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National women’s machineries: structures and spaces

NÜKET KARDAM AND SELMA ACUNER

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the ‘lessons learned’ by national machineries in mainstreaming gender issues, drawing from our experience of the Turkish national women’s machinery (NWM) as well as other published case studies. As we enter the twenty-first century, we have seen a number of institutional changes for gender equality. National machineries have been established, restructured, streamlined and upgraded in an effort to promote gender equality and increase NWMs’ capacities where they already existed. The majority of United Nations member states now have national machineries, a number of them having been established in the 1980s and 1990s. The concept of ‘national machinery’ includes many different bureaucratic units, ranging from ministries to desks, departments or directorates. Some may be located within the President’s or Prime Minister’s office; others may be a portfolio within a state ministry or local administration, yet others may be ministries in their own right. The mandates, responsibilities and resources of these machineries vary as well. There are some characteristics that national machineries seem to share. These are: (1) they are all bureaucratic bodies whose mandate includes, in one form or another, changing institutions towards greater gender equality; and (2) they are usually relatively weak compared with other state institutions in terms of resources and political clout. In fact, one of the major recent debates in the literature centres on the marginality and lack of effectiveness of NWMs. This debate acquires greater
importance as development agencies stress ‘good governance’ and the need to strengthen public sector management, transparency and accountability.

We would like to consider the following question here: what role can NWMs play in promoting and institutionalizing gender equality? We will begin our discussion by examining mainstreaming and institutionalization as a goal. We will then focus on the opportunities and constraints that NWMs face within the contexts in which they work, dividing them into political, organizational and cognitive contexts. Finally, we will discuss some strategies for NWMs that emerge from this analysis as well as those that incorporate NWMs but go beyond them to include other political actors.

### Gender mainstreaming and institutionalization

While in the 1970s and 1980s Women in Development advocates talked of ‘integrating women into development’, in the 1990s the emphasis was on the institutionalization of gender issues in development policy and planning. This shift in emphasis stemmed from the recognition that institutions were already ‘gendered’, typically placing women in sex-typed services and targeting women’s reproductive or social functions. It is clear that without changing institutions to reflect and represent women’s interests, the goal of gender equality cannot be attained. ‘Mainstreaming gender’ is a cognitive, organizational and a political process which requires shifts in organizational cultures and ways of thinking, as well as in the goals, structures and resource allocations of governments (see Staudt, chapter 2 in this volume).

Mainstreaming requires changes at different levels within these institutions, in agenda setting, policy making, planning, implementation and evaluation. Instruments for the mainstreaming effort include new staffing and budgeting practices, training programmes, policy procedures, guidelines and incentive structures.

Mainstreaming is a worthy goal but it is a long-term goal that may never be attained in its entirety. It is more useful to think of ‘mainstreaming a gender perspective’ as the
process of assessing the implications for women and men in any planned action including legislation, policies and programmes in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making sure that women and men benefit equally in all political, economic and societal spheres and that inequality is not perpetuated, but reduced. What role can NWMs play in attaining this goal and what constraints have they faced? What can we learn from their experiences and how can these constraints be overcome or at least understood more clearly? After a decade or more of attempts to institutionalize gender, there is a growing volume of data on and analysis of gender issues worldwide. By 1985, over 90 per cent of countries had established an institutional body or system for promoting the status of women. However, NWMs have often proved to be weak, vulnerable to changing political fortunes and under-resourced.

At the heart of the mandate of NWMs lies the promotion of gender accountability. We define gender accountability as responsiveness to the structure of relationships between women and men and the interests of the former at two different levels: the political and organizational. The end goal of the mainstreaming process described above is to achieve accountability for gender policy. How is this made possible? We see policy outcomes as the result of two factors: those pertaining to existing structural constraints and those to available strategies and options. Taking this approach, a number of insights regarding the effectiveness of NWMs can be reached. The constraints posed by conceptual, political and organizational factors shape, define and limit the choices open to actors, in this case to NWMs. This does not mean that there are no choices available but that the choices are circumscribed by the structural constraints. A clear understanding of these constraints will lead to expanded choice and more effective outcomes.

