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The Institutionality of Gender in the State: New Analytical Perspectives

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This document was prepared by Virginia Guzmán for ECLAC's Women and Development Unit.

This document has not been subject to editorial revision. The opinions expressed herein are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Organization.

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Summary

This document posits conceptual frameworks for a reading of gender mechanisms that seeks to analyze them as part of the broader process of which they are an expression: the legitimization and institutionalization of the new challenges facing society and the state. These processes are evident at the national and international levels, in civil society and in international organizations. They include the construction of new concepts of gender relations in various societies, the inclusion of inequality-related problems on public agendas, and the institutionalization of the issue within the State. Such institutionalization is manifest in new frameworks of meaning that inform policymaking, in changes to institutional agendas, in specific programmes, and in the creation of new bodies, laws, norms and resources to advance the situation of women.

The legitimization and institutionalization of new issues do not occur in a vacuum but in real societies with varying degrees of cultural diversity and organizational density, with different political systems, specific political cultures and degrees of institutional development, and distinct levels of development and modernization. A country's own characteristics thus condition and shape the processes under study. The prospect of legitimizing gender inequality as a public issue is subject to economical, political, legal and institutional conditioning.

Hence the process being analyzed is closely linked to developments at the various levels of society and public institutions, and especially to the degree of cultural opening, democratization, institutionalization and social integration.

This document draws on various sources: assessments, comparative studies by ECLAC and other organizations, the reports of experts' meetings, and material from women's office. Research and analysis by scholars from the feminist and women's movements has also been consulted, as has the specialized literature on State reform and public policies.

The document is organized as follows:

First, it examines the emergence of a new social subject, women, at the national and regional levels. That process brings into question current conceptions of gender, introduces new issues to the public debate, and places gender inequality-related matters on public and institutional agendas.

Second, the document examines the process whereby the institutionality of gender came to form part of the institutional agendas of the United Nations and the governments in the region.

Third, it considers the current debates on the role of the State and clarifies the various social, political, institutional and symbolic determinants that facilitate or hamper the inclusion and institutionalization of gender in public policies.

Finally, in light of the foregoing concerns, it puts forward some considerations to be taken into account in drawing up the agendas of gender institutions and in devising their strategies for action.

Presentation

There has been a longstanding debate on the meaning and role of gender mechanisms in the State,[1] and in recent years the gender institutions set up in various countries have been subject to assessments, comparative studies and attention at meetings of experts. These largely descriptive studies have mainly examined the institutions' characteristics and the strategies adopted to meet their objectives, and have reviewed the extent to which the stated goals have been met. The studies tend to contrast the actual workings of gender institutions with the ideal model arising from the recommendations of recent international conferences on the issue.

The studies and experts' meetings concur in many of their conclusions, notably: 1. The gap between the scale of the task assigned to the offices and the attributes and resources available to them. The offices lack sufficient authority because of their position in the hierarchy, their scant professional and technical resources, and their limited budgets. 2. The wide gap between the understanding of the issue among the offices' staff and the level of knowledge among authorities and officials in other sectors of the State. 3. The differences (and even contradictions) between the authorities' and officials' discourse and actual institutional practice. 4. The instability of the process: neither the hierarchical position nor the goals attained are stable over time. Advances deemed positive at a particular moment can be dismantled by a succeeding government, and a policy that is initially accepted can face opposition later.

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[1]   To facilitate reading, institutional mechanisms will hereinafter be termed gender institutionality or women's offices.

This document posits conceptual frameworks for an alternative reading, one that analyzes the mechanisms as part of the broader process of which they are an expression: the legitimization and institutionalization of new issues in society and the State. Such processes unfold at the national and international levels, in civil society and within international organizations. They include the construction of new conceptions of gender in various societies, the inclusion of inequality-related issues on public agendas, and the insititionalization of the matter within the State. Such institutionalization is manifest in new frameworks of meaning that inform policymaking, in changes to institutional agendas, in specific programmes, and in the creation of new bodies, laws, norms and resources to advance the situation of women.

The process can be analyzed from the viewpoint of innovation (the perspective of the emergence and dissemination of new ideas), the characteristics of which can help overcome the resistance to change evident in all societies and institutions.

The legitimization and institutionalization of new issues do not occur in a vacuum but in real societies with varying degrees of cultural diversity and organizational density, with different political systems, specific political cultures and degrees of institutional development, and distinct levels of development and modernization. A country's own characteristics thus condition and shape the processes under study. The prospect of legitimizing gender inequality as a public issue is subject to economical, political, legal and institutional conditioning.

The ideal context for the emergence, development and stability of the processes under study is marked by a culture of equality and plurality, the rule of law, transparent public and State institutions and a vigilant citizenry, as well as economic and social policies that reduce inequality between individuals.

This document draws on various sources: assessments, comparative studies by ECLAC and other organizations, the reports of experts' meetings, and material from women's office. Research and analysis by scholars from the feminist and women's movements has also been consulted, as has the specialized literature on State reform and public policies.

This document, however, is not an exhaustive empirical analysis of conditions in all the countries of the region. It is above all a conceptual framework whose potential stems from an analysis of certain processes in particular countries, especially the Andean and Southern Cone countries with which the author is most familiar. The author is aware of the richness of processes in other countries of the region, but these cannot be addressed at this stage of the analysis.

The debate on new conceptual frameworks should enable gender institutions to develop a more systematic and dynamic means of addressing the different scenarios, actors and institutions involved in gender legitimization and institutionalization. This is especially useful for devising political and strategic alliances geared to integrating gender in public policies, and to strengthening women as social and political actors. It could also help reposition the work of gender institutions within the broader challenges facing the governments of the region: economic growth and social equity, democratization and State modernization, governability and the development of a more democratic political and civic culture.

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First, it examines the emergence of a new social subject, women, at the national and regional levels. That process brings into question current conceptions of gender, introduces new issues to the public debate, and places gender inequality-related matters on public and institutional agendas.

Second, the document examines the process whereby the institutionality of gender came to form part of the institutional agendas of the United Nations and the governments of the region. It examines the various attitudes towards the women's offices since 1975, linking those attitudes to

changes in thinking, greater knowledge of the gender issue, and the transformation of the State. Although the document highlights the influence of conceptions and discourses arising from United Nations agencies in establishing an institutionality of gender in the State, there is no gainsaying the crucial importance of the women's movement in the various countries of the region and at the international level in challenging gender relations, in mobilizing new ideas and discourses on what constitutes the feminine and the masculine, in proposing new norms for inter-gender relations, and in placing gender inequality-related problems on public and institutional agendas.

Third, it considers the current debates on the role of the State and clarifies the various social, political, institutional and symbolic determinants that facilitate or hamper the inclusion and institutionalization of gender in public policies.

