



**Taking the Lead?: A Study of Discourses and Practices on Women's Empowerment  
by Ghana's Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC)**

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**Pathways of Women's Empowerment: Changing Narratives of Sexuality**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper is derived from our larger project on policy discourses and practices on women's empowerment in Ghana by leading institutions and actors in the state, civil society and the donor community. The overall aim of the study is to understand and ultimately influence the conceptions of women's empowerment in Ghana, and the strategies and actions flowing from these. In this paper, we focus on the Ministry of Children and Women's Affairs (MOWAC), the designated central government agency for 'mainstreaming gender' into national development plans. Operationally, MOWAC sees itself as the coordinator and guide for other ministries and government agencies on gender issues and concerns.

Textual analysis of MOWAC policy documents and in-depth interviews with differently located actors within the ministry allow us insights into interpretations of formal written policy and tacit working knowledges within the institution. In this investigation, we look for the explicit and implicit understandings of empowerment and disempowerment that inform official policy and everyday practice within MOWAC and collaborating government agencies.



## **Introduction**

The policy environment in Ghana is fragmented or disjointed. Many organizations, for pragmatic or ideological reasons, tend to focus on slices of women's lives. And yet together these organizations constitute the context for policy making for women and do influence how women live and make meaning of their lives. One purpose of this project, therefore, is to map out the landscape of policy discourse and practice on women's empowerment in Ghana.

We are interested in investigating the discourse and practice around women's empowerment in the Ghanaian policy environment. We chart the official (written) policy and actions related to "women's empowerment" within and across leading policy institutions. In doing this, we focus on the differences in meaning that exist in different locations within organisations and within the broader policy landscape. Initial findings from the Ghana Scoping Workshop held in July 2006, demonstrated the many different conceptions and (mis)uses of empowerment exist in policy circles, among civil society organizations, by the media and in the everyday parlance of women themselves (Manuh nd). These differences are not just semantic; actions have flowed from these interpretations over time and have impacted women's lives. The research therefore aims to understand and ultimately influence the conceptions of women's empowerment in Ghana and the strategies and actions flowing from them.

The methodology for this paper consist of desk research/literature review, analysis of policy documents, and interviews with actors within MOWAC. We analysed the two major policy documents of MOWAC: *The National Gender and Children Policy* and the companion *National Strategic Implementation Plan*. We examined explicit and implicit statements to understand how women's empowerment was defined, how it was conceptualised as a problem, and what solutions were proffered.



Interviews with staff within MOWAC and with collaborating sector ministries were the primary source of information. The original plan was to interview staff located across four different levels within MOWAC and affiliated institutions – *policymakers* (top administrators); *mid-level staff* (e.g. regional directors and Gender Desk Officers in sector ministries); *field staff* directly involved in implementing projects; and finally the ‘targets’, ‘participants’ in or ‘beneficiaries’ of MOWAC’s policy interventions. In reality, because MOWAC does not run flagship projects as other non-governmental organisations and bilateral organisations do, we replaced field officers with *schedule* officers within the Department of Women. For the fourth category of ‘participants’ or ‘targets’, we observed a meeting of the Women’s Organisations’ Monthly Meeting (WOMM) in Accra. It is a forum organised by the Department of Women for representatives of various women’s non-governmental organisations, and represents an important constituency for MOWAC. It was started under the erstwhile National Council on Women and Development (NCWD), the predecessor of MOWAC. The monthly meetings are to allow women’s groups to interact with each other, with MOWAC and (more importantly, according to MOWAC staff), to be educated about women’s issues. At the WOMM, we conducted an interview with the head of a women’s self-help group who had brought recent graduates of her skills-training program to the meeting. Although we also had informal conversations with other attendees of the WOMM, we were unable to follow up for in-depth interviews as planned.

We conducted a series of in-depth interviews with seven (7) persons located in different positions within MOWAC and collaborating Ministries. Four interviewees worked in the Department of Women (DOW) which is one of the two operational units under MOWAC and which deals directly with women’s issues; these were a top administrator, a regional director and two schedule officers. The fifth interviewee was an administrator who works within MOWAC and had previously held a top position in the NCWD. We also interviewed two Gender Desk Officers (GDOs) within two ministries with which MOWAC works most closely.



In the interviews with the government staff, we asked women about their knowledge of the national policy that presumably guided their work; their understandings of and experiences with gender in their work; and their conceptualisation of women's empowerment. Our aim was to gain insight into their interpretations of policy that they worked with on a daily basis. In the interview with the WOMM participant, we were interested in her perceptions of changes in practice and policy in the council/ministry.

In the rest of the paper, we first present and analyze the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs as an entity embedded in the framework of National Machineryes for Women inaugurated across Africa in the mid to late 1970s. We go on to examine and discuss the National Policy on Gender and the accompanying Action Plan formulated by the Ministry and how women's empowerment is conceptualized within it. We analyse the perspectives of staff and practitioners on women's empowerment and their interpretations of policies in the course of carrying out their work. The final section reflects on the potential of MOWAC to promote women's empowerment.