The political context

If politics means, according to one well-known definition (Lasswell, 1951), who gets what, when and how, or the distribution of power in terms of both resources and influence,
the politics of international agencies as well as politics at the national level are of utmost importance for gender policy outcomes. Given the time constraints, resource constraints and competing issues that demand attention from international and national bureaucrats, the question becomes: why should one pay attention to gender issues at all? Overall, international attention to gender equality, a politically committed and stable government, and a strong civil society should all encourage gender accountability and the work of the NWM. We now turn to each of these factors.

**International linkages: global discourse and donor assistance for gender equality**

At the international level the rise of women’s movements since the late 1970s have pressurized development agencies and governments to discuss gender issues and find ways to promote gender equality. NWMs are mainly the result of this pressure and that is also paradoxically what constitutes their weakness. More recently the global discourse on democratization and human rights has further encouraged the institutionalization of gender equality. International social movements such as the women’s movement are generally more successful in bringing new issues on the agenda rather than in institutionalization because they are on the outside rather than the inside. Many NWMs have been established because governments have been pressured in international forums and to avoid embarrassment they have made symbolic commitments, usually not backed by realistic resource allocations. This has meant that NWMs and many women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have turned to international donor agencies for funding. But the reliance on donor funding has also proved to be a double-edged sword.

The objectives of international donors may conflict with the objectives of the recipients, in this case bureaucracies that receive funding for gender-related projects. While the donors attempt to ensure appropriate performance, the recipients wish to maximize their autonomy and resources. Sometimes, the very existence of international donor support may reduce local commitment or interest or lead to the perception that gender-related activities are ‘foreign imports’. For example, Turkish NWM projects and programmes are
supported by international donor agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. Many Turkish NGOs receive funding from the European Commission and bilateral donors of Northern Europe and Canada. These donors have the ability to shape project objectives and activities. NGOs may seek projects that do not fit their goals and objectives just because funding is available. Even when there is a seeming fit between project objectives and broader recipient and donor goals, effective performance cannot be guaranteed because such a fit does not reveal whether the project is a priority for the recipient or not. If it is not considered a priority (this means that either the project objective specifically fits into policy priorities of recipient bureaucracies and/or is supported by top officials in relevant recipient bureaucracies), the project may serve implicit or unofficial priorities instead of official ones. In order to capture resources, bureaucracies may accept unwanted projects.

Once the resources are secured, there is a tendency to abandon implementation and turn to the competition for the next round of resources. This means that the incentives for effective performance are vastly reduced. In the case of projects for women, governments may accept funds for such projects but may not necessarily have the interest or the will to implement them. The identification of programmes to implement may be more influenced by the types of initiative that donors are willing to fund than by a coherent strategy that links implementation and policy advocacy functions. Given that formulating a coherent gender equality policy and strategy is at the heart of NWM effectiveness and is generally considered an area of weakness, the donor-driven projects may in fact further encourage this weakness, rather than allow NWMs to formulate self-driven coherent strategies.

Public administration and development literatures demonstrate how many instances of ineffective public sector management stem from conflicting objectives of stakeholders. In the case of NWMs, conflicting objectives of donors and recipients raise special concerns, partly because NWMs are generally so dependent on donor funding. What strategies may be recommended to NWMs? NWMs have to tread a fine line between international agencies and their
own governments. Being associated too closely with foreign funding limits the opportunities for the ‘national ownership’ of gender issues and may lead to alienation from the NWM’s national constituency. Given that international donors are valuable allies, we would argue for NWMs to formulate their own strategies carefully and diversify their funding sources as much as possible so that they are able to face international donors on an equal footing. These activities also require the identification and employment of national technical human resources.