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I. Gender Relations in the Public Debate and on the Public Agenda

Public problem-building and agenda-setting stem from complex sociopolitical processes that embrace other issues: the creation of social subjects, the design of new frameworks for interpreting social conditions, the power relations between different social subjects and actors, and the establishment of political alliances and strategies.

Agenda-setting is conditioned by the openness of a society's public and cultural life[2], and by the transparency and democratic functioning of its institutions. In that light, agendas are reliable indicators of the level, scope and depth of a society's democracy and openness to change (Luis Aguilar, 1993).

According to Aguilar, Cobb and Elder, Cobb and Ross, and Muller and Surel, *public agendas* comprise all the issues that members of a political community perceive as legitimate concerns that merit attention. An *institutional agenda*, for its part, consists of all the problems, demands and issues that are explicitly accepted, ordered and selected by those responsible for decision-making as objects of their actions (Cobb and Elder, 1986; Cobb and Ross, 1976; cited by Aguilar, 1990; Muller and Surel, 1998).

Not all the problems that are viewed as issues of public interest are placed on the agendas. Their inclusion depends on the way in which they are interpreted; on the power, resources and

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[2]   See Guzmán Virginia, Mauro Amalia. (1999).

strategies of the actors that promote them; and on the specific nature of the institutional sphere targeted for access.

To be included on agendas, problems should be expressed in terms that are consistent with general cognitive and value referents (beliefs and norms). According to David Knoke and Edward Laumann (1979), the subjects that mobilize them should develop discursive and political strategies with a view to positioning the problems, raising their profile, and increasing their importance to other social actors or officials.

The interpretation and definition of problems, as well as the development of alternative solutions, prompt repeated exchanges, confrontations and agreements between the various subjects and institutions involved in agenda-setting. Hence the understanding and meaning of the problems are transformed over time in line with the forum in which they are discussed, the actors involved, and the alliances and commitments between the latter. In non-state public spaces, women's interpretation of violence differs from that of members of parliament or public officials.

Not all the subjects that participate in these processes have the same resources or equal access to the forums where the agendas are debated. Additionally, the various forums are not equally open to the different problems. For example, although the problem of domestic violence has been accepted onto public, parliamentary and government agendas, issues associated with sexual and reproductive rights have not been so accepted.

In effect, public spaces block the inclusion of certain issues and social subjects. They exert pressure to exclude the weakest or most conflictive actors, and the criteria of hegemonic priority spur the subordination of some issues to others.

The problems that have the best chance of inclusion on agendas are those promoted by central actors in the social and political system, and that are most consistent with shared discursive conceptions and norms. Access is also easier for issues that have public support and that are disseminated and discussed in the media. Nonetheless, controversial or potentially conflictive issues promoted by strong and high-profile social groups or movements are also included on the agendas.

With regard to the access of problems to the public agenda and the actors that promote them, R. Cobb, J. Ross and M. Ross (1976), cited by Alfonso Arrau (1999), distinguish three forms of public agenda-setting. Their approach, which is very useful for analyzing the legitimization and institutionalization of gender inequalities as a public issue, highlights three models: mobilization, internal access and external initiative.

The mobilization model seeks to account for the transfer of an issue, by political and institutional actors, from the political-institutional agenda to the public agenda. It refers to the decisions, initiatives and policies mobilized by a specific political actor to win public support or legitimacy, to which ends efforts are made to make the issues known to and accepted by the community. The internal access model examines issue-building patterns within the political-institutional agenda, wherein various interest groups exert pressure for the benefit of their own interests. Publicly visible collective actors participate in the external initiative model. Aside from their particular motivations, these actors have an interest in participating in the discussion of public issues. The main actors involved in setting this agenda are civil society groups: professional groups, churches, student federations, ethnic, women's and human rights movements, voluntary associations, etc.

These three patterns of access can be present in the process of including gender issues on public agendas, depending on the timing and on the actors that take part. The external initiative model takes account of the start of the process, when gender inequalities are recognized as a public

problem by social subjects (women) who organize and mobilize from civil society, and it encompasses all the initiatives that arise from civil society on this issue. Once the issue is institutionalized by the State, however, new political and institutional actors can move (normally more precisely defined) problems onto the public agenda, as well as possible solutions.

The problematization of discrimination against women and its inclusion in the public debate are not unprecedented. The rise of modernity as an historical and ideological construct that acknowledges the equality of persons has enabled women to claim equal rights with men.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, women in various countries of the region fought for access to education, political participation and the right to vote. The suffragettes developed links with each other that transcended national borders, albeit to a lesser degree than in the case of the feminist and women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In a significant number of countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala and Venezuela) the right to vote coincided with the deepening of democracy, which helped the suffragettes to secure compliance with their demands (Line Bareiro, 2000).

Depending on the country, the second wave of the feminist and women's movement began in the 1970s and 1980s. This movement re-established women as social subjects who in this period demanded respect for their differences and the right to equality.

The rise and development of the feminist and women's movement in the region can be examined in terms of the simultaneous influence of: 1) the opportunities offered by political and institutional systems; 2) organizational resources and collective patterns; and 3) the interpretative frameworks guiding their behaviour (Doug McAdam, John McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, 1996).

These factors interacted with and nourished each other in the movements' establishment and subsequent development. The opportunities for collective action, as well as its scope and nature, were structured by the political system. The movements' formal and informal organizational structures influenced the breadth and characteristics of this exchange and debate between the actors, and affected the methods used to mobilize around issues of common interest. The combination of these two factors – political opportunities and organizational structures – provided only the structural base for action. The promotion of collective action required a new and shared vision of the world, and widespread acceptance of the proposition that situations deemed unacceptable could be overcome by such action.

In some countries (Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Uruguay) the feminist movement emerged in the wake of concerted efforts by some women's groups to delineate a new discourse on the situation of women within the prevailing frameworks of meaning. According to Virginia Vargas (2000), the transnational feminisms of the 1980s emphasized the political character of women's subordination in the private realm and its effects on the presence, visibility and participation of women in the public sphere.

The first expressions of the feminist movement emerged in the mid-1970s within a popular, progressive or left-wing ideological context with a strong Marxist bent.[3] In this context women gradually (with certain tensions and contractions) began to define themselves as social subjects that differed from other subjects. They did this by identifying female subordination as an expression of a specific system of inequality that differed from the system of class inequality. The debates on the priority of class or gender, and the tensions between *políticas* and feminists, evidenced the emergence of new frameworks of meaning.

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[3]   Since the 1970s important women's groups have benefited from the expansion of education, the widening of the labour market, changes in family structure and greater control over their fertility. Since the 1960s many of these women have participated in the broad spectrum of left-wing reformist political and social movements that sought to transform society.

