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# The Role of National Mechanisms in Promoting Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: Turkey Experience

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**The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality  
and the empowerment of women: Turkey Experience**

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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:**

All UN conferences on women have reiterated the importance of institutional mechanisms to ‘design, promote the implementation of, execute, monitor, evaluate, advocate and mobilize support for policies that promote the advancement of women. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) continues to point out that the main task of NWMs is to support government wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas. (para. 201) They should perform policy analysis, undertake advocacy, communication, coordination and monitoring of implementation, data gathering. It should influence policy and formulate and review legislation. It should report to legislative bodies on the progress of efforts taking into account the implementation of the Platform for Action, encourage and promote the active involvement of the broad and diverse range of institutional actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors to work for equality between women and men and promote and establish cooperative relationships with relevant branches of government, centers for women’s studies, and research, academic and educational institutions, the private sector, the media, the NGOs, especially women’s NGOs and all other actors of civil society. It should further establish links with national, regional and international bodies dealing with the advancement of women, provide training and advisory assistance to government agencies to mainstream gender policy.

The constraints NWMs face have been identified by many observers and can be summed up as the inability to perform the above tasks because of:

- Marginalization in national government structures
- Insufficient support from national political leadership
- Dependence on donor funding and the accompanying implication that gender equality issues are a ‘foreign import’
- Subjection to changing political fortunes
- Unclear and weak mandates
- Lack of adequate staff, expertise and data
- Lack of sufficient resources
- Insufficient understanding of gender equality and mainstreaming among government structures
- Lack of legitimacy and support from women’s organizations

The Beijing Platform for Action lists the following necessary conditions for an effective functioning of such national machineries include getting rid of the above constraints:

- Location at the highest possible level in the government, falling under the responsibility of a Cabinet minister (instead of marginalization)
- Institutional mechanisms or processes that facilitate, as appropriate, decentralized planning, implementation and monitoring with a view to involving NGOs and community organizations from the grass roots upwards (to support the advocacy efforts and expand participation)
- Sufficient resources in terms of budget and professional capacity (instead of lack of adequate staff, training and sufficient resources)

- Opportunity to influence development of all government policies (instead of insufficient support from national political leadership)

It is not terribly helpful, however, to just say the problem is weak mandate and the solution is a strong one, or that the problem is lack of resources, and the solution is sufficient resources. This seems pretty self-evident. It seems that what we need to know why these constraints exist in the first place, how they can be turned into strengths, and what strategies have so far worked to overcome some of them. Thus, I would like to present a set of strategies based on this premise.

### **NWM Strategies:**

I would like to start with pointing out that the very weaknesses of NWMs paradoxically have also led to some positive developments. First, the weaknesses of NWMs (resources, staff expertise and mandate) have opened up the possibility of greater alliances and cooperation with civil society organizations. Second, donor support even though it has led to accusations of gender issues as a foreign import, has encouraged such cooperation. Third, lack of staff expertise has meant that the NWMs have drawn on expertise from academics, activists and brought them on board in the design and implementation of projects, as well as in the writing of country reports to the CEDAW committee. This circumstance has created the opportunity for women in society to form links between themselves, with the NWM, to define women's agenda within the state, and to form links with international and regional organizations, forums and activities. Finally, NWMs are in a bind and find themselves in a paradoxical situation: they are state institutions in the very business of altering those institutions. This requires working inside the state but sometimes against the state. They are supposed to bring in the goals of the women's movement that are outside the state and make them palatable within the state. This creates a dual identity on the part of NWM staff – are they bureaucrats or advocates? When they are seen as advocates, does that reduce the perception that they are serious professionals? They are supposed to bring in the goals of the women's movement that are outside the state and make them palatable within the state. But this very weakness again has opened up a space for women's activists, academics, non-bureaucrats to take important positions within the NWMs, including sometimes the directorship, thus blurring the gap between state and society. **Thus, the first set of strategies and policy recommendations should focus on how to turn seeming weaknesses into strengths.**

