

**Letter of 13 November 2015 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Lilianne Ploumen, to the House of Representatives on the 'Gender Sense and Sensitivity' (2007-2014) policy review conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB)**

It gives the government great pleasure to present to you the 'Gender Sense and Sensitivity' (2007-2014) report and its response to it. The report describes a policy review, conducted by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), which examines the Netherlands' contribution to women's rights and to equal rights and opportunities for women and men (gender equality) worldwide and, specifically, in 13 partner countries.

The policy review comes at a fitting moment, in the year marking the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Platform for Action and 15 years after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The new Sustainable Development Goals, in which the importance of women's rights and gender equality are deeply embedded, were adopted at the recent UN General Assembly. It is clear that there is still a long way to go before women's rights and gender equality are achieved worldwide, and the Netherlands will continue to strive towards this end.

**The policy review**

The objective of the policy review is to provide an idea of the worth, effectiveness, sustainability and efficiency of Dutch foreign policy programmes on women's rights and gender equality, and to learn lessons for the future. Throughout the period under review (with the exception of 2007, when about €4 million was available) the Netherlands earmarked an annual average of €40 million for independent programmes promoting women's rights. As well as analysing these programmes, the IOB has examined the extent to which policy on women's rights and gender equality has taken shape in other priority areas within development cooperation, in human rights policy, in policy on security and the rule of law, and in multilateral cooperation. The evaluation focuses on results within the themes eradicating violence against women, education, political participation, food security, water and sanitation, economic development and peace and security.

The IOB adopted a broad approach, with individual studies focusing on the MDG3 Fund and on policy on women, peace and security. A synthesis of academic publications (in a separate report entitled *Premises and Promises*) forms the basis for critically examining the premises underlying Dutch policy.

The evaluation focuses on the following questions:

- (1) What motivated the government to play an active role on the international stage in tackling gender issues?
- (2) What were the objectives and key features of international policy on gender equality and of strategies to achieve these objectives, and how do these relate to national policies on equal opportunities?
- (3) Did gender equality feature in policy on partner countries and in thematic policy as well as in specific interventions and approaches, and is this reflected in the different phases of the policy and programme cycle?
- (4) What were the results of these interventions in improving conditions for women, and have these results been lasting?
- (5) What financial and institutional resources were used to implement gender equality policy? Were they used efficiently?

The IOB's main findings are addressed and the government's response given below. Where applicable, future plans will be explained.

## Findings

### **Reasons for the policy**

The fact is uncontested that women worldwide are in a structurally disadvantaged position, the IOB states. The change needed to move beyond this is slow in coming, and sometimes progress is even reversed. This inequality is a fundamental violation of internationally agreed human rights, and was a convincing reason for a succession of governments to work for women's rights and gender equality.

### **Response**

The government agrees with this and would underline the significance and urgency of an ongoing commitment to women's rights and gender equality.

Globally, the position of women is improving slowly. It is increasingly clear that the more women participate in political, economic and security-related processes, the more sustainable development and security benefit.

But, as the UN has noted, 'Change has not been deep enough, nor comprehensive, and it is not irreversible.'<sup>1</sup> While most progress has been made in the areas of education and health, women's economic participation lags behind men's.<sup>2</sup> Political participation and leadership give even more cause for concern.<sup>3</sup> Major challenges remain in specific areas. For example, women who face multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage have great difficulty in escaping extreme poverty. Worldwide, one in three women will be affected by violence at some point in their lives.<sup>4</sup> For many women, sexual and reproductive health and rights are not yet sufficiently accessible. This has a major impact on the opportunities available to them. In conflict situations, women are confronted with sexual and other violence at the same time as they try to ensure their own and their children's survival in collapsing economies and communities. Women are the target of the misogyny of violent extremist ideologies. Their rights are restricted and sexual and other violence is used as a tactical weapon. In the international arena, conservative powers are joining forces for the purpose of assertively disputing women's rights, often in the name of national sovereignty, tradition or religion.