Activities at the international level do provide legitimacy and support to NWMs. International women’s conventions and platforms for action to promote women’s equality legitimize national efforts. For example, one of the mandates of the Turkish NWM is to act as the link between international platforms and Turkish society, to represent Turkey on these platforms and to make sure that the conventions signed by the Turkish government are adhered to and implemented. There is evidence of the positive influence of international norms from several countries. According to Sawer (1995), even in Western industrialized countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, international pressure has been used by feminist bureaucrats to press home policy change at the domestic level. In Turkey paragraph 4.1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (which provides the grounds for legitimizing ‘temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between women and men’) was taken as the basis of efforts to bring an Equal Status Act to the political agenda. This initiative came from Ka-Der, a Turkish NGO that supports and trains women candidates and the Turkish NWM supported it. Such linkages should be explored further.

Symbolic political commitment to gender equality

Gender equality is generally not perceived as a priority area by politicians and is easily manipulated for their own interests. Furthermore, the few resources accorded to gender equality are in proportion with the small political clout of women’s groups. In many countries the main problem is the lack of ideological leadership. There is no stable political perspective that incorporates and owns gender equality
policies. For example, in Turkey support for gender equality depends very much on the socio-political context of the times, and such support moves from centre-right to centre-left parties depending on political expediency. Under such circumstances, NWMs find themselves in a politically precarious position.

These constraints can and have been turned into opportunities in several cases. As Goetz (1995) has pointed out and is also true in the Turkish case, the weaker NWMs have built partnerships with civil society, including women’s organizations and other stakeholders as visible demonstration of the organization’s commitment to mainstream for equality. In countries where the state tradition is strong, these first steps towards alliances with civil society constitute important ones towards building democracy. NWMs, in order to be effective, have to have a broad base of support and respond to demands from society. In this way, they can build legitimacy and get political commitment.

Political instability

The instability of government and frequent changes of government, including the Minister for Women’s Affairs, have made NWMs dependent on political fortunes in many countries. What does political instability imply for NWMs? Instability leads to job insecurity, an atmosphere of uncertainty. Inevitably, lack of motivation and ineffective performance follow when it is not clear how long one’s job is going to continue. In order not to depend on the top administrative level, which tends to change with governments, it may be a useful strategy to build in-house technical capacity.

Times of instability are also times of transition and do not necessarily signify negative outcomes. As some case studies, such as those of Brazil, Chile and Turkey, have demonstrated, times of transition towards more democratic rule have opened up space for gender policy. Alvarez (1990) argues that in transitional regimes from authoritarianism to democracy, gender-specific demands may stand a greater chance of being met if women’s mobilization is seen as necessary to consolidate the regime and achieve larger developmental goals. Goetz’s research also shows that in countries undergoing a period of transition, such as Uganda
and Chile, some political space to promote women's issues is likely to present itself (Goetz, chapter 3 of this volume). This is not just the case in developing countries. For example, Sawer discusses how women's machineries in Australia and Canada were assisted by a political opportunity structure which included both reforming governments eager to expand the policy agenda and the economic prosperity of the 1970s [Sawer, chapter 12 of this volume and 1995]. Many observers see the Turkish women's movement as the first democratic movement to emerge after the military coup of 12 September 1980. Most agree that the emergence of the women's movement was due to an atmosphere of indifference to women's activities, or perhaps an assumption that it would not create any danger for politicians. In short, NWMs have to be politically astute and ready to seize opportunities when they arise, and even times of instability may be turned to advantage.

The gap between civil society and the state

Lack of trust between governments and women's NGOs hampers open communication and opportunities for reaching a consensus. In authoritarian systems, women's NGOs may not be ready for dialogue on equal terms, being used to taking directives from the state. In Turkey, there is a lack of communication between different women's groups: they compete for the same pool of funds rather than collaborating. Many NGOs do not trust the government yet still want the resources and services it provides. So there is a 'love–hate' relationship between NGOs and the state and among NGOs. States may have a tendency to co-opt NGOs rather than treat them as equal partners, while NGOs may also lose their autonomy and become a part of the state bureaucracy in their eagerness to receive funds and favours. While NWMs need to see NGOs as allies and partners, NGOs also need to remind themselves of their function as pressure groups.