Some of the constraints and weaknesses, on the other hand, are not as easily surmountable, and may come from the way NWM tasks are defined. It seems to me that the expectations are quite unrealistic. NWM in most cases cannot design, implement monitor, advocate programs that support gender equality *and* support government wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in *all* policy areas. We are asking the NWM to be involved in all stages of the policy cycle of gender specific programs. We are asking the NWM to be an advocate within government. We are also asking NWM to support mainstreaming within government in all policy areas. What kind of government agency or department is known to do all these things at once? The number and variety of tasks assigned to it tend to create ambiguity and confusion. Are they coordinating, resource-allocating or policy making bodies? Should they be building human resources on gender issues? Should they be promoting internal policy

advocacy and build alliances with other state bureaucracies? How can one bureaucracy undertake all these tasks? **Thus, a second set of recommendations should flow from the need to set priorities, including a coherent gender policy.**

Turning to the underlying reasons for NWMs' weaknesses and devising appropriate strategies, it is imperative that the gender discourses within different institutions of a society are clearly defined and understood, and the NWM placed within these discourses as *one* of the actors. The NWM represents the state as a bureaucratic institution; the state also includes legal and judicial institutions. Within societies, there are also religious institutions, family and kinship institutions, and markets. The discourse of 'gender mainstreaming' comes from the global level, from donors, but it is generally not the discourse of institutions within countries themselves. There are still many places where neither 'gender' nor 'mainstreaming' is clearly understood, let alone implemented. Donor driven projects may, in fact, prevent NWMs from developing coherent gender equality policy and strategies – such policies need to be self-driven to promote national ownership. Gender issues have to be embedded in one's own national context, gender issues have to be defined in one's own language and devise one's own methodology – otherwise the theory and practice of gender equality remains a foreign import. But what does 'self-driven' mean? **A third set of recommendations includes a clarification of how 'gender' and 'gender equality' are understood, interpreted, and contested within different institutions.** How do religious institutions perceive of gender issues? What are the main debates? How do markets and business communities see them? What are the differences within the state institutions themselves? Legal institutions may have relevant laws in place, but how do courts implement them? How do the bureaucracies such as the police bring their own views? Unless these are understood clearly and made visible, the words gender and gender equality are bound to remain the language of donors, NWMs and some women's organizations, who are trying hard to 'adapt' themselves to this language, without internalizing them as it relates to their own experiences. **Thus, a fourth set of recommendations pertains to providing the space for dialogue among these different actors on the meaning of 'gender equality' in a particular policy area. Many times, global norms and accompanying concepts conceal reality, and rather than clarify and seeing things as they really are.**

### **Case study: Turkey's Experience**

The NWM was a top down initiative of the female Minister of Labor in 1990, who was responding more to international mandates than the demands of women. This initiative was caught up in the 'secularism versus Islam debate', leading to the establishment of two parallel institutions: the Directorate on the Status and Problems of Women (the official NWM), and the Family Research Institute. This initiative fueled widespread debates colored by pertinent dualisms on the role of women as well: private versus public spheres, individual versus collective identities, the top down state control versus participation from civil society. Another outcome, besides the two parallel institutions, was the placement and open debate of contested gender issues for the first time on the national agenda.

The Directorate up to date lacks a legal base, and as a result suffers from lack of resources and staffing. However, this seemingly weak structure contributed to the growth and strengthening of the academic and activist capacity on gender issues in Turkey. (Ertürk, 2004) It

led to collaboration between the state and civil society. The NWM invited women from diverse sections of society to attend workshops where strategies and inputs for all major national reports to the CEDAW committee were prepared. For example, the Turkish National Report to the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1994 was prepared with the contribution of over 70 women from different fields and backgrounds. Thus, the report reflected women's views rather than that of a government institution. In the same way, the second and third combined periodic report (1997), as well as the third and fourth combined periodic (scheduled for review by the Committee in January 2005) CEDAW reports were prepared collaboratively. NWM provided the space for the participation of NGO leaders in official delegations to the various international meetings. Thus, the NWM gave women's groups an institutional framework within which to penetrate and influence the state apparatus, to connect with the international gender agenda, women's rights instruments and mechanisms. Women's groups were able to contribute to Turkey's official reports in response to international and regional mandates, including the European Commission mechanisms, intergovernmental bodies of the UN – in particular the Commission on the Status of Women, the Beijing Conference and Beijing + 5 special session of the General Assembly, and to CEDAW Committee. It provided diverse women's groups a common platform for dialogue and gave women ownership of the state's agenda on women's issues. The state, in turn, benefited from the expertise and human resources of women's groups in meeting its mandate and the NWM was able to engender its political agenda and activities somewhat independently of bureaucratic priorities. Thus, the case from Turkey is evidence of how weaknesses can turn into strengths.