In this international context of opportunities and threats the government has opted for a proactive policy of partnership with new and existing allies, dialogue with those who hold contrary opinions, and diplomatic efforts to shape and secure international frameworks. Now, more than ever, it is crucial that we continue to work towards equal rights and opportunities for women. And the government is firmly convinced that this approach is working. It is not just a matter of justice; it ultimately means better solutions for everyone.

### **Key characteristics of policy**

The IOB concludes that policy has been fairly consistent throughout the period under review. Successive governments have expressed their support for the global observance of women's rights.

Gender equality relates to unequal power relationships between women and men, which are shaped within a specific historical, cultural and socioeconomic context and expressed in traditions and views. Generally speaking, Dutch policy has tended to focus on 'women' rather than on 'gender equality'. The human rights perspective has consistently been the leitmotiv. This explains the importance the Netherlands attaches to the international process of establishing norms and

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<sup>1</sup> Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcomes of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly, Report of the Secretary-General, ECOSOC E/CN.6/2015/3.

<sup>2</sup> IOB (2015), *Premises and Promises: A Study of the Premises Underlying the Dutch Policy for Women's Rights and Gender Equality*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>3</sup> IOB (2015), *Premises and Promises*, pp. 90-93.

<sup>4</sup> IOB (2015), *Premises and Promises*, pp. 16-20.

our active role at the United Nations (UN). Given the disadvantages women continue to face, the IOB believes that the emphasis on the rights dimension is thoroughly justified.

In line with the agreements reached at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, donor countries have focused on integrating women's rights and gender equality into all policy documents, programmes and projects. This is known as gender mainstreaming. Pragmatic arguments are increasingly used to justify this, for example that taking account of gender enhances the effectiveness of programmes for economic development and poverty reduction (smart economics), inclusive decision-making (smart politics) and international security (smart security).

The IOB believes that from a human rights perspective such arguments are unnecessary, and may even be counterproductive as they can divert attention from women's specific interests and needs and the obstacles they encounter. Moreover, the IOB believes that there is still little evidence for this argument. For example, the evidence that gender equality, in education and the employment market in particular, contributes to economic growth is much stronger and clearer than the evidence that economic growth contributes to gender equality in terms of health, welfare and rights.

### **Response**

The government sees the IOB's finding that policy has been consistent over a number of years as confirmation of the importance and urgency of continuing to work to achieve equal rights and opportunities for women and girls. Justice remains the guiding principle. However, the government believes that promoting rights, on the one hand, and promoting development, access to productive resources, security and inclusive governance, on the other, are not mutually exclusive. Promoting women's participation also means safeguarding their rights, to prevent their other interests from being eclipsed. Women's potential contribution to economic growth, including governance and stability, must not come at the expense of their rights and welfare.

Accordingly, the government will continue to offer targeted support to NGOs fighting for women's rights worldwide. These organisations – and individual women's rights defenders – play a crucial role in getting women's rights on the agenda, promoting and monitoring them and pursuing any violations. This empowers women and the organisations that represent them. Empowerment is a precondition for women's participation and leadership in politics, the economy and security. The government seeks to encourage these organisations to work more closely with governments, business, armed forces and other institutions to help ensure that women's rights and wellbeing are not subordinated to growth or stability objectives.

The Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW) fund is at the core of Dutch support for women's rights organisations worldwide. These organisations are reached and supported through the Human Rights Fund, a number of Strategic Partnerships for Dialogue and Dissent, the implementation of the National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 and voluntary contributions, for example to UN Women. The government is aware that many women's rights defenders work under dangerous conditions. Supporting and protecting these activists is a priority of Dutch human rights policy.

It goes without saying that men can also champion gender equality. Greater gender equality does not just empower women but also puts men and women on an equal footing. Relaxing rigid ideas of masculinity and femininity is also in the interest of men and boys.

### ***Integrating gender into policy and programmes***

During the evaluation period the emphasis on women's rights and gender equality took shape within a number of relevant themes: eliminating violence against women, sexual and reproductive

health and rights,<sup>5</sup> education, political participation, economic participation, access to productive resources, and peace and security. The evaluation gives a mixed picture. Gender has not been integrated consistently into these policy areas, either in developing policy or of implementing programmes and projects.