In Chile, some civil society organizations saw the NWM as an arm of a state which did not represent their interests. In Guatemala, the NWM, whose programmes focused on home economics, had little relevance for more radical women's organizations addressing peace, human rights and economic issues (Byrne and Koch Laier, 1998). However,
there are also examples of constructive collaboration. In the Philippines, government agencies have a long history of cooperation with NGOs on gender, facilitated through an alliance of some 300 national women’s NGOs and umbrella organizations, as well as government personnel (Honculada and Ofreno, chapter 6 of this volume). In Belize, the Department of Women’s Affairs and the NGO ‘Women Against Violence’ together carried out a consultation, lobbied the government and eventually succeeded in getting a law passed against domestic violence [Byrne and Koch Laier, 1998]. In Turkey women’s NGOs are partners to the activities of the NWM through their participation in four commissions on health, education, employment and law. It is obvious that collaboration between NWMs and NGOs have both constructive and problematic sides that need to be carefully considered.

The gap between state and civil society can only be bridged through democratic governance. Political accountability is integrally tied to the concept of democratic governance, since without it the latter would be a contradiction in terms. Democratic governance requires both a high degree of accountability of the state and a democratic civil society, as represented in community associations, interest groups and political parties, to influence the processes, regulations and policies and hold the office bearers of the state to account. For civil society to exist, the state must be receptive to possible sources of opposition and recognize the rights of its population actively to participate in all spheres of life. There must be a political culture conducive to political action and participation in NGOs should be encouraged in order to promote citizen involvement and help create a political culture and the social capital necessary to sustain democracy. Turning to Turkey, as this process has begun and gained strength Turkish women’s NGOs have appeared and voiced their concerns. The media cover gender issues on a regular basis and most recently the changes to civil law to remove discriminatory articles against women has been on the public agenda. Ka-Der, whose objectives to increase women’s political participation created a media event by its establishment, succeeded in building alliances with the media and staying on the public agenda.
The relationship between the state and civil society is reflected in the relationship between bureaucrats in the NWM and women’s NGOs in society. If the state tradition is strong and the gap is wide, we also see a general indifference or a ‘looking down’ on the NGO sector by bureaucrats. This presents a very important constraint to NWMs’ effectiveness. But the opportunity is there to find ways to promote open communication between different stakeholders. Several donor projects in Turkey promote collaboration between different government bureaucracies and women’s NGOs, with the NWM acting as the focal point. Yet it has also been found to be quite difficult to allow equal access to women’s NGOs of different ideological persuasions; those that follow the official state position on women are more likely to receive greater support. It is clear that NWMs’ role needs to be considered within the democratization process itself as to a great extent it determines their interaction with other stakeholders.

The organizational context: public sector management

Gender policy and practice takes place within institutions. It is of utmost importance to pay attention to specific organizations’ objectives, goals and procedures in order to understand how they encourage or impede gender mainstreaming. The more recent attention to effective public sector management and streamlining the public sector presents both opportunities and challenges to NWMs. Resource allocation towards gender equality is mainly achieved through institutional mechanisms of the state. New bureaucracies such as NWMs have been established just at the same time as state bureaucracies are being asked to scale down and become more efficient and effective.

Procedural differences among stakeholders and bureaucratic rigidity

Procedures that are control oriented tend to hinder flexibility and response to unforeseen circumstances — qualities that are especially needed in new areas such as gender policy. Control-oriented procedures discourage frequent
consultations between stakeholders and may lead to misunderstandings and resentments. For NWMs, control-oriented procedures may mean that a lot of energy and effort goes to the project proposal and report writing, rather than implementation and policy advocacy activities.

Bureaucracies are generally rule bound and top down, but over-centralization leads to rigidity and resistance to change. Procedural differences are even more important if the organizations involved operate in different cultural and economic contexts. What this means for project teams is that they are accountable to several masters; that is, they have to work with at least two different organizations with quite different procedures. Furthermore, in a typically hierarchical bureaucracy, staff at the lower levels are usually reticent in voicing positions in opposition to their bosses for fear of losing their jobs. This leads to bureaucratic rigidity, a lack of creativity and flexibility. Bureaucracies in general are not open to agendas which challenge accustomed organizational patterns and this is a special concern for NWMs working in a new area.