Since this discourse was adopted by an increasing number of women, it created a space for interaction that underpinned the development of a collective conscience and a sense of belonging. That in turn helped build a specific identity. Hence the construction of new frameworks of meaning is simultaneously a process of power-creation, whereby an actor achieves self-worth and affirms her own interests.

Established in the region in close coordination with the international feminist movement, the new feminist discourse has great potential for cultural criticism and change. It not only demands, as in the past, that women have access to the public space through education and political participation. It also questions how society conceives of the feminine and the masculine, the norms on coexistence between the sexes, and the mechanisms for constructing different subjectivities. It opens the private sphere to public scrutiny.

The autonomy of this discourse depends on cultural opening in the different countries, on the relationship of each country's feminist movement with the international feminist movement, and on the kind of leadership that has developed.

Bolivia's feminist movement, for example, found it much more difficult than its counterpart in Peru to distinguish itself from the prevailing frameworks of meaning. The Bolivian women's movement was obliged to function in a context of Marxist and culturalist propositions that were reluctant to acknowledge the subordination of gender in indigenous cultures and to identify new causes of discrimination outside the capitalist system. In Peru, on the other hand, the feminist movement quickly asserted its ideological and organizational autonomy.

Feminist discourse does not preclude debate, nor the existence of different strands within the movement. In a number of countries at least three strands communicate, struggle and form alliances with each other: intellectual feminism, popular feminism and political feminism.

As a result of different circumstances and contexts, traditional political parties and social organizations in most of the Andean and Southern Cone countries were weakened, and they ceded ground to new social organizations and movements.

In countries under dictatorship, such organizations facilitated contacts between people from the old social and popular organizations; party, union and professional activists; and those with no prior organizational experience. Women affected by political and social conditions joined these organizations.

At an early stage a number of women's groups also established links with the international feminist movement while in exile and participated in feminist networks in the region. These groups helped to spread new ideas to other women's organizations. The rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the countries of the region also endowed the feminist movement with new organizational resources, and in time many women's groups became NGOs.

The value accorded to solidarity, and the degree of personal affective commitment to the new ideas, gave rise to a dense network of different organizations. This network brought together women from different backgrounds and helped the movement to penetrate new spaces, crossing class barriers and the urban-rural divide. The network made visible the emergence of a new type of political action based on gender discrimination.

The prospect of extending this new field of action and disseminating its ideas beyond the women's organizations depends on the opportunities offered by the political system and the movement's range of action, as is illustrated by the cases of Chile, Bolivia and Peru.

In Chile the military dictatorship kept the movement under its control, which prevented the dissemination and discussion of new ideas and the promotion of a broad cultural debate. In Bolivia,

the movement asserted its public presence and by the mid-1980s the media were making references to it, reporting on its events and seminars, and disseminating its proposals. A Women's Coordinating Committee, set up in 1984, grouped feminist organizations, other gender-related NGOs and some governmental organizations. This was "one of the first attempts to at State-society coordination on the issue of women".[4] The Women's Platform[5] sought to promote reforms and legislation, and began a civil society campaign in coordination with the Parliamentary Women's Commission to define rape as a public crime. In the 1990s the Women's Coordinating Committee proposed sectoral policies to "include and institutionalize gender in the state apparatus and in the main trends of development investment".

In Peru, women disseminated their ideas simultaneously in different forums: culture, politics and social organizations. The movement took part in political marches and mobilizations of various kinds, and organized mass cultural events, seminars, workshops and public debates. In mid-1985 it presented two feminist candidates to parliament and subsequently supported the municipal council candidacies of popular organization leaders. At the end of the 1980s the country's grave political-institutional crisis hampered these organizations' penetration of the political system and its dialogue with the State.

In Chile, the legalization of opposition political parties and the 1988 plebiscite broadened the public space. Women organized under the *Concertación* of Women for Democracy and drew up a gender agenda for inclusion in the programme of the incoming democratic government. Women activists played an important role in intermediating between the movement and the political parties.

These three examples reveal that the characteristics of the political system (the weakening of dictatorships and the return to democracy) favoured collective action that enabled women to assert themselves as social subjects in relation to other social actors, particularly the State.

As noted earlier, however, if gender is to be included on public agendas it must be expressed in terms that are consistent with the prevalent cognitive and value referents. Each new paradigm is grounded on a linkage between the movement's general and specific principles. Although new frameworks of meaning create borders and mark out groups and organizations, they also demand new forms of expression and new means of transcending borders if their relationship with society as a whole is to be considered.

In the cases under study, feminist discourses and proposals were linked to broad social discourses such as a country's growth and development, social equity and the fight against poverty, State modernization (Bolivia, Peru), the protection of human rights and the return to democracy (Argentina, Chile).

Since the 1990s, the creation of an institutionality of gender in the State (to resolve the problems attendant on gender discrimination) is a demand common to the region's feminist movements. They are surely influenced by the recommendations of various United Nations conferences on women, and by the debates on State modernization and the redefinition of State-society relations.

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[4]   Sonia Montaño, cited by Virginia Vargas (2000).
[5]   Appeared at the end of the 1980s, promoted by CIDEM.

II. The Institutionality of Gender on Institutional Agendas

A. The institutionality of gender on the international agenda: the international conferences of the United Nations

The discussion about women's offices began in the 1970s in the context of the Mexico Declaration on the Equality of Action of Women and the World Action Plan (1975), and in the framework of the approval of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979).

The purpose and nature ascribed to the offices by the conferences has changed over time with the acquisition of greater understanding and knowledge of gender relations, social and economic transformations in the various regions, and the continuation of the debate on the State. The experience acquired in different countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as at the world level, has also affected the offices' proposals and characteristics. The experience of Spain's Institute for Women's Studies merits special mention because of its influence on the countries of the Southern Cone, as does that of Chile's National Women's Service (SERNAM).

The conclusions of the 1975 World Conference on Women in Mexico declared that "the establishment of an interdisciplinary and multisectoral mechanism within governments, such as national commissions, women's offices and other bodies with adequate staff

and resources, can be an effective transitional measure for hastening the attainment of equality of opportunities for women and their complete integration into national life."

The goals and functions assigned to the first offices were influenced by the "Women in Development" (WID) approach, and by the characteristics of the States – developmentalist, centralist, bureaucratic – where such offices were set up. The WID approach promoted the integration of women in development without taking account of the links between the position of women in economic structures and gender relations. Neither did it consider the influence of unequal gender relations, nor the links between productive and reproductive roles in access to productive resources. The offices sought to foster the integration of women while attending to groups that were extremely vulnerable. Institutionally, they were located in hierarchically subordinate positions and entrusted with the promotion of women-related programmes and projects that were largely isolated from other areas of public endeavour.

