Concern for gender equality

Decision-makers' gender sensitivity and high priority for gender equality policy are crucial. "Political will" is a necessary condition for successful action, together with high-level decision-makers' "gender-equality sensitivity" and engagement with its complexity. IMs must take a leading role in education and training of decision-making elite, including upper-level civil servants. Political leaders are far more likely to place gender-equality achievement high on decision-making agendas if sensitised to its importance.²

5. Data

Systematic data collection including sex-disaggregated data incorporating marital status, and civil society participation, especially women's NGOs, underpins successful IMs. Reliable and systematic national data collection on gender equality using international performance standards is mandatory. Data must include differential impacts of policy and practices on women and men.

6. Indigenous women

Indigenous women's work is largely under-recognised and underfunded. National machineries tasked with ensuring Indigenous women's human rights fall short. Coordinated accountability mechanisms are required for implementing and monitoring outcomes and recommendations, with dedicated funding. Full, equal, and effective participation of Indigenous women in decision-making as critical enablers is essential for Indigenous women's advancement.

7. Funding

IMs lack robust funding. Resource allocation and management are weak. Financial institutions and infrastructures intended to promote economic growth and alleviate poverty, deepen gender bias and systematically contribute to perpetuating inequity. Financial policies and practices systematically exclude women's finance access at all levels. Embedded gender-biased dynamics expose the causal linkage with poverty and infrastructure intersectionality.

Challenges

Unclear mandates, inadequate staff and training, poverty of data and insufficient resources hamper IMs. Combined with insufficient national policy leadership support, financial problems,

² OSCE 2023 survey, *ibid*.

institutions working in silos, Civil Society lacking direct communication with policy makers neuter IMs.

1. In many countries, change of government leads to reassignment and renaming of IMs. IMs mandated to enhance gender-equality policies may, under authoritarian regimes, paradoxically serve a conservative agenda, undermining women's rights. IMs working effectively under one government can operate bureaucratically or ineffectively under another.
2. Atop the formal remit, IM activities are framed by their founding documents and formal national gender equality plans. These require clear objectives and measurable goals aligned with the institution's vision; effective governance structure for transparency and ethical decision-making; stakeholder engagement and participation; monitoring and evaluation structures; adaptability and flexibility; capacity building and continuous learning for all involved; and risk management and mitigation.
3. Research confirms IM leadership background and appointment method may affect their approach. IMs headed by individuals connected to the women's movement are more likely to play an "insider role", acting as a women's movement voice and advocate within government.

Resources and advocacy of civil society benefit the multiple challenges faced by society at large yet this important contribution is unacknowledged or unincorporated into the work of IMs.

Existing Commitments

Many Member States have instituted IMs, committing budgets, Ministries and national systems, for example:

(a) National Machinery for Women's Rights budget covering an Equality Unit's operational expenses, and grants and subsidies budget for women's organisations;

(b) National Department of Women's Rights and Equality operating a complex administrative system including a National Women's Rights and Equality Information Centre, with a 125-information centre network at regional and departmental levels;

(c) localisation of gender equality policy through 12 government sectors, 21 provinces, the capital city and eight of its nine districts implementing individual gender sub-programmes;

(d) a gender equality group in each central authority, responsible for gender mainstreaming in the respective government sector;

(e) National Strategy of Gender Equality including gender-responsive budgeting by ministries, municipalities, and other actors.

Ways forward

Advancing IMs to achieve BPfA objectives requires a comprehensive approach addressing three decades of evolving challenges and opportunities.

1. **Strengthening Institutional Capacity:** Develop and implement capacity-building programs targeted at policymakers, government officials, and civil society organizations to enhance their understanding of gender issues in decision-making.
2. **Promoting Inclusive Decision-Making Processes:** Adopt measures to increase women's participation and leadership in decision-making bodies at all levels -national, regional, local, and international forums.
3. **Enhancing Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms:** Develop gender-sensitive indicators and methodologies to gather disaggregated data and assess impact of development and subject-matter policies on women and girls.
4. **Policy implementation:** Administrative resources and organisational structure to pursue gender equality and consolidating policy action throughout the policy process are equally vital.
5. **Triangles of Empowerment:** “Triangles of empowerment”, “strategic partnerships”, and “feminist coalitions” of IMs, NGOs and social movements, and other government and parliamentary actors are crucial to advancing a gender equality policy agenda.
6. **International influence:** International influence on national level policy across the globe is a given, although the exact process of transmitting international gender norms to national level is complex.
7. **Ministerial interest:** When IMs have a close relationship with their minister or cabinet and chief executive, they are more effective in persuading government gatekeepers to provide key support.³

By prioritising these strategies, Governments, International Organisations, and Civil Society can contribute to the fulfilment of the Beijing + 30 agenda, advancing IMs and thus gender equality.

³ OSCE 2023 survey, *ibid.*