

PRE-CONFERENCE MEETING

Women in Local Authorities' Leadership Positions:
Approaches to Democracy, Participation, Local Development and Peace

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It is an honour to represent the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs at this important conference. I congratulate the organizers, and in particular the Regional Council of Tuscany, the Commune of Firenze, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Euro-African Partnership, for this initiative. I welcome the participants from so many different countries and I look forward to hearing about the practical experiences of

an important step towards democracy – among other things, women’s participation ensures diversity in contributions to policy-making and can offer new perspectives and priorities. Broader participation of women at local levels may also be an important first step towards increased political participation at the national level – although this is not automatic.

Around the world, however, women are still not systematically brought into consultation and dialogue around local planning and management. Women are far from being represented equitably as elected officials and government employees at local level. The 2006 figures from United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) indicate that women constitute only 9 per cent of mayors and 20 per cent of councillors globally. As a result, local-level institutions, facilities, and services are not always conceived with women’s needs, priorities and contributions in mind, which can result in, among other things, neglect of critical areas or inefficient public infrastructure and services.

It needs to be noted that decentralization does not automatically ensure increased participation of women. The local context is not always inherently more democratic or more open to women’s involvement. Because women’s participation is a recent innovation in many contexts, the local environment may be very hostile to their involvement. Prejudices against women’s involvement can be more strongly held at local than at higher levels. Local government in many areas has been shown to be particularly responsive to informal institutions and relations of power, rather than more formal rules and procedures, which often advantages men rather than women. Considerable specific support is required to ensure that women can participate effectively.

It is also important to keep in mind that representation of women in different bodies and processes does not necessarily ensure their effective participation. Ensuring that both women and men will be able to influence decisions and resource allocation requires going beyond increasing the numbers of women in different positions to providing real opportunities for influencing the agendas, institutions and processes of decision-making.

In addition, the presence of women does not in itself guarantee that gender equality issues will be placed on the agenda or that outcomes will be gender-sensitive. All actors – men as well as women – must have the awareness, commitment and capacity to bring attention to gender equality perspectives. Women may need training just as much as men. Men must become active partners in achieving the goals of gender equality and empowerment of women, including the increased involvement of women in local government. Progress is dependent on men’s willingness to question gender stereotypes and change existing structures and processes, including redefining the roles of women and men in both public and family life. Awareness-raising and capacity-building must be specifically targeted at men, including public officials.

Steps to increase women’s participation and attention to gender perspectives

Three broad strategies can be identified for increasing women’s participation in local and regional governance, under which specific actions/measures need to be taken. Firstly, equal representation in political decision making must be promoted. Successfully implementing this strategy requires political will by local and regional authorities and clear targets, backed if necessary by legislation, for example legislation to reserve a percentage of seats in local bodies for women. Secondly, women must also be given the opportunity to participate as employees of local governments in the management of local services.

Municipal councils, for example, must develop measures to encourage women to take up key

women are stereotypes on the roles and expected behaviour of women which confine women to subordinate positions in public life. These barriers limit women's opportunities in public life at all levels, including local government, including by reducing their self confidence and self esteem.

In many countries, poverty also negatively impacts women's ability to participate in public life. In relation to elected positions, the high cost of seeking and holding public office may also be a constraint – both in terms of financial and time costs. Women may lack the required finances for campaigning.

The unequal division of unpaid domestic work, including care-giving, between women and men also constitutes a significant barrier for women in all regions of the world, constraining the time available for involvement in political processes and limiting opportunities for full-time employment outside the home.

Among the most pervasive factors limiting wo

decentralization policies and local governance include:

- the incorporation of gender perspectives into policies, strategies and action plans in all policy areas, for example health, transport, security and the environment;
- establishment of requirements for consultation with and participation of women in decision-making processes;
- development of gender-sensitization progr

Even when economic rights for women do exist, they may not be enforced; women may not know about these rights; or social norms and practices may make it impossible for women to claim their rights.

The value of networking

Networking – the third issue you will address today - remains a key strategy for ensuring women’s effective participation in local governments and securing the required attention to their concerns and interests in decentralization processes and in the work of local authorities. The Euro-African Partnership for Decentralized Governance has already done significant work to develop common goals and approaches and to enhance the sharing of information on strategies and outcomes on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women between local and regional authorities in Africa and Europe. I look forward to hearing more of your practical experiences on how this has supported the participation of women and attention to their concerns and interests in your local contexts.

There are a number of specific areas where strengthened networking and increased sharing of experiences, lessons learned and promising practices would be useful. In particular, innovative measures are urgently needed to address the stereotypical attitudes and practices which hinder the participation of women in decision-making. Efforts should be made to engage educational institutions and the media in actively promoting positive change. The achievements of women in leadership roles in local governance should be made visible and celebrated.

Change in attitudes is needed among women as well as men. It is therefore critically important that women who have achieved leadership positions in local government actively support other women and promote gender equality and empowerment of women. Mentoring programmes should be used to provide positive role models for younger women. Career guidance should provide information on potential openings in local and regional authorities.

Another important gender equality issue which local governments should give increased attention to is the unequal burden of unpaid work, including caregiving, carried by women. This is particularly critical in the context of HIV/AIDS. Without support through the provision of necessary infrastructure and services, and more equal sharing of these responsibilities between women and men, women’s productive capacity is severely restricted, with significant consequences for local development. Steps to address this problem can be taken at national and regional levels, but the role and inputs of local government is critical. This issue must be urgently addressed at local level to release the full economic potential of women as employees, entrepreneurs and as farmers.

The context of the financial and economic crisis

Allow me to also briefly address the theme of the Conference tomorrow – the financial and economic crisis. The goals of promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment through decentralization processes and in local and regional government take on increased urgency in the context of the current financial and economic crisis. There is a risk that it may become more difficult to achieve many of the desired policy responses at local level because of the impact of the lack of resources, or because an alleged lack of resources may be used as an excuse for not taking action on gender equality and

empowerment of women. A challenge will be to keep the focus of the response to the crisis at local level on social development and gender equality.

Experience from past economic crises has indicated that the unemployment of women may increase, although they may not be the first group to be affected. Even in contexts where male employment is more significantly affected, experience shows that women often increase their work outside the home to compensate for the income loss in the household. In many cases, this work is in the informal sector and may be in vulnerable sectors with low wages and poor working conditions. Economic crises often also result in reduction of, or increase in the cost of, services such as health, education and child- or elder-care. This may result in significant increases in women's unpaid work as they compensate for the loss of essential services. Work programmes established to create employment and social protection measures may ignore the priorities and needs of women and target only men. Given women's critical roles for the welfare of families, and in particular children, it is critical that responses to the financial and economic crisis, at all levels, including the local and regional levels, are carried out in a gender-responsive manner, giving due consideration to the ways in which planned interventions will meet the specific needs and priorities of women and men and will impact on women compared to men.

The effective use of gender-responsive budgeting becomes more important in the context of the crisis. Gender-responsive budgets allow local governments to integrate gender analysis into expenditure policies and budgets in different sectors. This does not imply

on mainstream issues. The broader the base of participation in power structures and decision-making processes, the greater the transparency and accountability.