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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

The evolving status and role of national mechanisms for gender equality

Parliamentary mechanisms for gender equality and the empowerment of women, and collaboration with other stakeholders at the national level*

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Chairperson
Ladies and Gentlemen

Namibia's quest for democratic governance in the past 20 years has borne witness to significant progress in the area of gender equality through Government policies and programmes, which include the domestication of international conventions and national policies, as well as gender-related law reform.

The Government of the Republic of Namibia has assented to several international agreements for the promotion of gender equality such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Parliament approved in 1992; the CEDAW Optional Protocol, ratified in 2000; the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, the Beijing Platform for Action and the African Regional Platform for Action that assert the need for gender equality. These international instruments contributed to the development of the National Gender Policy and Plan of Action

related NGOs and academic institutions.

Progress

Namibia has made progress in the social and legal arena to realize gender equality. There has been significant progress towards reform of discriminatory laws, but this has not occurred without resistance from the male counterparts. Parliament has passed laws that govern women's right: Married Person's Equality Act (No. 1 of 1996); the Affirmative Action Act (No. 28 of 1998); the Combating of Rape Act (No. 8 of 2000); and Combating of Domestic Violence Act (No. 4 of 2003) to mentioned but a few.

Available data also indicates that most men and women in Namibia have a good working knowledge of issues associated with gender equality. However, the internalization of both men and women of the concept of gender equality is varied.

Women have begun to advance in Government. There is now a significant number of women in top Government positions such as Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Directors, Deputy Director etc. This is evidence that women's social status has improved considerably.

Through government and political party policies, as well as pressure from civil society, there is a high number of women participating in the political process and making significant strides in being elected in some government sectors. However, women as political leaders do not necessarily translate into women moving gender issues forward. Although there has been progress in women's greater political representation, there has not been a corresponding increase in levels of political influence.

Despite the political support from Government and best efforts by gender advocates, there are still negative attitudes toward gender equality, both at community and national level, that are serious challenges to the implementation of gender policies and programmes, not to mention women's greater participation in power-sharing and decision-making. Many men, having become used to their privileged positions, desire to maintain the status quo.

It is worth noting that civil society has not been very effective in utilizing regional and local councils in accessing Parliament or pushing gender equality issues forward in the general public. Advocacy programs targeting Members of Parliament are carried out but are not always well thought through, and their strategies of action are not always clearly linked to gender equality issue. Therefore, measuring their success is not

increased, although women are far from having 50 per cent representation in higher-level decision-making positions. At national level, the

are still a limited number of women in power-sharing and decision-making positions. If gender issues are to be more aggressively addressed, the government needs enough women in positions of power to form a 'critical mass' so that women can overcome patriarchy and become the voices for those women who are still at the periphery.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to conclude by saying that despite the progress made by Namibia since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, women cannot obtain gender equality in the social, economic and legal spheres of Namibian society without greater participation in power-sharing and decision-making structures. In Namibia, the struggle for gender equality is not only played out at the social and legal levels, but also in the political arena. Therefore, development of greater gender equality must simultaneously occur at the social, legal and power-sharing levels.

Thank you for your kind attention