

## Helpdesk Research Report: Successful Gender Ministries

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**Query:** Please identify examples of 'successful' gender ministries, i.e. cases where such ministries have had a discernible impact on equality or empowerment.

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### 1. Overview

Gender ministries can simultaneously perform a variety of different roles and functions in pursuit of gender equality and empowerment goals. These include advocacy, awareness-raising, policymaking, and coordinating policy implementation (UNIFEM 2009). The literature does not tend to characterise particular ministries as being generally 'successful', or otherwise. Indeed, there is no consensus on what should be achieved by gender-oriented state agencies, which activities should be evaluated or appropriate indicators of effectiveness (McBride and Mazur 2011). Nevertheless, there are some cases where gender ministries have helped push through significant advances in specific areas of gender policy and have, therefore, been considered effective in performing a particular role. This report identifies a few such examples from both developed and developing countries. It also includes information on the factors that may enable or constrain the performance of ministries or other gender-oriented state agencies in general.

Since the Beijing Platform for Action recommended all countries establish 'national machineries'<sup>1</sup>, (state institutions focused on gender issues) to support accountability for commitments to gender equality, there has been growing attention to the ability of these institutions to achieve their stated goals. A notable study led by UN Women, for example, identified a number of achievements mainly in the areas of legal reform, awareness raising and political visibility, increases in women's political

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women define national gender mechanisms as 'those bodies and institutions within different branches of the State (legislative, executive and judicial branches) as well as independent, accountability and advisory bodies that, together, are recognized as 'national mechanisms for gender equality' by all stakeholders'. See: [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/TechnicalCooperation/tcprog\\_strengthening.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/TechnicalCooperation/tcprog_strengthening.htm)

representation through quotas, gender mainstreaming, and capacity building for gender analysis and research (Jahan, 2010).

In spite of the growing emphasis on the role of gender ministries (and machineries in general), measuring their success or impact is considered highly challenging for a number of reasons. On the whole, studies tend to be cautious about making direct causal claims about the role of gender ministries in improving gender equality or empowering women. Experts acknowledge that it is difficult to isolate the role of gender ministries in reform outcomes, particularly because ministries sometimes achieve their goals by working productively with other actors and institutions within and outside government, including civil society (UNIFEM 2009). Some experts emphasise that it is important to distinguish between the *effectiveness* of agencies and the *impact* of agencies, where effectiveness is defined as the agency's role in influencing policy debates and impact is measured by the substantive policies and processes that result from the agency's influence (McBride and Mazur 2011).

The literature on gender machineries has been described as generally fragmented and unsystematic, making it difficult to judge effectiveness and performance (McBride and Mazur 2011). Moreover, studies are often snapshot-oriented in that they give an account of performance at a particular point in time, as opposed to analysing long-term effectiveness (ibid). Much of the available grey literature on gender ministries is in the form of technical reports outlining the role, objectives and functions of ministries, sometimes written by the ministry itself. Organisational reviews and evaluations do not tend to go beyond describing the process and challenges faced by ministries, and rarely link their activities to actual indicators or outcomes.

Whilst rigorous evidence of the impact of particular ministries remains limited, there is nevertheless some consensus around the general types of conditions that can enable or constrain the ability of gender ministries to achieve their goals. A number of factors affecting the success of gender ministries are identified in the literature, broadly related to levels of capacity, resources, political commitment, and prioritisation and positioning within government and political structures.

## 2. Achievements of gender ministries

A major multi-country research programme led by UN Women (Jahan, 2010), entitled *strengthening national mechanisms for gender equality and women's empowerment*<sup>2</sup>, synthesised the experience of gender agencies across five regions, identifying several broad areas where significant achievements have been made. These are:

- **Legal reform.** Many countries have passed laws to guarantee women's equal rights in employment, marriage, divorce and citizenship. Some countries have criminalised violence against women, including domestic violence, which had 'for centuries remained outside the realm of legal redress'. In the survey of national gender mechanisms in Western Asia<sup>3</sup>, Jad (2010) noted the national machinery in Egypt successfully lobbied parliament to change the nationality law, the pension law, the tax exemption law, the alimony fund law, the 'Khul' law and the family court law (p.23)<sup>4</sup>. However, whilst there have been several high profile legal reforms, there have also been many challenges in implementation, hampering durable and sustained progress towards gender equality.