The NWM's presence and activities provided a shared space for women, as well as allowing them to develop advocacy experience. Landmark reforms resulting mainly from women's pressure group activities include the adoption in 1998 of the law on domestic violence (Protection of the Family Law), removal in 1999 of the CEDAW reservations, going into force in 2002 of the new Civil Code, the same year the ratification of the CEDAW Optional Protocol, and now the new Criminal Code. To be sure that the application process for EU membership provided a very important opening. Turkey's candidacy to the EU serves as an important catalyst in supporting this process in terms of both democratization measures that the government is compelled to take, but also in terms of enhanced rights and liberties. But the Civil Code, for instance, was under review since 1993, long before Turkey became a candidate for the EU in 1999. The Civil Code reflects significant shifts in the understanding of gender relations, and modifies traditional patriarchy and brings the law in line with CEDAW. The important point here is that women's engagement in lobbying and advocacy activity, with universal norms and Turkey's international commitments as negotiating tools, has increased the likelihood for dialogue among women of different orientations. As Ertürk points out, this is not to say that women's groups have a common stand on all issues. One issue has, however, provoked a response from all corners of the country, of diverse backgrounds and orientations, and that is violence against women, and the so called 'honor crimes'. Honor killings in particular and violence against women in general have become the most important issues that unify women across discourses and ethnicities.

The process of dialogue around common problems within a common human rights framework has created the possibility for transcending the dualisms imposed within formal politics. These dualisms within the context of gender relations are: secularism versus Islam,

individual versus collective identities, private versus public spheres, top down state control versus bottom up, participatory politics based on respect for human rights. Thus, for example, regarding honor crimes and violence against women, both Islamist and secular constituencies have joined hands. Both the NWM (which supports women's individual identity and roles in the public sphere), and the Family Research Institute (that supports as its name implies, women's collective identity and role in the private sphere) have focused on violence related issues. Islamist and secular women have learned from each other: as Islamist women have learned to speak out about their individual rights, secular women have learned to organize grassroots activities and become more service oriented. In March 2004, women joined in sending a communication to the special procedures of the Human Rights Commission claiming that the Turkish government has not complied with its obligations to protect women against third parties.

The experience of the Turkish NWM shows that some of its weaknesses have indeed turned into strengths – in helping to develop gender expertise, supporting women's groups, and linking them with global forums and actors. A coherent gender equality policy still doesn't exist, but the monumental changes in the legal system, the new Civil and Criminal Codes will no doubt begin to be reflected in judicial and bureaucratic institutions over time. As individual human rights takes precedence over state's right to control individuals, women's human rights will improve. But the lack of support for the NWM may be a reflection of the political leadership's greater emphasis on women's 'collective identity' and 'familial roles in the private sphere' rather than their individual identity and public roles.

Turkey's experience demonstrates how NWM roles may change as the political context changes. Perhaps it has outlived its initial purpose. It is interesting to note that the rise of strong women's groups and lobbies in Turkey has diminished the role of the NWM, as women have found platforms and lobby groups to directly influence the policy process, and directly collaborate with donors. Now that a legal framework is in place, and women's organizations have become more savvy, perhaps the new role of Turkey's NWM is to now focus on a) programs to help in implementing the new legal reforms in the courts and bureaucracies with greater gender sensitivity and b) education for women on women's human rights and strategies to approach state institutions in collaboration with women's organizations and state bureaucracies such as the Social Services Administration. Thus, the priorities of NWMs should change and be adaptable to the changing political and social contexts.

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