

2

The Context

Mandates for Gender Equality and Equity

Advancing gender equality and equity has been mandated internationally by the Commonwealth, by the UN and related agencies, and by some regional groupings.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is committed to gender equality and equity. The central strategy of the 1995 Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development is the mainstreaming of gender considerations into all government policies, programmes and projects. The Plan of Action advocates the adoption by member governments of a national gender action plan, and emphasises the importance of a strong national women's machinery, with authority emanating from the highest level of government and adequate resources, to lead the mainstreaming process.

Among 15 government action points under the Plan of Action, seven are of particular relevance to public service commissions, central personnel offices, and similar government agencies:

- 1 establish and strengthen gender management systems and national women's machineries;
- 2 integrate gender issues in all national policies, plans and programmes;
- 3 build capacity in gender planning;
- 4 become a model of good practice as a gender-aware employer;
- 5 promote equal opportunities and positive and/or affirmative action throughout the country and consult women and men equally on priorities;
- 6 take action for anti-discrimination;
- 7 take action for women's participation in decision-making.

As key players in the staffing of governments and the management of personnel in the public service – with responsibilities that can

include appointments, promotions, training and discipline – public service commissions and central personnel offices are strategically placed to carry out these action points and make a significant contribution to advancing gender equality, both directly (within government) and indirectly (in the wider society).

Global commitments

The Platform for Action adopted by the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing called upon governments, the international community and civil society to take action on 12 critical areas of concern, including “inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources” and “inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels” (United Nations, 1995a). Under these concerns the following strategic objectives were stated:

- ◆ eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination;
- ◆ take measures to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making;
- ◆ increase women’s capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

As the leading public sector employer in many countries, the public service has a clear responsibility to work towards the attainment of these objectives.

Many countries of the Commonwealth have also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which commits governments to passing laws to remove “women’s subordinate status and promote setting up of institutions that further women’s advancement” (CEDAW, 1995).

Development of Theoretical Approaches to Advancing Gender Equality

The United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women (1975-1985) encouraged UN agencies, national governments, and NGOs to develop projects and programmes that would improve the economic and social position of women. The demand for policy attention to women’s needs in development was often

framed in terms of access or 'integration' to a range of development policy-making and project institutions. The implicit assumption behind many of these policies was that women's main problem in developing countries was insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development.

The Women in Development (WID) approach was premised on this assumption and on the underlying rationale that women were an untapped resource that could provide an economic contribution to development. The thinking behind the WID approach was strongly affected by the assumption that heavy investment in education systems and in the development of highly trained workers and managers would result in the transformation of predominantly agricultural societies into ones which were industrialised and modernised. It was assumed that women and men would benefit equally from these changes.

This assumption began to be questioned in the 1980s, however, as the relative position of women over the two decades of modernisation had not only shown very little improvement, but had actually declined in some sectors. Gradually, it became widely recognised that women's experience of development was different from that of men, and research began to focus on women's views, opinions and experiences.

The gender and development (GAD) approach was offered as an alternative to the WID approach. This approach questioned the previous tendency to view women's problems in terms of their sex i.e. their biological distinctions from men – rather than in terms of their gender i.e. the social relationship between men and women in which women have been subordinated and oppressed. The GAD approach also emphasises the importance of taking into consideration class and race distinctions, and intra-class/race variations as these relate to gender.

The GAD approach supports the WID view that women must be given the opportunity to participate on equal terms in all aspects of life, but its primary focus is to examine the gendered power structures of society. The state is expected to assist in this process of promotion of women's emancipation, and has been called upon, for example, to assume the responsibility of facilitating women's participation in the productive sphere by providing social services such as child care, which women in many countries provide on a

voluntary or private basis. The GAD approach also places strong emphasis on legal reform.

The shift in emphasis from WID to GAD has the potential for more efficient use of development resources, and greater long-term benefits, since a major objective of the GAD approach is ensuring that women are empowered to affect development planning and implementation. In the GAD approach, women are viewed as agents of change rather than as passive recipients of development assistance. However, government practice has sometimes been slow to follow this shift in theoretical perspective (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999b).

Gender mainstreaming involves, among other things:

- ◆ focusing attention on the vital roles played by women as well as men in sustainable development, and ensuring that these roles are acknowledged;
- ◆ ensuring that women's and men's voices are heard equally and that both women and men participate in making decisions that affect their lives, at all levels: the national level of government and the public service, the local and community level, and the family and personal level;
- ◆ ensuring that, in all sectors, policy is developed based on sex-disaggregated data and an awareness that policy decisions impact on the lives of women and men in different ways;
- ◆ ensuring that the delivery of government services is equitable and that resources are allocated to women and men – and among different social groupings according to age, race/ethnicity, class/caste and other differences – on an equitable basis;
- ◆ empowering women to define and articulate their needs and aspirations, and to acquire skills, experience and self confidence in order to participate equally at all levels; and
- ◆ ensuring that language used in policy statements and other documents is gender sensitive and inclusive, and does not imply bias towards a male perception of society.