

# NATIONAL REPORT ON INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN HUNGARY

## 1. Introduction

The Hungarian National Machinery for Women's Equal Status was set up in September 1994 by a Government decree. It started to work effectively at the end of 1995, after the Beijing conference. Originally, it was called **Department for Policy on Women** and it was established within the Ministry of Labour. According to most NGOs' opinion, this was due mainly to the fact that the Labour Minister was the only female in the cabinet at the time. Then, in 1996, the name was changed to **Department for Equal Opportunities**.

Recently, after the change of government following the May 1998 elections, the Labour Ministry ceased to exist and was substituted with the Ministry for Social and Family Affairs. The Equal Opportunities Department was renamed and reorganised: now it is called **Section for the Representation of Women**, within the Ministry of Social and Family Affairs.

The head of the section is a social political expert. Most of the former employees were taken over and are mainly dealing with their former tasks. The **Section for the Representation of Women** doesn't have the authority to formulate the government policy concerning equal gender status, even though it does have the task to initiate legislative actions. Its main activities will be the same as for the former Department. It functions as an opinion maker on the government policy at national and local level. In the past this worked with very limited effectiveness.

The Government now is going to create a **Council for the Representation of Women**, consisting of the deputy state-secretaries of the 11 ministries, women's NGOs and experts. Its tasks will be to express an opinion on provisions of law, government action plans and to initiate new programmes related to women's equal opportunities. It seems that in the future NGOs' opinions and needs will play an important role in the formulation of the Section's policy. The Section wants also to create local Committees of NGOs to cooperate with them in the countryside to implement gender policies.

## 2. Tasks and responsibilities

For the period 1997-98 the former **Department for Equal Opportunities** had financial means (e.g. a separate budget) to implement its own strategies and programs, but it was not a very large amount of money which had to cover salaries, social security and all other expenses (office costs, travel etc.).

The Department for Equal Opportunities had the authority for direct international cooperation. However, to our knowledge, it could not effectively liaise with international organisations. This was and is made even more difficult by the fact that the Hungarian CEDAW reports for instance are still to be written by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as issues concerning international conventions and treaties are their competence. What is more, the Department for Equal Opportunities (according to its staff) does not receive any feedback from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the UN hearings. It used to report to the Minister of Labour, but the reports were not made public.

**The Department for Equal Opportunities has been the only government's body responsible for the advancement of women in Hungary: it didn't have its local counterparts in the local public administration.**

### **3. The Hungarian National Action Plan**

The activity of the Department for Equal Opportunities went on according to the **Hungarian National Action Plan** issued in 1997 by the Government (Note 1) which identified the following priority areas to implement the tasks defined in the Beijing Declaration:

#### **1. Women's rights:**

- a. to compare the Hungarian legislation with the EU gender-related legislation (deadlines: Sept. 30. 1997, 1st March 1998). See the following point c).
- b. to establish a legal advisory service (helpline) (labour and family law) (deadline: 1st Sept. 1997)
  - o The helpline was set up by the Department for Equal Opportunities, but it only operated once a week, for two hours. This was clearly unsatisfactory. The person who answered the phone calls was a young, freshly graduated jurist man with very little experience.
  - o Right now, this service is offered by a small women's NGO, the Ombudswoman Programme Office. The line is called Women's Line. It operates three times a week, for three hours respectively.
- c. Publishing a handbook on women's rights in Hungary and in the EU (deadline: 30 April 1998)  
A handbook on gender equality was published in 1997 (Note 2)
- d. to work out training programmes on gender equality for public employees (1st Dec. 1997).  
Training programmes were not worked out as far as we know.

#### **2. Implementation of women's equal opportunities:**

- a. Definition of discrimination of female job seekers and employees (30th September 1997)  
No definition of gender based discrimination in the field of labour has been formulated.
- b. Securing the stability of women's workplaces through collective labour agreements (30th September 1997)  
This has not been achieved yet. Anyhow, the current head of the Sections for the Representation of Women is strongly committed to this.
- c. Training and retraining for women re-entering the labour market (31st July 1997)  
According to personal communications by a representative of the former Equal Opportunities Department, a few programmes of this kind were run in the countryside of Hungary. However, this is not documented and no formal information is available.
- d. Training programmes for women preparing for public life (1st September 1997)  
This is being done by the Hungarian Women's Academy (a civil organisation). They got funding from the Department of Equal Opportunities in 1997. The number of trained women is about 100 by now.