<sup>2</sup> The studies are based on primary and secondary data analysis, desk-based documentary review, questionnaires, and interviews with key informants. See [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/TechnicalCooperation/tcprog\\_strengthening.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/TechnicalCooperation/tcprog_strengthening.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Countries included in the report are: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

<sup>4</sup> Egypt has 'gender units' across 32 ministries.

- **Awareness raising and political visibility.** The studies indicate, albeit mainly through anecdotal evidence, that national machineries have been able to generate greater political visibility around gender equality goals through activities such as training public officials and mass media campaigns.
- **Increase in women's political representation through quotas.** Several countries have seen an increase in women's political representation through the introduction of quotas (e.g. Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan). Quotas are typically achieved through a partnership between government ministries, civil society and the parliament. Data from the Inter-parliamentary union shows that the quota law adopted in Nepal in 2006, for example, boosted women's representation in parliament from three per cent in 1997 to 33 per cent in 2008 (cited in Jahan, 2010, p. 50)<sup>5</sup>.
- **Gender mainstreaming.** Whilst the effects of gender mainstreaming activities are often invisible and therefore difficult to measure, the widespread use of gender-budgeting has been a notable measure of some progress.
- **Capacity-building.** Statistical offices, and research and training centres have helped to improve the capacity of government officials and non-governmental organisations to design programmes from a gender perspective.

Though the achievements above make the general case for the need for gender-oriented state institutions, the synthesis study acknowledges it is difficult to isolate the *specific* contribution of such mechanisms in reform outcomes. This is partly due to the wide scale problem of limited sex-disaggregated data and statistics for in-country monitoring, and partly because other (exogenous) factors and actors may also be at play. As the report notes:

‘Civil society activism, judicial interventions, political mobilization and, in some places, enlightened political leadership have all made their contributions. Successes attributable to the national mechanisms may, thus, reflect their skills and capacity to draw upon some of these exogenous factors in order to strengthen their own authority, advocacy and capacities for implementation’ (Jahan, 2010 p.47).

### **Examples of areas of achievements by specific ministries**

**Domestic violence in Chile.** A report by UNIFEM (2009) cites Chile's National Office for Women's Affairs (Servicio Nacional de la Mujer, SERNAM) as ‘one of the strongest examples of a national women's ministry that has used its status in the government to go beyond raising awareness to take an active role in policymaking’ (p.27). This ministry has successfully advocated for legislation on domestic violence and gender discrimination, including child care for seasonal day workers and maternity leave for domestic employees. A study comparing the relative performance of Chile and Argentina in advancing policies to prevent violence against women found that Chile has outperformed Argentina partly because of the influential role of SERNAM (Franceschet, 2010). In this detailed historical account, the author describes how SERNAM was able to improve policy responses to domestic violence because of its ‘insider’ role (it was directed by a Minister of State well positioned in the Cabinet) and subsequent legislative power. SERNAM also played a vital role in monitoring and reporting problems with the implementation of the law and helped provide advocacy groups and legislators with the necessary tools and data to build public support for reform.

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<sup>5</sup> See the website ‘Women in National Parliaments’: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

**Advancing women's land rights in Rwanda.** The Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) is widely credited as playing an important role, along with the Forum of Women Parliamentarians and civil society organisations, in pushing through the 1999 Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions. This legislation established women's rights to own and inherit land on an equal basis with men and to share ownership of marital property. This, along with subsequent land titling laws, is seen as an important achievement in advancing legal rights for women in Rwanda. Preliminary findings from qualitative research indicate that it is affecting attitudes towards land inheritance and patterns in practice (UN Women, 2011 p. 41).

An article by a Rwandese female MP published in the IDS bulletin (Kantengwa, 2010) similarly argues that in the post-genocide period, Rwanda's gender ministry has played an 'eminent catalytic role in the reinforcement and creation of national mechanisms for women's promotion and in the subsequent promotion of the positive image of the Rwandese woman' (p.75). It argues that by working in a concerted effort with other women's organisations and networks, the ministry has helped to achieve the following.

