

The preparatory meeting for the ECOSOC 2005 High-level Segments  
16-17 March 2005

**Roundtable 5: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women**

Strengthening institutions to deliver on commitments to gender equality and women's  
empowerment

**Chair: H.E. Mr. Jaime Moncayo Garcia** (Ecuador), Vice-President of ECOSOC

**Moderator: Noleen Heyzer** (Executive Director UNIFEM)

**Participants:**

Key elements and messages from the discussion included the following:

**Centrality of gender equality**

Gender equality is central to the upcoming Millennium Summit + 5 as is the need for the Beijing PFA and CEDAW to inform the Summit and the MDGs. The panel noted that the Seven Strategic Priorities of Task Force 3 for achieving gender equality are the *minimum* requirements to reinforce all of the MDGs. The FAO emphasized the centrality of women's education in relation to issues of nutrition, and hence to overall poverty reduction. Civil society was encouraged to lobby representatives at the ECOSOC

### **Increase women's representation**

The weakness of women's presence in governance and within development institutions was noted as one cause of the failure, thus far, to implement commitments to gender equality. For example, too little progress has been made to achieve the commitment of 30% female representation in Parliaments. Women's representation is essential to advancing development, hence panelists advocated for a boost in women's representation in governance, within the architecture of institutions and through gender experts with requisite standing to influence decisions.

### **Systematize and strengthen gender equality mechanisms within existing institutions**

Within institutional structures, the advancement of gender equality is constrained when it is one of many competing agendas, lacks a critical mass of change-agents and is caught up in the confusion over gender mainstreaming. A positive example of change within women's organizations in Colombia demonstrated the need for a clear set of priorities for gender equality advocates. The formerly splintered groups honed their numerous competing agendas to a coherent and agreed set of messages in order to influence the peace process.

Within the United Nations system, field experiences of engendering CCA/UNDAFs, PRSPs, and NEPAD, demonstrated that regional inter-agency cooperation was an important mechanism for enhancing action on gender equality within institutions and processes. The TCPR is another positive roadmap for the future, with clear points highlighted for ways of strengthening the UNCTs work on gender equality.

### **Eliminate institutional blockage**

Institutions were defined as formal and informal rules that determine who does what, who gets what, what counts, and who decides. Formal organizations, because they are embedded in social contexts, tend to reflect and reproduce existing power imbalances. So while their formal rules may specify non-discrimination in serving a population, they often operate according to rules and values that may be hidden – which *do* discriminate against women and the poor. It is necessary to disaggregate institutional activities and shift mandates in ways that allow us to understand what they do well and to hold them accountable for those outcomes. Four strategies for making organizations more responsive to women's interests: 1) Allow political access by constituents, with substantial gender expertise in place; 2) Track progress toward positive social change rather than through discrete countable measures that are poorly connected to women's empowerment; 3) Create an institutional culture that does not perpetuate power imbalances and the public-private divides in society (e.g. women's unpaid labor as a subsidy to support men's public participation); 4) Examine how the work is conceived and whom it serves through gender-sensitive norms and understandings of rights, economics, and governance.