#### **3. Improvement of women's social equality:**

- a. Analysis of the impact on women of the reform of the welfare system

- b. Reviewing of the existence of equal access to parental benefits
- c. Further extension of the specific health screening practices to teenagers, pregnant women, elderly women (deadline for a), b), c): 31st December 1997)

Nothing remarkable happened in this field.

#### **4. Elaboration of recommendations regarding gender education in public schools:**

(31st October 1997)

As far as we know it was not done.

#### **5. Violence against women:**

- a. Drafting legislation regarding marital rape  
At the initiative of a women's NGO (NANE, "Women for Women Together Against Violence") the Parliament adopted in 1998 the modification of the Criminal Code. Now marital rape is a punishable crime.
- b. Educational programmes in public schools on the prevention of violence against women  
(31st December 1997)  
As far as we know it was not done.

#### **6. Co-ordination of activities:**

- a. For the various projects of the National Action Plan various ministers are responsible.  
In order to secure government policies which promote equal opportunities for women, an Interministerial Committee was supposed to be established. According to informal communications by a representative of the former Equal Opportunities Department the work of this Interministerial Committee has not been effective so far. There have been sessions, but no clear outcome.
- b. Creation of a resource and information centre for women's NGOs
  - o A regular forum for information exchange for women's NGOs called "Civil Forum" and later a Civil Consultation Board (consisting of women's NGOs) were created in 1996 and 1998 respectively by the former Department for Equal Opportunities.
  - o A booklet containing a list of the Hungarian women's NGOs was published in 1998 (Note 3).

#### **7. Creation of a database and information system for women and on women:**

- a. Recommendations concerning the enlargement and rationalisation of existing databases and establishing new criteria of data collection - organisation responsible: Central Statistical Office  
(31st August 1997)
  - o The recommendations - if existing - are not public.
- b. Setting up of a grant-giving system for proposals assisting gender-related government activities (31st July 1997)
  - o There is an opportunity to apply for grants from a National Scientific Research Fund and conduct gender research. Also, the Equal Opportunities Department has commissioned research on gender related issues, and published the findings in a booklet, available free of charge from the Department. However, the government does not support directly Gender Studies.
  - o There was a competition launched by the Equal Opportunities Department called "Successful women", expecting women who felt they were successful

in their lives (careers or private life) to write essays about that. A jury consisting of writers and other consultants working for the Department was set up, and the awards were handed over in the building of the Hungarian parliament, with the then Minister of Labour (a man) present. The head of the Women's sub-committee of the Human Rights Committee of the parliament was also invited to the ceremony.

- c. Publishing of a Yearbook on the advancement of women.  
The first volume was published in autumn 1997 (Note 4)

## 4. Editors' remarks

In Hungary, as in many other countries, **de jure** gender equality is existing. The legal guarantees for the advancement of women and for the equal gender status are:

- The Hungarian Constitution
- The Hungarian Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in force since 1982
- Government decrees

The Hungarian Constitution has actually a number of provisions that refer to women as mothers and on one occasion states that positive discrimination (i.e. affirmative action) is allowed in the case of groups that in the past had been discriminated against, which may include women (depending on the interpretation).

However, until the UN Fourth World Conference on Women no special projects or programmes were run by the Government to promote and to implement the de facto equality.

The first attempt to do this is the so called National Action Plan, a government decree formulated by the former government in 1997. The government has indicated deadlines for the implementation of the individual projects, however there are no benchmarks for monitoring. The latest deadline for the implementation of the projects of the National Action Plan was April 30, 1998, prior to the parliamentary elections. No new National Action Plan has been formulated until now by the new government.

NGOs were not formally consulted in the formulation of the National Action Plan, maybe there had been informal meetings with some of them. Some NGOs participate in the implementation of some government projects, such as the Hungarian Women's Academy - training women in public life - and the Women's Information and Resource Centre (Women's House), which runs training programmes for women re-entering the labour market and also training programmes for the prevention of violence. Certain training programmes (see above) are partly run with funding from the government, either directly with resources from the former Department for Equal Opportunities, or from central state funds such as the National Employment Fund.