The priority 'eliminating violence against women' was covered by the MDG3 Fund and its successor Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW), and by the Human Rights Fund, the National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 and bilateral programmes, for example in Mozambique and Bangladesh. Violence against women, in conflict or post-conflict countries and elsewhere, consistently featured in diplomatic interventions in the UN, the Council of Europe and the Human Rights Council. It was also addressed in international trade union programmes. Women's rights were a prominent and, generally, successful focal point in the theme education. Leadership and political participation by women was a priority within all independent programmes, but did not feature in the fund for supporting political parties. The theme 'access to productive resources' was a priority for the MDG3 Fund and for FLOW. The issue of women's land rights was raised in the country programmes for Burundi, Mozambique and Rwanda and in multilateral programmes supported by the Netherlands, including the International Land Coalition and the Global Land Tool Network. In programmes for peace and security, such as the Stability Fund, the Reconstruction Fund and the UN Peacebuilding Fund, focus was more limited. Women's rights and gender equality were virtually absent from centrally funded private sector programmes. The Dutch Good Growth Fund could break with this tradition.

The IOB would conclude that, in practice, there was little interaction between programmes for women's rights organisations and programmes within priority policy areas.

### **Response**

The government recognises the pictures the IOB paints of the difficult and uneven path from political priorities to programmes and projects.

Since the concept of gender mainstreaming was introduced at the Beijing Conference on Women 20 years ago, it has proven difficult to put into practice, in other countries as well as in the Netherlands. Generally speaking, the integration of gender into other policy areas, such as the development cooperation priorities or security policy, is most likely to be effective if there is a match between gender objectives and policy area objectives. For example, the UN recently presented a new rationale for involving women in peace processes. While this is an end in itself, it also makes peace processes more effective, making it more likely that agreements are reached and implemented and that they are upheld for longer. Women's participation also means a more prominent role for other actors, such as civil society organisations, in reaching and implementing peace agreements.<sup>6</sup>

The government seeks to make more consistent use of gender analyses to identify strategic opportunities for integrating gender into priority policy areas. These map local gender relations, identify women and men's needs and opportunities, and make it possible to set specific objectives for improving the position of women. This will also help improve monitoring and evaluation.

Often gender analyses make clear that efforts on many fronts are required to improve the position of women. After all, the everyday rules of conduct, legislation, norms and practice that determine how much scope women are given form the conditions for gender equality. For example, it's not enough to grant women greater access to work if they don't earn a living wage, don't have

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<sup>5</sup> A separate evaluation of this theme has been conducted: IOB (2013), *Balancing Ideals with Practice: Policy Evaluation of Dutch Involvement in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, 2007-2012*.

<sup>6</sup> Thania Paffenholz et al., 'Making Women Count: Assessing Women's Inclusion and Influence on the Quality and Sustainability of Peace Negotiations and Implementation' (Graduate Institute, Geneva, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 13 April 2015).

protection from violence at home, on the streets and on the work floor, or if they have no say on the size of their family, pregnancy leave, and medical or child care. The government is committed to improving these conditions by promoting partnerships in several sectors with women's rights organisations. The local knowledge these organisations have puts them in a good position to shape the proposed improvements.

One example is the approach within private sector development. In many businesses and countries, a higher percentage of women in employment would mean higher growth figures and returns on investment, and globally companies are making considerable investments in women. These investments do not always have the right impact if insufficient thought has gone into the conditions for women, such as care for family members, living wages and protection against violence. The Netherlands supports the development of business strategies that do take these conditions into consideration. Collaboration with other partners is a must. The textile industry in Bangladesh, where most of the employees are women, is a good example. To help improve their working conditions, the Netherlands supports broad coalitions including government, local factories, international clothing brands, trade unions and international organisations. These coalitions focus not just on a safe working environment, but also on living wages, access to sexual and reproductive health care and protection against violence on the work floor.

The government also seeks to move more in this direction in the other policy priority areas (food security, water, sexual and reproductive health and rights, security and the rule of law, climate and humanitarian aid).