When the first women's offices were created in the region, the feminist and women's movement, as we have seen, was asserting itself as a distinct subject that would basically grow and expand at level of society. The movement asserted its autonomy from the State, which led it to disregard the latter as a significant interlocutor or as an element of change in gender relations.

The mid-1980s saw the emergence of a new interpretive framework known as Gender and Development (GAD).[6] This approach centered not only on unequal relations between the sexes but also on the structures that spawn inequality. From this perspective, changes in gender relations require the profound transformation of existing structures. This approach sought to assimilate gender into the mainstream, which requires decentralizing responsibility for gender equality towards the public sector in policymaking, programme implementation and service provision.

The GAD approach inspired the recommendations of the Third World Conference on Women (Nairobi 1985), which proposed that mechanisms should be instituted at the highest government levels and should be endowed with sufficient resources to advise and follow-up on the impact of policies on women. Although the terminology of gender mainstreaming was not used, the conference's propositions and recommendations implied that the progress of women was conceived as the outcome of collaboration between women's offices, ministries and government agencies.

The Platform for Action approved by the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) was a significant landmark in defining the institutionality of gender. The assessment of women's offices highlighted the fact that they lacked clear mandates, sufficient staff and appropriate internal training systems. Neither did they enjoy the support of national political leaderships. The mechanisms held marginal positions in government structures, were assigned scant resources, and were routinely viewed as the only instruments with responsibility for changing the situation of women.[7]

In this new context it is recommended that women's offices undertake more critical duties in public policymaking. In line with such recommendations, the mechanisms are conceived as agencies of policy coordination with responsibility for leading the process of gender mainstreaming. For the purposes of meeting their goals, they should be located in the upper levels of the hierarchy and be endowed with sufficient resources and authority to gain access to the various decision-making circles within and beyond the State, and thence to influence public policies as a whole.

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[6]   This framework was influenced by intellectuals associated with the feminist movement,
[7]   See paragraphs 79, 105, 123, 141, 164, 189, 202, 204, 229, 238, 352, and 272.

The Regional Programme of Action for the Women of Latin America and the Caribbean, 1995-2001 (PAR)[8] and the Platform for Action take account of advances in the research on gender, as well as the demands set out by feminist organizations and issue-specific networks at the international level.

On the one hand, advances in gender theory cultivate connections between gender research and broader issues such as democracy, citizenship, institutionality and State reform. On the other hand, such progress enhances knowledge of the mechanisms that cause inequalities in specific fields: health, work, education and access to services, among many others.

The Platform draws attention to the presence of gender inequality in all societies and the systemic origin of gender problems rooted in various levels: symbolic, normative, in social practices and in personal circumstances. It distinguishes between the various actors responsible for changing gender relations.

The Platform proposes: improving the situation of women in the various social spheres, from the most private to the most public; impinging on mechanisms that expose women to situations of extreme vulnerability and that predispose them to poverty, exploitation and abuse; securing a fairer distribution of resources and social opportunities between women and men; strengthening women's participation and activism in all social spaces in which they find themselves, in the public debate and in decision-making circles. Overall, it seeks to strengthen women's autonomy and increase their level of freedom to shape the course of their personal lives and their societies.

Additionally, it makes the State responsible (in coordination with other actors) for the following tasks, which are only possible in a reformed State:

- to counteract mechanisms that cause inequality in their various spheres of intervention;
- to implement integral policies that address the multi-causal nature of gender inequality;
- to recognize and foster the participation of women as interlocutors in various public and institutional forums.

Hence it is helpful to examine the gap between how real and concrete States in each country of the Region operate and the positions tabled by the Platform's Regional Programme of Action. In particular, the aim is to analyze the breach between the ideal proposal for gender institutionality and the prospect of its being realized in States that remain highly centralized, hierarchical and sectoralized.

B.   The institutionality of gender on regional agendas

The creation of most of the women's offices whose characteristic are similar to the Platform's proposals (by virtue of their innovativeness) has been possible in extraordinary political conditions. These are typified by the greater receptivity of political actors and public authorities to social demands, which allows mobilized social actors to draw attention to their proposals.

The offices were created at a time when there were significant changes in the national political climate, parliamentary shifts or changes in government, and keen lobbying campaigns by women's groups. The agreements reached in the international conferences of the 1990s[9] also entailed pressure to accept or redefine the nature and scope of gender's institutionality.

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[8]   Adopted in 1994 at the sixth Regional Conference on Women's Economic and Social Integration in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mar del Plata).
[9]   Name the conferences.

According to John Kingdom (1992), in normal circumstances the process of problem-building, the quest for solutions to public problems and electoral conditions follow their own courses. These do not necessarily converge. Problems arise somewhat chaotically, depending on the course of events and/or the random mobilization of social actors. By contrast, options to resolve problems stem from a complex interplay of factors that variably unites private and public actors in pursuit of public action programmes that might offer solutions. Finally, political events unfold according to their own schedules in line with particular rules that might or might not be associated with problem-building or with identifying solutions. In exceptional circumstances, however, these processes converge, giving rise to "the opening of a political window of opportunity" (Pierre Muller and Yves Surel, 1998).

In Brazil, the creation of the State Councils in 1982-1983 and founding of the National Council for the Rights of Women (CNDM) came at a time when the military regime was ending and the country was embarking on a transition to democracy. In Argentina, demands acquired force and viability in the context of the return to democracy that characterized the Alfonsín government (1983). Sensitive to women's demands, among other issues Alfonsín's programme included the enactment of a divorce law, shared parental authority, and the ratification of the CEDAW. The Promotion of Woman and the Family programme was set up in 1983. The Under-secretariat of Women was established in 1987 in response to the demands of a horizontal and multisectoral women's organization.

In Chile, the National Women's Service (SERNAM) was created under the presidency of Patricio Alwyn (1990-1994) in response to demands made by the *Concertación* of Women for Democracy. The Alwyn government, whose programme had been negotiated between the political parties of the *Concertación* and the various groups and actors that had resisted the dictatorship, was sensitive to women's demands. It integrated equality between the sexes within the government's programme and created *ad hoc* mechanisms to respond to the new issues raised by less powerful groups, such as women, indigenous people and youths.

The reformism of the César Gaviria government in Colombia (the pacific revolution of 1990-1994) found expression, among other things, in the convening of a Constituent Assembly in which the feminist movement's participation was encouraged. The movement's presence ensured that gender equality was raised to the status of an institutional norm, that discrimination was declared unconstitutional, and that positive discrimination was facilitated. Such decisions would have lacked sufficient cultural and political bases in normal circumstances. The first gender institutions were created from 1990 onwards, with a duty to coordinate policies to control discrimination against women. Several women's organizations were involved in proposing and discussing such means of control.[10]

In Bolivia, women's organizations demanded that the new government of Sánchez de Lozada retain the gender mechanism created under the previous administration of Paz Zamora. The political moment and the substance of the "Plan for All" government programme – State reform, economic modernization, new links between the State and society, decentralization and the impetus to social participation – spawned the conditions necessary to redefine the nature and scope of the gender institutions.