Yet within these constraints, NWMs need to find ways to promote change by acting as advocates for gender equality and find strategies to promote change. This requires presenting new information/facts to policy makers to convince them why a new policy should be formulated. Without the conscious effort of some people, a new issue will not be accepted. What is required is the formulation of gender issues in ways that gain acceptance and fit in with the larger goals of government, with national development policy and plans. For example, Waylen (in Goetz, 1997) has argued that the National Service for Women, the Chilean women’s bureau established in 1990, succeeded because it consciously sought to achieve outcomes which fitted with the agenda of the government; that is, measures associated with poverty alleviation rather than those which threatened to alter gender relations directly. It is also necessary to define gender issues in one’s own language and devise one’s own methodology; otherwise the theory and practice of gender equality are bound to remain a foreign import. Gender issues have to be embedded in one’s own national context.

It is very hard to be an agent of change if one’s priority is to keep one’s position; career aspirations often compete
with the commitment to gender equality. The paradox that NWMs face is the following: NWMs are state institutions in the business of altering those very institutions. This requires working inside the state but sometimes against the state. This means that NWM staff have to acquire a dual identity: they can’t be just bureaucrats; they have to bring in the goals of the women’s movement that are outside the state and make them palatable within the state.

*Weak bureaucratic position and unclear mandate*

Overall, NWMs are still not equipped to alter the incentive structures governing individual bureaucrats or departments. According to Goetz, they usually cannot offer material or status rewards, they cannot provide useful technical support, and they lack the powers of ultimate sanction over policy and programme proposals that fail to incorporate gender-sensitive perspectives (Goetz, 1995:52).

There is usually ambiguity regarding the role of NWMs: are they coordinating, resource-allocating or policy-making bodies? Should they be building human resources on gender issues? Should they promote internal policy advocacy and build alliances with other state bureaucracies? How can one bureaucracy undertake all these tasks? Should the role of the NWM be a resource for policy dialogue on gender equality, a place for establishing common ground for joint efforts among all sectoral counterparts and pertinent actors such as advocacy groups, women’s movements, women’s NGOs, public officials, political parties and the media?

The central mandate of NWMs should be preparing, monitoring and assisting in the implementation and monitoring of policies in line with the demands of civil society. To this end, collaboration with women’s NGOs is of utmost importance, without which NWMs cannot be effective and legitimate. NWMs will have to work closely with gender specialists or gender units of other bureaucracies, building networks and alliances, and sharing good practices related to mainstreaming a gender perspective in all substantive programming areas, as well as with the media and the private sector. NWMs will need consciously to find and cultivate groups in society who are allies, to whom they can provide resources and who are able to pressure the government on behalf of the NWM.
Weak monitoring systems

Gender sensitivity requires an accountability structure that provides appropriate motivation, based on incentives such as pay or promotion to monitor performance. If there is a failure to relate incentives to performance on a fair and compulsory basis in regard to women’s empowerment, public institutions will simply not be responsive. Bureaucrats will be attracted to gender programmes only if they believe that there are opportunities to be tapped; once funds and other incentives dry up they are likely to fall back on traditional gender discriminatory practices (Bangura, 1996:31).

Policies should be further elaborated by action plans or strategies which clearly describe goals, tasks and accountability for gender equality mainstreaming at all organizational levels. Gender training and other similar activities should be employed in order to develop clear and salient procedures, guidelines, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms so that the question of ‘how to mainstream gender’ is addressed and understood.

There is, however, a previous step that needs to be completed before mainstreaming can occur. Legal tools for gender equality have to be in place and administrative bodies that are entrusted with the task of mainstreaming, such as ombudspersons or equal opportunity commissions, have to be in place.