- Reviewed and lobbied for the repeal of all laws that subscribed to inequalities or any other forms of discrimination against women such as issues of nationality, property ownership and family relations.
- Mainstreaming gender in all national planning and development.
- Ensuring that the budgeting system in the country is engendered at all levels of national expenditure.
- Sensitising the population at large and women in particular to existing inequalities.
- Educating leaders and planners, both men and women on gender issues, concepts, tools, etc.
- Mobilising women to give their views during the constitution drafting process, to turn up in large numbers for the voting processes and to run for political office.
- Building networks with men, especially those within the commission who were drafting the constitution and those within parliament who will debate the final draft, and using gender-sensitive men to reach out to other men (p. 77)

An earlier review of DFID support to the gender ministry in Rwanda (then known as MIGREPROFE), found that in spite of being somewhat over ambitious and lacking in management capacity, the ministry achieved greater awareness of gender issues within government, a framework for the collection of gender disaggregated data, forged stronger links and collaboration with the Ministry for Finance and Economic Planning and helped inform the development of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSP) (cited in Waterhouse and Neville, 2005).

**Gender mainstreaming in Uganda:** The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) in Uganda is considered to have had a discernible impact on specific, strategic initiatives. These have included support to analysis of the links between gender inequality and poverty in Uganda, as well as leading a Gender Task Group that helped to ensure that the Government's Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) addressed key gender issues, such as gender inequalities in land ownership (Waterhouse and Neville, 2005, p.16).<sup>6</sup>

**Achieving gender equality in Finland:** The Council for Equality between Men and Women in Finland has been seen as successful, partly because of its proximity to other government institutions dealing with social policy, its assertive leadership, its statutory power, and its allies in parliament (McBride and Mazur, 2011). This agency moved from playing a marginalised, symbolic role in relevant debates in the 1970s, to an active role in the 1990s. During this decade, it registered

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<sup>6</sup> Note that it was not possible to find additional information on this case in the timeframe of the report.

significant successes in debates pertaining to prostitution, job training, and political representation. For example, it was able to take an active role in pushing the goal of gender quotas in a debate of 1995. This success is attributed to the fact that at the time the agency was led by an MP who was committed to gender quality, and had support from women MPs of all political parties (ibid).

**Addressing sexual violence in Thailand:** One empirical study directly attributes women's machineries, including the National Commission on Women's Affairs, as having played a significant role in tackling prostitution and sexual violence in Thailand between 1989 and 1999 (Leeraisiri, 2004). The study runs counter to the more pessimistic thrust of much of the literature, arguing instead that 'gender machineries can achieve high levels of success in areas of sexual violence policy, even in settings where more established gender norms prevail' (Leeraisiri, 2004, cited in McBride and Mazur, 2011, p. 36). During this time, the state achieved a high level of 'feminism', and the National Commission was able to play an 'insider' role in the development of prostitution policy and participate fully in the policy process. This was partly due to its feminist leadership, but also because it received support from international NGOs.

### 3. Factors affecting performance

Although potted examples of success can be identified, as above, it is widely acknowledged that there are often severe constraints on the ability of gender ministries and gender machineries in general to achieve their goals. UNIFEM (2009) argue their influence over national decision-making and their ability to hold other parts of government to account on gender equality issues depends on their staff and budget resources, institutional location (such as a ministerial cabinet position or a desk in another ministry), their right of oversight on government decisions and their relationship with women's groups. These organisational attributes are often signals of the level of priority accorded to gender issues within government. Many women's machineries are accorded low priority, positioned on the margins of decision-making and chronically under-resourced (ibid pp. 27-28).

In their evaluation of DFID support to gender equality, Waterhouse and Neville (2005) also found that in practice, ministries and other gender institutions are often weak, under-resourced and marginalised within the Government. They argue there is a need for more capacity building and that such support should include the development of clear objectives and strategic planning skills, as well as promoting a wider Government support base for women's voice and accountability. In addition, training should be provided on a long-term basis, be practical and consistent, and help build critical alliances with Ministries of Finance and Planning.