In other countries, the agreements reached at international conferences gave additional impetus to the movement and prompted substantial pressure on governments either to create institutional mechanisms or to redefine such mechanisms' position, attributes and functions.

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[10]   The Committee for Coordination and Control of Discrimination against Women was created in 1990 under the Presidency of the Republic. The women's area inside the Presidential Council for Youth, Women and the Family was established in August 1990.

The creation of an institutionality of gender in extraordinary circumstances, however, does not ensure the stability of the attendant achievements. When the "political windows" close, other kinds of pressure seek to edge institutional mechanisms back into their normal channels. Additionally, new electoral circumstances and changes in government pose a risk that the achievements might be reversed. In Bolivia and Colombia, the position of the mechanisms shifted with the arrival of new governments. In Argentina, the election of the most recent government put in doubt the position of the National Council for Women. The threat was neutralized by the coordinated response of several organizations of women, female parliamentarians and public officials.

The stability of the achievements or the degree of reversal depends not only on political circumstances but also on structural, institutional and cultural factors: the level of economic modernization, the prevailing political culture, institutional stability, progress on State reform, and women's position and political activism in society.

Proposals for gender equality and equity, as well as for new institutions, cause less disruption in more urban, modern and secular societies like Argentina and Uruguay. In those countries women's educational levels are high relative to those of men, their levels of labour market participation are also high in both the formal and informal sectors, and the birth rate fell at an earlier stage. Women, moreover, and especially urban women, have a long history of trade union, social and political participation. In these countries, migration in the last century nourished the development of a more equitable and democratic culture, wherein an individual's achievement and ascent were associated with merit and personal drive.

In multicultural societies marked by the coexistence of different gender systems that are intrinsic to each culture, proposals for gender equality and equity can be viewed as remote from the concerns of such societies, as well as from the patterns of multiculturalism.

III. The Institutionality of Gender and State Reform

A.   The current debate on the State

The new proposals on the institutionality of gender in the State have surfaced in a context of economic and cultural globalization, and of social transformations that raise questions about the functions of the State and its relations with society.

A variety of scholars and politicians agree that the State should be reformed,[11] not only to surmount growing fiscal deficits, inefficiency and clientelist practices in the provision of goods and public services but also, and fundamentally, because there is a need to reassess its functions in the new international context. Those functions concern both the capacity of the State to represent the whole of society, spatially and historically, and the fact that the State is both the expression and consequence of the links that it forges with society (Muller and Surel, 1998)

Dirk Messner (1999) and Norbert Lechner (1999) agree that current forms of social coordination are inadequate in view of the scale of the transformations being wrought within societies. State coordination (hierarchical, public and reasoned) through laws, administrative norms or political measures, and the market

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[11]   State centralism; the absence of clear missions that are adapted to new social circumstances in various different sectors and government bodies; the significance of sectoral thinking in the public administration; adherence to routines in assessing results; disregard for the policies' social impact.

coordination (unreasoned, decentralized) that regulates interactions between private actors are unable to respond to the demands of ever more organized actors, to coordinate increasingly autonomous social subsystems, or to address the complexity of public issues.

Box 1
NEW CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIETIES AND OF STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

- The tendency towards an ever more organized society. An increase in collective actors and improved conditions to influence political decision-making and to shape society itself.

- Growing sectoralization of the economy and society. An increase in social complexity and growing interdependence between a large number of actors give mounting importance to social sub-systems in society as a whole. There is a tendency to create social and economic spaces with a high degree of autonomy, which the State finds difficult to regulate politically.

- The participation of ever more groups of private and public actors in policymaking, and an upgrading of their level of political intervention.

- Tendencies to match the differentiation of society with a parallel growth in the State apparatus.

- Decentralization and the fragmentation of the State and the uniformity of State operations, of patterns that are intrinsic to State subsectors and of their means of intervention. The later vary by policy areas, productive sectors and political levels (local, regional, national, multilateral).

- The erosion of dividing lines between the private and public realms, linked to State decentralization and the various forms of cooperation between the State and social groups.

- The incapacity of the State in different areas to assume the duties of a social coordinator, leader and role model without resorting to know-how or even to the capacities of non-State actors.

- The delegation to society of some State functions and support for the development of autonomous capacities within society (promoting partnerships, establishing forums where social conflicts can be aired, or seeking means of dispute-resolution with or without the moderating function of public bodies).

- The increasing importance of systemic interaction between relevant groups of actors in policy areas that arise in response to ever deeper interdependence.

- A loss of autonomy on the part of national States as a result of globalization and insertion in institutions.

Source: Dirk Messner. (1999). Del Estado céntrico a la "sociedad de redes". Nuevas exigencias a la coordinación social.

The relatively uniform and centralized activities of political-administrative elites do not guarantee the coherence of public action. Decision-making by public authorities depends not only on pertinent information from different spheres (scientific, technical, economic, social and political), but also on the presence of various private and public actors that face the challenges of coordinating themselves and of opening up a space for joint action. Their participation in policy decisions helps weaken the rigid borders between the private and public realms.

To analyze all the forms of linkage between social groups and the State,[12] various authors[13] use the notion of a network. These linkages are new forms of social coordination that are not necessarily superimposed on public organizations (ministries) or private bodies (companies and trade unions). The relatively informal character of the interactions within a network, and the latter's accessibility to new actors, allow peripheral exchanges to multiply and resources to be combined.

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[12] Rhodes and Marsh (1988, cited by Muller and Surel, 1998) distinguish several types of networks, from the most open to the most closed: 1. The issue-specific network that groups actors around a specific problem or demand, such as the defence of a bill on domestic violence. Participants in the network can vary, their identity is changeable and interdependence between the actors is limited to the issue in question. 2. Producers' networks organized around a particular economic interest, wherein interdependence is relatively limited. 3. Intergovernmental networks designate the regrouping in the horizontal plan of local and territorial authorities. 4. Professional (or sectoral) networks consist of organized professions on the vertical plan, closely linked to a specific field of expertise that distinguishes them from other networks in the public policy community.

[13] Pierre Muller and Ives Surel (1998), Norbert Lechner (1999), among others.

Understandably, in such a context the traditional systems of representation and civic participation are insufficient, and there is an increase in forums for discussion wherein various actors participate simultaneously and acquire the skills associated with democratic decision-making: to bargain, to pressure, to negotiate, to accept dissent, to manage conflict and to build the minimum consensus necessary for joint action. In other words the participants become aware not only of their personal needs, challenges and definitions but also of the other subjects and of the extent to which they agree or their needs and interests coincide or clash. Considered civic participation becomes more important in addressing various public problems and the nature of State action. Moreover, civic participation is necessary in the formulation and implementation of such policies, so that the latter respond effectively to the needs and peculiarities of different social groups. Finally, there is a need to create new public and private institutions that oversee State activities and to which the State is accountable.