Gender budgeting practices

All national bureaucracies implementing policies and programmes and disbursing budgets should publicly report on their performance and national and international civil society organizations should be empowered to monitor this performance. There should be systematic gender analysis of budget allocations at all levels, with special emphasis on the reallocation and effective utilization of resources. Good practices in gendered budgeting should be shared. Specific time-bound targets for the achievement of gender equality should be set and monitored. Overall, means to transfer gender equality rhetoric to substantial policy need to be found and by that we mean redistributive policies which are lacking in many developing and developed countries alike.
Cognitive context

NWMs generally face an environment in which gender issues are considered sensitive and contested. There are conflicting ideas on what the role of women in society ought to be and conflicting perceptions of the causes underlying gender inequality. There are no clear and salient solutions in this issue area. Furthermore, what women can and cannot do strikes at the core of societal rules and, in many developing countries, these rules are not necessarily agreed upon.

In order to promote a new policy, a gap between reality and the desired state has to be seen. Furthermore, reasons for the existence of such a gap need to be elaborated so that, based on these reasons, one can devise ways to overcome them. There is a wide diversity of views regarding why there is a gap between what exists and what the ideal state of gender relations, of development and of gender relations in development should be, as well as how this gap should be overcome. Gender and development combines two broad theoretical issues: women’s and men’s social, economic and political roles within society and the nature of development itself. As is well known, international development agencies states, and various groups within developing countries differ on the definition of both of these issues. The international women’s movement itself has not been able to reach an agreement, except in broad terms of promoting gender justice and overcoming discrimination against women [Kardam, 1991]. This is mostly because the definitions had to be left broad and ambiguous in order to elicit cooperation from different actors. Unfortunately, this state of affairs leaves a great deal of responsibility to domestic actors to define, interpret, and come to an agreement on what gender equality is and what to do about it.

Looking briefly at gender relations, most would agree that the power relations between women and men are unequal and that what women do is generally undervalued, but the reasons why this is the case and the policy recommendations that stem from these reasons differ vastly. If the reasons for unequal gender relations are seen as being
caused by exploitative economic relations, as socialist feminists view them, then policy recommendations would include the different treatment of women from different socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, for example, different policies for urban middle-class women, urban factory workers, domestic workers or peasant women in rural areas would be devised. On the other hand, if the crux of the issue is seen as the lack of opportunity for women within male-defined institutions, then policies are targeted to establishing space for women and rewriting laws to promote women’s interests.

The discourse on development, like the discourse on gender relations, also presents a vast and colourful array of definitions and policies that flow from these definitions. Since the issue is not gender relations per se, but gender relations in development, gender policy and practice has been justified and interpreted differently depending on the development policy that a government follows. When efficiency and economic growth are emphasized, the economic contributions of women to development are brought on to the agenda. Policy recommendations then include ways to improve their contribution to national development through programmes and projects in training, education and employment of women. It is suggested that patriarchal norms, principles and institutions be dismantled to the extent that they interfere with women’s contributions to economic growth. When equity, basic human needs and welfare issues dominate the discourse, the discussion turns to women in poverty and lacking in basic human needs. Recommended programmes then include increasing literacy, providing loans for small-scale enterprises for women, providing upgraded technology to reduce hours of work, and the like. More recently, with the introduction of the term ‘empowerment’ into development, women’s empowerment has come on to the agenda. Women’s empowerment includes achieving control over one’s life through expanded choices. The policy recommendations that would flow from this view would deal with, for example, ways of resolving conflicts between women’s reproductive and productive roles, child care and men’s share in the maintenance of the family, as well as women’s overall participation in the redefinition of gender relations and the meaning of development itself.
Strategies for NWMs

In countries such as Turkey, where there is a wide diversity of ideological positions and conflict between secular and Islamic positions on women, NWMs may face a difficult situation, depending on which political party is governing. Political parties and women’s groups represent many diverse views on the reasons for gender inequality. How can the NWM prevent this diversity from turning into a ‘cacophony’? One way that governments deal with diversity of views is to cater to the politically important groups separately, if necessary. In Turkey, two separate bureaucracies have been established within the State Ministry for Women’s Affairs, one that deals with the status and problems of women and the other with the family. However, because they were located under one roof — namely the same ministry using the same resources and personnel — they engaged in efforts to gain control over the other’s operations. Furthermore, different ministers in charge of the State Ministry for Women’s Affairs showed favouritism towards one or the other of these bureaucracies. Experience shows that units established with similar mandates need to be given autonomy from each other so that they can compete fairly.