The multi-country study on *strengthening national mechanisms for gender equality and women's empowerment* study (Jahan, 2010) identified a number of factors that enabled national women's agencies to achieve progress towards gender equity goals. These are:

- **Growth and maturation of mechanisms.** The relationship between gender ministries or agencies and the state often evolves over time. In some cases, autonomy can enable a more proactive stance for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.
- **Strong leadership of the national mechanisms.** High-profile leadership has had a significant bearing on the success of different agencies: 'rank and mandate aside, the political and personal relationships that the head of the machinery can develop with the head of state or government and cabinet ministers in critical areas have been a substantial factor in either opening up or closing possibilities of influencing policies, strategies and institutional mechanisms' (p. 53). On the other hand, political closeness can leave agencies vulnerable to changes in government. Overall, national mechanisms may need to navigate through

'potential minefields' in order to simultaneously garner the necessary support and political will from both the state and the women's movements.

- **Synergy among multiple mechanisms.** Success is often enabled by multiple mechanisms working in collaboration. In Ukraine, for example, cooperation between state government authorities, gender focal points, civil society and other academic institutions led to the development of a comprehensive gender equality strategy which stipulated mandatory gender equality expertise in all programmes and projects.
- **Strengthened civil society voice.** Relationships between women's ministries and civil society are important in order to mobilise a wider support base for the work of national mechanisms. These relationships may have historical roots, or can be put into place on a more ad hoc basis. In Brazil, for example, women's groups were invited to participate in the drafting of regional plans of action, which helped to mobilise women and encouraged them to bring gender issues into the public discourse.
- **Regional level cooperation and exchanges.** Regional level cooperation and exchanges can help strengthen the capacities of national mechanisms. The *Southern African Development Council*, for example, has arguably strengthened the diffusion of new strategies and mechanisms for gender-sensitive budgeting.

A background paper for the World Development Report 2011 identifies an additional set of potential ingredients or factors contributing to the success of women's agencies (McBride and Mazur, 2011). This paper is based on case studies from 13 Western, post-industrial agencies from the 1960s to the early 2000s, undertaken by the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS). The research argues that it is important to consider how the following factors might influence agency capacity to be effective in policy debates and implementation.

- **Type of policy issues being considered.** Agency success in influencing and gendering policy debates to promote women's interests tends to be affected by the type of issue being considered. With few exceptions, positions on any issue may be expressed in gendered or non-gendered terms. Even themes like abortion and prostitution frequently come to public agendas as health or crime concerns, not in terms of their effects on women. Thus, when policy proposals are gendered at the beginning of particular debates, they typically open up opportunities for women's agencies and advocates. As issues are debated in policy subsystems and over time, these can become increasingly open to gender influences. Job training and priority issues have been more resistant to gendering over time than abortion or political representation.
- **Type, location, and policy powers of the agency.** Those agencies that are ministries with policy proposal powers and are in close proximity to central powers have the advantage in influencing policy adoption.
- **Qualities of agency directors/ministers.** Important factors include the leader's commitment to gender equality goals, priorities set for the agency, and their political position in relation to decision makers and potential allies.
- **Placement of agency in relation to policy subsystem where decision is made.** For example, policy subsystems that include elected leaders may privilege quasi agencies or cabinet offices; administrative offices may be important if policy subsystem is in bureaucracy.
- **Political leaders who support agencies and movement claims.** Party identification is not a proxy for this support. While there are countries where right wing governments take power and underfund or eliminate agencies, there are other cases where right wing parties are supportive and maintain agencies. Left wing governments are likely to foster gender equality, but they are not always in agreement with positions taken by agencies.

- **Administrative capacity.** Resources should be considered, but in relation to mission and function; there is no structural blueprint for successful agencies. More staff and higher budgets may mean an agency can do more to support women's movement organisations, conduct research and provide services. But those resources are not a determining factor in agency success in influencing policy or opening up politics to gender issues. Similarly a lack of administrative resources does not lead to failure; effective leadership and proximity to centres of power can compensate.
- **Priority of gender equality issues to domestic women's movement as a whole.** When a policy debate pertains to a matter that is among the top priorities of the women's movement as a whole (not just the actors in the debate), agency leaders often use that support to intervene (see pp. 16-17).

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## 5. Additional Information

### Experts Consulted:

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**About Helpdesk research reports:** This report is based on 3 days of desk-based research. Helpdesk research reports are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues, and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.