The co-operation of government administration with NGOs is incidental, except for the regular meetings of women's groups at the Civil Forum where all existing women's NGOs are invited to.

As far as the media is concerned, it occasionally picks up the issue of gender, if there is a blatant case of discrimination or violence, or an extraordinary event connected with women's reproduction (e.g. underage pregnancies, abortion debates etc.). But, with the exception of one commercial television channel, women's equal gender

status is not an interesting issue for the media. The image of women shown by the media is the traditional "good mother and housewife".

## 5. Conclusions

Three years after the Beijing Conference and after the launch of a National Action Plan only small results have been achieved in Hungary to promote gender equality. Although in the National Action Plan it is explicitly stated, the Government, the Parliament and the competent ministries have not, to our knowledge, adopted any remarkable action to abolish gender discrimination relating to employment, primary education, social and family care, as well as health-care. It seems that at governmental level there is a certain lack of commitment regarding gender equality.

Moreover, changes in government as a result of parliamentary elections (May 1998) seem to have some impact on the effective functioning of the National Machinery in Hungary. (It's worth mentioning here that the percentage of women MPs diminished from former 12% in 1994 to present 8%). Although international treaties formulate responsibilities of states, as opposed to governments which come and go, in Hungary the implementation of such treaties seems to be at the mercy of the given government in power.

As far as the observance of women's rights in general is concerned, there are some warning signals that suggest that the conservative government in office now does not consider women's human rights to be a priority; on the contrary, favours conservative, at times outdated family models and values. The government has so far not shown any intention to mainstream gender concerns in its policies.

In the editors' view, in Hungary the basic problem related to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action - besides the lack of commitment of governments- is that exact competence and tasks of the National Machinery organisation have not been clearly defined. The Department for Equal Opportunities of the Ministry of Labour (now Section for the Representation of Women of the Ministry of Social and Family Affairs) seemed to mix up governmental and NGO tasks and activities, and thus the responsibility and accountability of the department was minimized.

In our mind, the National Machinery's main task would be to mainstream gender issues in the governmental policies, to influence legislation (by giving opinion and a normative control on draft legislation) and to liaise with international bodies (this is right now done by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

The role of women's NGOs in Hungary remains still very important to promote and mainstream gender equality issues in the society and to give a contribution to implement the Beijing Platform for Action at the grass-roots level.

Notes:

1. Government decree No. 2174/1997 (26th June)
2. "Equal opportunities and legal harmonisation", Ed. Ministry of Labour, Department for Equal Opportunities, Working Group for Integration Strategy, Budapest, 1997
3. "Hungarian Women's NGOs", Ed. Non-profit Foundation and Department for Equal Opportunities of the Ministry for Social and Family Affairs, Budapest , 1998
4. "Changes of roles", Ed. Ministry of Labour, Department for Equal Opportunities, Budapest, 1997

## 6. Additional information about women in decision-making positions in Hungary

### 1. Women in the Hungarian Parliament

In the 1994 elections the percentage of women MPs was 12%. After the May 1998 elections in the Hungarian parliament the current percentage of women MPs has dropped to 8%.

- 2 Vice-Presidents of the Commission for Local governments in the Parliament
- the President of the Commission for Human rights, religion affairs, minority affairs in the Parliament
- the Vice-president of the Commission for International Affairs in the Parliament
- Commission for Relations with NGOs in the Parliament: no women in leading position

### 2. Female Cabinet Ministers/ Executive Secretaries

- One minister, the Minister of Justice;
- two State Secretaries: the Government Commissioner for the Social Security Funds and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Welfare.
- The Ombudsperson is a woman.

### 3. Female Judges

For the moment we don't have up-to- date disaggregated data for judges. There are no female constitutional judges.

### 4. Local Authorities

At present, there are no freely available gender disaggregated data on the composition of the countries' Local Authorities. The Central Registration and Elections Bureau of the Ministry of the Interior charges offers these data for 250 USD.

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The report was written for 43rd CSW Session  
and Regional Preparatory Process for the "Beijing + 5".