A second strategy is for the NWMs to identify the different stakeholders on gender policy (such as women’s NGOs, research centres on gender, local governments, international donors, ministries and the private sector) and to ask them each to present their views in terms of both the causes of gender inequality and the solutions they propose. Overall, one of the major challenges that NWMs face is to formulate a coherent gender equality policy through valuing differences, synthesizing diverse views and, sometimes, recognizing indifference. Such a policy requires an awareness of the cognitive context, an awareness of both the national and international gender discourses, and development policies, including economics and budgeting.

Conclusions

NWMs face some formidable challenges. They are expected to provide leadership as the focal point for follow-up to the
Beijing Platform for Action and are indeed expected to be a public sector institution, as well as a set of policies. They need to be catalysts for action by other government ministries and the agency that builds the capacity of other government ministries. To undertake this capacity-building function in other institutions, as well as of itself, is a formidable task for which sophisticated political and bureaucratic skills are required. Furthermore, NWMs are expected to work with international donors, develop coherent strategies, and manage the process of policy advocacy and relations with other institutions, while delivering programmes directly to the public! These expectations are too high even for the most efficient bureaucracies. The function of catalyst offers few political rewards. This is a long-term process in which the achievements are slow and incremental and where it is generally difficult to demonstrate progress. Thus this ministry or NWM is not often the most attractive assignment for politicians or experienced bureaucrats. On top of this, the actual and perceived weaknesses of the NWMs have meant that some donor agencies are reluctant to work with them. We have asked NWMs to be an ‘ideal, non-existent bureaucracy’ and have punished them for not living up to their task!

We would argue that NWMs should have an achievable agenda. First, NWMs need to be involved in a redefinition of gender issues in alliance with international donors, women’s NGOs and their own governments that is appropriate to their own contexts. Second, they need to clarify their position, develop coherent strategies and engage in incremental steps, such as the development of procedures, guidelines and support gender training programmes. Third, they need to cultivate political allies. Leadership is a matter of entrepreneurship; it involves the combination of imagination in inventing institutional options and skill in brokering the interests of numerous actors to line up support for such options. In order to do this, one needs to be aware of the structural constraints discussed above, so that options and strategies can be devised within these constraints.

While it is important to understand the role of the NWMs, we cannot just focus on them without understanding the role of other political actors. Gender accountability requires broader conditions that include: (1) a political commitment
to gender equality, including by political parties; (2) constitutional guarantees to gender equality; (3) a political culture that institutionalizes democratic and participatory values; and (4) the existence of gender-sensitive and knowledgeable women and men in decision-making positions. Perhaps we need to revisit the conventional understanding of the notion of national machinery. Case studies on the experience of national machineries suggest that policy processes are complex and multi-layered, not linear and pre-defined. As such they require multiple interventions by different actors. At a recent expert group meeting which examined case studies from the Dominican Republic, Romania and South Africa, it was concluded that successful gender mainstreaming is unlikely to take place in countries where this responsibility is located in a single governmental body. For example, the South African case showed that it is possible to institutionalize a variety of structures, instruments and mechanisms to serve the purpose of gender mainstreaming at the state level (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women [INSTRAW], 2000). These may include gender equality commissions made up of representatives of political parties, NGOs and government departments, women’s advisory committees in legislatures, monitoring bodies to measure the implementation of national plans of action, special units in ministries, ombudspersons for gender equality and family courts. As United Nations reports show these have already been established in some countries [INSTRAW, 2000; UNDP, 1995]. It is thus time to insist that states should move beyond the symbolic commitment to gender equality which has often translated into the establishment of NWMs. NWMs should be provided with the required clout and resources to monitor state practice and simultaneously mechanisms should be set up so that NWMs’ work can also be systematically monitored.