### ***Diplomatic efforts***

The IOB recognises that, through diplomatic efforts, the Netherlands has contributed to the adoption of internationally accepted norms for women's rights and gender equality, and to monitoring observance of these rights and gender equality by UN member states. Our focus has been on combating violence against women and implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325. In Europe, too, the Netherlands has made concerted efforts to include support for women's rights in both internal and external EU policy. Although it is hard to assess the results, these diplomatic interventions have more than just symbolic importance. International norms are the best possible basis for lobbying at local level and for calling authorities to account. They have also served as a framework for bilateral political dialogue.

### **Response**

The recognition that Dutch diplomatic efforts are making a difference motivates the government to continue to energetically pursue this course. International frameworks and monitoring mechanisms must be maintained and further strengthened and their use encouraged. After all, some women's rights are again under fire and – under the guise of national sovereignty – being curtailed in the name of tradition or religion. In particular, the government seeks to tackle those issues which are not yet adequately addressed by existing frameworks or on which existing commitments are not yet being well enough implemented: child marriage; violence against women; women, peace and security; women's rights defenders; and sexual and reproductive rights. New consortia – including parties who hold dissenting opinions – are needed to make progress on women's rights.

The government deploy diplomacy for women's rights more broadly than in just the regular forums, such as the annual UN Commission on the Status of Women. The new Sustainable Development Goals, our membership of the UN Human Rights Council, our candidacy for the UN Security Council, and other forums on priority themes like security, climate, trade and raw materials all represent opportunities for promoting women's rights.

Diplomacy and political dialogue are also being used bilaterally, for example to back the concerns of civil society partners, or to urge governments to take or support them in taking the action required. For example, the Netherlands emphasises the importance of safeguarding the scope and security of civil society organisations and activists working for women's rights.

Diplomacy also helps to bring together partners who have not previously worked with each other. For example, in the interests of helping establish relations between women's organisations and governments, businesses and other bodies or of getting women's voices heard on the international diplomatic stage.

### ***Effectiveness***

The evaluation shows that it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of gender policy. Gender analyses were often omitted when developing policy or programmes, as were gender-specific indicators. This means that only limited monitoring and evaluation of the results is possible.

Evaluation of the MDG3 Fund revealed that many of the women's organisations supported by the fund are still reliant on external funding. This tends to be because these organisations fill the gaps left behind by the government's unwillingness to support women, for example if they fall victim to violence.

It is these organisations, which understand the local situation, that struggle to survive and require long-term support, the IOB states. This support should focus on strengthening their institutional capacity rather than implementing short-term projects. The IOB warns that an exclusive focus on women's organisations should be avoided. Sometimes it is also necessary to involve (conservative) men to improve gender relations.

### ***Response***

The Netherlands is unusual in earmarking funding for women's rights. Historically, improvements in the position and rights of women have been the work of the women's movement. Women's rights organisations – which may include men as well as women – are our strategic partners in international and bilateral diplomacy. The IOB is right to note that support for women's organisations – large or small, local or international – must be long-lasting and focused on strengthening capacity. The recently launched FLOW 2016-2020 is based on this principle. The new FLOW also expects civil society organisations to pursue partnerships with administrative, economic and social institutions to better embed the results of their work.

Results of efforts to promote women's rights and gender equality will become more transparent thanks to more consistent use of gender analyses prior to programming, and by imposing stricter conditions for monitoring and evaluation when new grants are approved.

### ***Efficiency and resources***

Like other donors, the Netherlands adopted a two-pronged approach during the evaluation period: besides integrating the gender perspective across various policy areas, we also had an independent programme to support civil society organisations for women's rights. The MDG3 Fund (2008-2011) and FLOW (2012-2016) were financed from the relevant budget article, as was programming under the National Action Plan on Resolution 1325, the Women on the Frontline programme and the voluntary contributions to UN Women and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women. It is difficult, given the inconsistent use of the OECD's gender equality policy marker, to calculate what financial investments for gender mainstreaming have been made.

In the IOB's opinion, the Netherlands' standing obliges it to be consistent about practising what it preaches. Accordingly, gender policy should feature in all phases of policy, programming and projects. This has not always been the case. The organisational factors that have influenced this are limited availability of knowledge and training, unclear positioning of gender equality in the organisation, and the lack of a good mechanism to ensure accountability for poor results.

