

## **Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women**

National machineries for the advancement of women have been established in nearly every country around the world. They include offices, commissions, agencies, and ministries on the status of women. The first offices of this nature were endorsed by the League of Nations and the International Alliance of Women. One example is the Women's Bureau in the United States, created in 1920 as part of the Department of Labor, whose remit is to promote the welfare of female workers by formulating standards and policies to improve their working conditions, efficiency, and opportunities for employment. However, most agencies were established following the United Nations First World Conference on Women in 1975. The initial mandate of these offices was to advance the situation of women in education, politics, and the economy. They were later made responsible for implementing a new policy approach known as 'gender mainstreaming' following the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Examples of these offices worldwide include the National Women's Service in Chile, the Government Equalities Office in the United Kingdom, the Commission on Gender Equality in South Africa, and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development in Malaysia.

In addition to national machineries, several regional and international organizations have also set up gender agencies. In the UN system, four different offices were created to deal with issues of gender equality: the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), and Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI). They exist alongside the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), created by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1946, whose annual meetings contribute to defining and elaborating UN policy on women and gender. In 2010, the General Assembly voted unanimously to create a new office, the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), to merge and build upon the efforts of DAW, UNIFEM, INSTRAW, and OSAGI to accelerate progress in this area. This step was justified on the grounds that gender equality is not only a basic human right, but also spurs economic growth. A similar step was taken by the European Union, which in 2006 set up the European Institute for Gender Equality to assist the EU institutions and member states in promoting gender equality through public policy. Nonetheless, the oldest regional agency of this type is the Inter-American Commission of Women, a specialized unit of the Organization of American States, which was established in 1928 as a forum for generating hemispheric policy to advance women's civil and political rights.

The shared concern of these offices, both national and international, is to further gender equality and women's empowerment. Approaches for achieving these goals, however, have evolved over time. Initially, most machineries focused on policies ensuring equal treatment, seeking to gain for women the same rights that were already enjoyed by men. This strategy was later criticized for simply assimilating women to a male standard. A second approach then emerged, addressing women's needs as women through such measures as affirmative action, recognizing that distinct policies for women and men may be required to ensure gender equality. Dissatisfaction with this strategy led to a third approach, known as gender mainstreaming, popularized around the globe through the Beijing Platform for Action. The mainstreaming approach involves evaluating every prospective policy (1) with a gendered lens and (2) with the goal of promoting equality between

women and men. As such, it differs from prior strategies in seeking to apply a gender perspective across all policy areas, including those where a gender dimension is not readily apparent.

The widespread presence of women's policy machineries, however, belies important variations in the strength and status of these agencies, whose resources are often vulnerable to changes in government and donor funding priorities. The result is that these offices diverge greatly in terms of their budgets and staff, the length of their mandate, their closeness to the executive, the backgrounds of their agency heads, and their policy priorities. In some countries, for example, agencies have ministerial rank, while in others they are housed in the office of the president or under the auspices of another ministry, such as justice or social development. Few machineries have the power to negotiate their own budgets, and many have only a handful of staff members. In addition, their existence and status may depend closely upon the will of the president or prime minister, who may fundamentally reorganize their mandate, for example by adding a focus on family and children or by combining the unit with other offices focused race, disability, and sexual orientation. An ongoing concern is therefore whether these agencies are endowed with the power to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

### **Biography**

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