The nature and functions of the gender institutions that arise from the agreements of the Platform for Action are consistent with positions in the current debate on the State. That debate identifies, assigns responsibility for and stimulates coordination between different kinds of private, public and social actors in order to address gender inequities that, although symptomatic of a specific system of inequality, are conditioned and affected by other systems that cause social inequalities. Further, the debate underlines the importance of ensuring women's social participation and activism in the various forums for public discussion and in the dialogue between the State and society, so that they can define, defend and negotiate their demands and interests with other actors and can help shape the definition of public interests.

In this connection there is a need to analyze the gap between the ideal proposal for the institutionality of gender and the prospect of its being realized in States that remain highly centralized, hierarchical and sectoralized.

Meeting the Platform's goals requires changing the ways in which States work and altering their interpretive frameworks. Integral gender policies and the resolution of new problems demand intersectoral coordination and an integral approach that run counter to the sectoralist thinking prevalent in many States of the region. Moreover, the conceptions of gender that sustain policy proposals from women's offices differ from and/or run counter to those that hold sway in other sectors. Hence the efforts of the institutions to raise the profile of and guarantee activism by women as social actors is not shared by the other institutional actors. The latter do not see the importance of women's participation as autonomous subjects, and hence women are rarely invited to decision-making circles in the spaces for interaction between the various sectors and society.

B. Institutional conditioning: normative, symbolic and political

Institutions are important for order and stability, in as much as they disengage policies from the immediate vicissitudes of social movements and from circumstantial correlations of forces, thus lessening the chaos of rivalries and confrontations.

From this perspective it is easy to understand the importance that the region's women's offices give to the approval of new frameworks and legal norms, and to the creation of new gender-related agencies in the State. In several countries of the region, the 1990s saw significant changes to the juridical frameworks that respond to demands for sexual equality and channels to tackle discrimination. In Argentina, for example, the process of constitutional reform granted constitutional rank to CEDAW; international agreements on human rights were signed; and a set of internal legislative provisions was approved to offer protection against discrimination and to promote gender equity. Congress was endowed with the authority to promote positive action, while the right of the victim, the public defender or other associations to appeal for assistance in the face

of any form of discrimination was recognized. As regards more specific legal norms, the quota law and the law on violence were enacted.[14] In Colombia, the following significant laws were approved in the 1990s: Law 82/1993, whereby the State brought female heads of household and the families in their charge into the social security system; Law 294/1996 on violence in the family sought to prevent, punish and remedy domestic violence: it penalizes such violence and stipulates that sexual violence between spouses is punishable; Law 360/97 on crimes against sexual freedom and human dignity (for sexual assault between 8 to 20 years of age).

Institutionality, however, has an obverse. The creation of new gender institutions and the inclusion of new problems on government agendas depend not only on the willingness of public authorities or the fleeting strength attained by the women's movement. They are conditioned by the substance of constitutional and legal texts, as well as by the way in which the politico-administrative apparatus operates and the thinking within it. That circumstance sometimes calls for more or less substantial changes to the proposals on the gender agenda.

The adaptation of issues to political-institutional configurations is an important matter given the significance accorded to the law in qualifying problems and solutions. These latter should therefore be posited in acceptable juridical terms.

Mutual selection mechanisms determine the pace at which an issue moves from one State institution to another. In Chile's institutional arrangements, for example, the executive has predominance over the legislature; thus the issues on the government agenda can be placed on the legislative agenda when there is a need for a bill, but the process cannot happen in reverse. The mobilization of a group of parliamentarians is insufficient to elevate matters to the levels of government decision-making.

The very characteristics of politico-administrative actors, and especially the thinking that governs their actions, can determine whether problems are placed on agendas. It is easier for public actors to accept the issues proposed by gender-related institutions when they regard the inclusion of the matter on their agendas as a supplementary resource and a basis for legitimization. To date, most women's offices have been more successful in placing gender issues on the agendas of social ministries and local governments. In both cases the very work of the ministries brings them closer to women and makes them more sensitive to women's specific conditions. Consequently, women are gradually viewed as distinct policy targets and are not absorbed into the general, gender-unspecific category of beneficiaries. In some cases, acceptance of gender problems has given these ministries or local governments additional resources and greater social legitimacy.

Public action is not wholly shaped by rules, norms, procedures, roles and forms of organization. Neither do the latter fully enclose institutional actors within their routine, since the rules (often multiple and contradictory) allow for substantial manoeuvring room. Hence the authorities and the members of the new gender institutions must make strenuous efforts (which are not free of contradictions and frustrations) to learn, so that they can become familiar with, dominate and adapt laws, norms, rules and administrative procedures in a manner that is conducive to meeting their institutional goals.

The constraints are also symbolic and political. Institutions consist not only of rules, but also of beliefs, cultural codes and expertise that envelop, nourish, develop and contradict such roles and routines (Muller and Surel, 1998).

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[14] The quota law of 1991 established a women's quota of no less than 30% of the names on lists for representative positions and guaranteed that women would be placed on the lists in positions that were likely to lead to election. Two years later the law was put into effect by the executive through decree 379/93. The Women's Council can initiate legal action to ensure the presence of women on the lists.

Policies are expressions of the particular interpretive and symbolic order of prevailing conditions. They are grounded in mechanisms that come into play when policies are made, implemented and assessed.

It seems that it would been relatively easier for women's offices in the region to legitimize gender problems within the discourse on vulnerability and compensation than in the discourse on the recognition and exercise of women's rights. This explains why most countries have enacted laws against violence and established programmes that include resource-allocation and service provision reforms to benefit abused women. The rejection of violence against women is consistent with interpretive schemes that view them as protected subjects. The attention paid to women who are heads of low-income households, or the extension of certain rights to groups of working women, are geared to the same ends. It has also been relatively easier to propose policies that facilitate linkages between domestic and productive work than policies that seek to alter the allocation of different types of work between men and women. In general, it has been more difficult to devise policies that foster a significant redistribution of opportunities and power between men and women, and that assert the political and social activism of women regardless of their social backgrounds. It seems that in most countries of the region, the matter of gender in the State was initially built on the recognition that various groups of women were vulnerable.