### ***Response***

The government believes there is urgent work to do in the fields of women's rights and gender equality, but also recognises the importance of long-term investments. It goes without saying that

transformations in deeply embedded power relationships – which is what gender equality requires – do not happen overnight. In that light, the IOB's critical findings come as no surprise. They do, however, suggest a need to reassess the most effective organisational approach.

The Task Force on Gender Equality and Women's Rights was set up in March 2014 to better organise specialist knowledge within the ministry and make it more widely available. It includes an external expertise centre offering advice and support to embassies, departments and implementing organisations, which has increased the number of initiatives for integrating women's rights in planning, programming and implementing the development cooperation priorities and other programmes. This is also reflected in Multi-Annual Strategic Planning documents.

In the coming period constant cooperation, knowledge sharing and measuring gender equality results will continue to require our attention. Successfully integrating gender is not just a question of procedures and guidelines; awareness raising, motivation, inspiration and accountability are just as important. An action plan will be developed to guide the ministry's work.

The government entirely agrees on the importance of research and knowledge development. The Knowledge Platforms on Development Cooperation and the Netherlands' participation in the World Bank Group's Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality are helping to create more clarity about what works for gender equality.

### ***MDG3 Fund***

In the individual study on the MDG3 Fund, the IOB states that independent funding is still necessary for organisations working to achieve equal rights and opportunities for women and girls. There is still a great deal of inequality in many countries, and the achievements women have been fighting for for decades are again under fire. Gender inequality is a complex phenomenon and lasting change requires a long-term, context-specific approach and the involvement of formal and informal institutions and organisations, government, civil society organisations and both men and women.

While the MDG3 Fund has made a difference for many women and organisations, the IOB questions the effectiveness, sustainability and efficiency of the activities funded. Opening up the MDG3 Fund to organisations the world over has resulted in a certain degree of fragmentation. The Fund also lacked a framework for shared objectives, and indicators for measuring progress, learning from experience and making results visible. The role of Southern partners was too often limited to achieving short-term project objectives. Outsourcing the management of the MDG3 Fund was not conducive to productive interaction between policy and implementation.

### **Response**

The government has decided to continue to finance civil society organisations defending women's rights. The IOB's findings have been incorporated into the recently published grant framework for FLOW (2016-2020). This requires organisations to make strategic choices, pursue partnerships where possible with institutional partners, develop a convincing intervention logic, and establish indicators for measuring progress. This requires capacity building on the part of implementing organisations (especially the smaller ones). The new grant framework provides for this.

The new FLOW will be managed in-house to improve interaction between policy and implementation, learn as much as possible from experience and make results more visible.

### ***Women, Peace and Security***

The IOB concludes on the basis of the individual study on women, peace and security that the partnership between the government and civil society organisation within the National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 has proved to be successful, both diplomatically and in raising awareness. In allocating €4 million a year, the Netherlands is one of the few countries to have answered the UN Secretary-General's call to make funding available for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325.

At the same time, the evaluation has revealed that full advantage has not been taken of the complementary roles played by those in the partnership (in this case, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other ministries and civil society organisations). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs could have focused more closely on the systematic integration of women's rights and gender equality into broader security policy, and participating civil society organisations could have focused more on achieving tangible results for women in conflict areas.

### **Response**

The government acknowledges that it bears primary responsibility for implementing the Resolution. The National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 is one of the tools for doing so, with at its heart the added value of cooperation between government and civil society organisations. Although a series of action plans have focused on the role and position of women in conflict situations and on support for integrating a gender perspective into broader policy, this integration has indeed not as yet been systematic. The government wholeheartedly accepts this. As suggested by the IOB, an independent strategy will be developed for this, which will be shared with the House later this year. The IOB's findings will be drawn on in drafting the third National Action Plan for the period 2016-2019.

### **Final remarks**

It goes without saying that the Netherlands is, and will remain, a staunch advocate of equal rights and opportunities for women and girls. It is a matter of principle and not just a matter for women. If women's potential remains structurally underused, everyone will be worse off – men and women alike.