There are, however, variations in the discourses and strategies of the different institutions. Under the Sánchez de Lozada government in Bolivia the under-secretariat for gender, deploying a strategic vision, linked distinct symbolic dimensions in addressing gender inequalities. Efforts were made to ensure that women were treated in equality with men in the main reforms, and the law on popular participation contemplated the parity of women in order to further their social and political involvement. At the same time, the under-secretariat shed light on an area in which women are particularly vulnerable: their exposure to domestic violence. It also encouraged the social organization of women politicians in such bodies as the Political Forum. In Argentina, the various agencies dealing with gender have upheld their demands in speeches calling for equality and rights, and significant cultural changes in gender practices and conduct have been proposed in constitutional texts, as is the case of the constitution of Buenos Aires.

Equal opportunities plans or similar programmes for women can be important in addressing symbolic constraints rooted in the various conceptions of gender underlying the policies. That there are proposals for political plans for all government sectors makes plain the complexity and systemic nature of gender inequalities. Identification of a common goal to be reached by applying the various policies counteracts the tendency to associate gender inequality with vulnerability, and recasts such inequality in the discourse on equality and rights.

Finally, attention should be paid to political constraints. As noted earlier, policy decisions are taken not only within decision-making circles in the public administration (the presidency, the cabinet and ministries, among others), but also within circles located in the spaces for interaction and dialogue that the government establishes with various private, social, trade union and political actors.

The decisions taken are conditioned by the resources, visibility and strength of the actors concerned with the policies.[15] The degree to which the actors are organized, the nature of their leadership, and their capacity to define their identity more or less autonomously condition the quality of their participation in such decision-making circles.

The issues placed on agendas do not necessarily remain there. The agendas are subject to permanent pressure from various actors that new issues be included, that problems be assigned new

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[15]   Resources: features that give actors a capacity to operate or, more precisely, that ensure them power in the classical sense. The capacity of A to pressure B to take action that B would not have taken without A's intervention.

priorities, and that those deemed less important be excluded. Only the permanent presence and activism of institutional, political and social actors give force, legitimacy and stability to the gender agenda.

On this point it is worth recalling the importance of structures for intermediation between the State and society, since these can serve as particularly useful forums from which interested actors can place new problems on agendas and sustain their policy relevance.

It is helpful to refer to Colombia's experience in drawing up the Equality of Opportunities Plan in the context of the Government Development Plan, 1998-2002. In 1998, women organized in the Convergence of Networks[16] fostered the establishment of structures for intermediation in formulating the Equality of Opportunities Plan. Participants in the structures included women's organizations, government bodies, and both central and outlying public corporations.

In eight regions the Convergence set up panels on each issue area: peace, employment, income-generation, participation in power and decision-making, education, training, health, countering violence, housing and habitat, and rural women, as well as four panels to address issues of interest to vulnerable groups, such as Afro-American, indigenous and displaced women, and those in clearance areas.

In 1999, the Convergence drew up a document that was presented to the various actors involved in devising the Equality of Opportunities Plan: the National Planning Council, the National Planning Department, the Congress and the National Department for Equity. When the Plan was put into effect in 2000, a process of inter-institutional and inter-sectoral agreement began, involving the bodies responsible for the various programmes of the National Development Plan and social actors.

C.   Some final remarks on the institutionality of gender

In most cases the creation of an institutionality of gender as a means of policy coordination is grounded in a prior history. That history is marked by the presence of different kinds of women's offices and specific programmes for women in the fields of health, rural promotion or poverty. The new institutionality is often created as a focal point for coordinating and centralizing efforts already being made within the State.

The hierarchical position of the gender institutions, their attributes, and the human and material resources assigned to them arise from negotiations between different institutional, political and social actors within and beyond the executive and the State. An institution's manoeuvring room varies substantially according to whether it has the rank of a ministry, under-secretariat or department; whether it is located within a social or political ministry; and whether it has or lacks sufficient professional staff and resources. The institutional arrangements prevailing to date range from autonomous organizations (in Cuba), through ministries or institutes (in Costa Rica and Peru, among others), to agencies within the ministry of the presidency headed by a minister of state, special advisory bodies within the ministry of the presidency, agencies or services in social planning ministries or human development ministries, agencies within sectoral ministries, and focal points in sectoral ministries.[17] Their characteristics and attributes can change over time, as illustrated among other cases by Bolivia and Colombia.

i) Designating the authorities of gender institutions

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[16]   The Convergence of Networks comprises the various national networks in Colombia.
[17]   ECLAC. The Institutionality of Gender Equity in the State. LC/R.1837 August 1998.

Designating authorities and putting together teams of professional staff respond to attitudes and considerations that differ from those espoused by women's leaders in the social and political spheres. The choice reflects the importance accorded to gender institutions in political coalitions and government programmes, and is shaped by considerations of balance among the various political forces in the State.

The characteristics of the authorities and the staff play a fundamental role in the legitimization and recognition of gender institutions as valid and authentic interlocutors of society and the rest of the State. They are crucial channels for sensitizing States and for transmitting to them the knowledge acquired on gender.

Experience is illuminating in this respect. The selection of authorities who have experience in politics and who are recognized by ruling parties confers legitimacy on the new institutionality, and in most cases guarantees a more forward-looking outlook in the government programme. In such cases the new authorities are familiar with negotiating techniques, which enables them to move with greater ease within public institutions. The priority assigned to the government programme, however, and the often inadequate understanding of the subject and of the nature of gender policies, generally leads the authorities to subordinate gender issues to other government concerns and interests. Different concerns prevail simultaneously in governments (economic, social, and gender-related matters). The attendant goals are not always coincident and might sometimes run counter to one another. Demands for gender equity in the labour field can vie with economic priorities as conceived by the government.

When the authorities are chosen from among leaders of the women's movement, the institution secures legitimacy in the eyes of women. In such cases, the new authorities and their staff expend immense energy, dedication and creativity to furthering the realization of their institutional goals, and become a significant engine of change in institutional routines. However, their lesser experience in the State and their frequent disengagement from political parties generally entails less negotiating expertise and less attention to institutional, political, cultural and symbolic conditioning and constraints. There is also a tendency to give a low priority to linking gender issues with general government policies.

ii) Gender's institutional fabric

In most cases the institutions entrusted with ensuring that gender equity is conceived as a policy criterion are both national and regional, and they coexist with other institutions, bodies or programmes within the public administration and within the various State powers responsible for or concerned with gender equity.[18] In some countries there are public defenders for women or gender (Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Costa Rica), parliamentarian commissions on women, or forums of women politicians. The various institutions comprise a rich institutional fabric that often transcends national States and extends to international forums or non-State public spaces. Since 1998, for example, there has been a Specialized Meeting on Women (REM) in Mercosur.

Martín Landau (1972) has dubbed the replication of functions in different State institutions as redundancy, and has argued that the phenomenon is not necessarily negative. On the contrary, it can serve as a useful basis for experimenting with solutions to problems, which enhances institutional know-how and can trigger the accumulation and distribution of forces in different points of public sector institutions.

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[18] Argentina has an under-secretariat for women in the foreign ministry, the National Women's Council, the Under-secretariat for Equality of Opportunities in the province of Buenos Aires, an *ad hoc* commission for monitoring the Action Plan arising from the IV World Conference on Women, and provincial mechanisms in the form of Provincial Women's Councils (12) provincial (9) and municipal (143) women's areas. Only three provinces lack specific mechanisms.

In addition to these policymaking institutions there are others that address problems affecting women and their families. Some of these are located in the grey area of the para-state sphere. Traditionally, these bodies, organizations or foundations are in the cabinet of the first lady and in some cases they have more resources than the women's offices.[19]

The institutional fabric and informal networks throughout the public administration and the different branches of the State comprise power bases and points for disseminating new ideas and proposals on the administration of public policy. The institutionality of gender can be located at different positions within that fabric, and it can exercise the leadership assigned to it either truly or merely formally.

The different components of the fabric can operate in a coordinated manner under the leadership of the gender institutions or, by contrast, they can vie with each other in line with the guidelines and thinking that underpin their actions. In a worst case the gender institutions can find themselves immured while the others take over their functions.

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[19] Chile has a wide range of institutions under the direction of the first lady, which cover highly important issues in women's lives: children, the family, the promotion of women.

IV. By Way of Conclusion

This document proposes a perspective for analyzing the institutionality of gender that diverts attention from the study of its characteristics or the strategies it deploys. It emphasizes the social and political processes that enabled the institutionality to emerge, and to gain legitimacy and stability over time. It also examines the opportunities and constraints bestowed by the institutional and political context, within which public authorities and officials take decisions on gender policies.

- From this perspective, it is worth insisting that the institutions' progress and achievements are rooted not only in the State but also in the economic, social and cultural changes under way in the countries of the region.

- In recent decades women's greater access to new and more varied opportunities, and hence their increased share of a broader range of social and economic positions, has given rise to a better appraisal of their specificity and their contributions.

Several studies show that the growing acceptance of equality and respect for differences in recognizing gender equity are important as policy determinants. Cultural debates and the broader dissemination of knowledge pose the risk of imprecision and often lead to a simplistic understanding of problems. Nonetheless, they have great potential for sensitizing opinion and for spawning schools of thought.

The studies of Carol Weiss (1986), cited by José Joaquín Brunner and Osvaldo Sunkel (1993), reveal the influence of public and cultural debates on decisions taken by public authorities. Such influence is often greater than that exerted by the findings of precise research that identifies the problems.

The role of the international and regional conferences convened by the United Nations in the 1990s is to be underscored. These opened up international forums for debate on the subject of equality, difference and the struggle against social exclusion. The agreements concluded at the conferences have influenced the endeavours of national governments.

This document has shown how the definition of a field of action in the area of sexual discrimination simultaneously allows women to be recognized as political subjects and fosters consideration of sexual discrimination and its attendant problems in the public decision-making process.

Although this field of action is largely fashioned and activated by women, it also involves other social, political and institutional actors, as well as women from different backgrounds (popular, feminist, politicians and State officials). The positions they adopt might or might not coincide, but they have marked out a broad space for discussion of the situation of women. Also involved are the various institutions and organizations established in recent years, such as public defenders for women, parliamentary commissions on women, and women's political forums. It is this more or less uniform field of action, intersected to a greater or lesser degree by antipathies, that helps place gender discrimination issues on public agendas and keeps them there.

Women will be invited to other forums of public debate or social coordination to the extent that this field of action is recognized and valued. They will also be invited to take part in those structures for intermediation between the State and society that are located at various levels of the government and in a range of State agencies. Stability and transparency in these structures will allow the demands of different social groups to be channelled to the institutions, and will enable those groups to monitor the agreements concluded by the State.

Female participation in the formulation and implementation of public policies is particularly important for women with fewer resources and limited access to decision-making circles. Their organization for the purposes of policy implementation often gives rise to useful forums for debate, wherein the nature of public policies and the duties of public institutions can be discussed. At the same time, organization raises their profile as distinct targets of the different policies and services, with needs and experiences that differ from those of men.

Account should be taken of the foregoing considerations in devising the institutional agenda and in planning strategies to further the inclusion of gender in public policies. Support for social initiatives to promote a more equal culture that respects differences could increase the cultural force for change. It could also exert influence, from outside the State, on the perceptions of public authorities.

The need to make the institutionality of gender visible, and to secure recognition for it from the whole of the State and society, can occasionally divert attention from the strengthening of other subjects or groups that undertake activities conducive to gender equity in society and the State. It can also entail a disregard for the organized social and institutional field of action on sexual discrimination. In both cases the risk is that of weakening the institutionality's own bases of support, from which complementary initiatives could be put forward.

For this reason one of the first tasks of the gender institutions should be to identify the outlines of the network or networks that make up the field of action on gender discrimination; to

identify the actors, especially those involved in different fields; and to analyze the principles of forming and distinguishing between the different regroupings within that field.

- • The new debate on the role of the State and on the need for new forms of social coordination to counteract fragmentation and social disintegration prompts discussion of the participation of various social, private and political actors in the institutionalized structures for intermediation between the State and society. These channel the issues and the options for resolving social problems.

From this perspective it is important that the gender institutions ensure that women are represented in those structures, which arise in various sectors of public institutions.

The approval of new anti-discrimination norms and laws makes more sense if there are institutional arrangements and a culture that supports them. Moreover, success in the implementation of mechanisms for dialogue and participation between the State and civil society is closely related to the clarity of the norms that regulate those mechanisms, the degree to which different social actors have access to them, and their stability over time.

Hence the strengthening of democratic institutions is an important pre-condition for meeting goals and for solidifying the achievements secured at the legislative level.

In recent years there has been some success in approving juridical norms and in setting up institutional mechanisms to ensure the permanence and stability of the attainments of gender policy. Additionally, progress has been made in drawing up equality of opportunities plans and instruments that make gender criteria operational, thereby allowing follow-up on the implementation and impact of public policies geared towards women and gender relations.

The State is marked by a variety of constraints and distinct schools of thought that can coincide with or run counter to the logic of gender equity. Economic policies, for example, can contend with proposals to improve women's access to the labour market, to improve the quality of their jobs, and to narrow the wage gap between men and women. Only with difficulty, moreover, can an education policy that does not lessen social divisions between schools transform women's greater educational achievements into better job opportunities.

Proposals to foster gender equity can thus be interwoven with general policies that facilitate or constrain the prospect that those proposals will be implemented. For that reason, linking the various schools of thought in the State and fostering a fuller understanding of the nature and scope of government policies should be central to the process of establishing institutional agendas and to gender policymaking.

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