### **Analytical Framework**

The setting up a Ministry of Women's Affairs in Ghana has been as much an occasion for optimism as for scepticism. On the one hand, it might be considered a hopeful sign that the state has woken up to the need to focus attention on gender issues and that this commitment, whatever its strength or depth, provides an opening for the women's movement to insert their agenda into policy. However, another perspective is that a state-created agency in the form of MOWAC may retard women's interests by using the existence of the institution to dampen the rhetoric of the women's movement. It can be used as a show-piece and to monopolise the public space and discussion around women's empowerment, thus crowding out independent movements. Mama (2000) writes:

“The very existence of a state-created structure has exonerated government from tackling gender issues as part of mainstream policy, while making it possible for the state to



neutralise feminism and undermine non-state women's organisations, so setting back the development of a more organic and independent women's movement"

Whether there is more cause for optimism or scepticism is contingent on several factors, including reasons given for the establishment of the ministry, and also what it espouses and does. We borrow parts of Mama (2000) framework for analysis of national machinery, by examining the historical and political conditions and processes out of which MOWAC emerged. Here we pose similar questions to those asked by Mama (2000) in her analysis of the national machinery in Africa: to what extent did MOWAC arise from the women's movement and was grounded in their agenda? What institutions and discourses, both national and international, have influenced MOWAC's creation and work? What policies does it espouse and how is this reflective of a progressive agenda? Another set of considerations include its organisational structure and bureaucratic organisation of MOWAC; its placement within the overall government setup; and its resources basis, including its staffing and budgetary allocations. We analyse the limitations that these structural factors place on MOWAC's work. These analysis provides the context in which the policies and practices of MOWAC can be properly understood, and within which its potential for empowerment can be gauged.

### **National Machineries for Women in Africa: From the NCWD to MOWAC**

The genesis of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs can be traced through policies across governments going back to the immediate post-independence state. Mensah-Kutin et al. (2000) note that while Kwame Nkrumah's government can be credited with a progressive outlook on women, its policies (formal and informal) did not fundamentally change the lives of women, even if they did offer women a higher profile in national public life.. Nkrumah had broad support among women, particularly the market women who parlayed their economic power into social and political power, forming women's wings of Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CPP). As a reward for their loyalty, Nkrumah gave women places in public office, reserving seats for them



in parliament, and providing them opportunities to pursue education and formal work (Tsikata 1989; Manuh 1991).

The gender politics of Nkrumah's government were progressive compared to those of the predominantly military governments that followed, which often targeted women as 'nation-wreckers', agents of indiscipline and corruption or '*kalabule*' (Manuh 1993; Roberston 1983; Clark 1994; Bentsi-Enchil 1979). At the same time the tenure of military regimes from the mid-1970s coincided with increasing awareness and advocacy at international levels for women's equality and empowerment, leading to the establishment of the National Council for Women and Development (NCWD) by decree in 1975 under the National Redemption Council (NRC) led by General Acheampong. Despite this initiative, it is debatable whether the establishment of the NCWD can be attributed to the NRC's understanding and acceptance of gender and women's issues. More likely, its establishment reflected developments in the international arena and the declaration by the UN of International Women's Year and the First UN Conference on Women, as well as the efforts of a number of prominent women, such as the late Justice Annie Jiagge, for the institutionalization of gender issues within the state.

The NCWD was composed of members appointed by the government (the majority of whom were women), representatives of a number of ministries, and other officials in the civil or public service. The Executive Secretary was appointed by the government and funds for the Council came from government grants. The NCWD's mandate was to advise on policy, play a coordinating role, liaise with other ministries, evaluate programmes, and report to government (Mensah-Kutin et. al., 2000). Over time however, the NCWD placed different emphasis on each of these roles, depending on their reading of government direction on what was needed to advance women's causes, the internal capacity of the organization, and their sense of what was possible. It also drew on gender politics and discourses at home and internationally in formulating its direction and



programming. Initially, NCWD was placed under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which had oversight responsibility.

The language of the decree setting up NCWD was replete with the development discourse of the day about the need to integrate women in development (Mensah-Kutin et al., 2000). The integration of women in development translated, for many years, into projects (mainly in income-generating ) aimed at lifting women out of poverty, which clearly reflected the basic needs approach of the 1960s and 1970s. The NCWD established several income-generating projects for women all over Ghana, with financial and technical support from Ghana's development partners. Studies were also commissioned on women's access to resources and services, which brought out discriminatory practices and gender gaps, leading to the recommendations of relevant reforms. Laws were promulgated in the areas of marriage and inheritance that would protect women's interests while traditional practices which were deemed harmful to women, such as cruel widowhood rites, ritual servitude and female genital cutting, were abolished. It can be argued however that because of the paradigm within which much of the work of the NCWD was pursued, policies were not initiated to fundamentally change gender relations; rather the projects fixed women firmly in their traditional roles and statuses as producers. Even more crucially, the NCWD lacked the influence to change policy (whatever its supposed mandate), while its constant change in location, the discursive setting, and the network of institutional relations in which it operated did not provide it with an alternative to the prevailing development discourse. However, it continued to receive some support for its work, which Mensah-Kutin et al. (op cit) attribute to the global environment which encouraged governments to demonstrate support for women's causes.

The fortunes of the NCWD did not improve remarkably over the years, culminating in a nadir during the military rule of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) from 1981 to 1992. Mensah-Kutin et al. (2000) report an overwhelming consensus by staff of



the NCWD that it received the least support from the PNDC government which initially regarded the council with suspicion. To some extent, this reflected the general anti-women bias of military regimes. In addition, the NCWD as an agency invested in women's rights and advancement, with many of its projects benefitting urban market women (a 'favourite' target of the PNDC) was not unsurprisingly targeted. It was seen as elitist, and preoccupied with the concerns of a minority of women. Increasingly the Council was pushed into assuming a coordinating role, and to relinquishing control over projects and donor funds. In 1987, the board of the NCWD was replaced with an Interim Management committee while a new Executive Secretary was appointed with the position of a Minister of State (although the NCWD was never officially declared a Ministry).

The revolving door of Executive Secretaries, the constant changes to its institutional location, and the lack of interest in restructuring the NCWD, meant that it lacked focus and direction, and was rendered largely ineffective. A staff member interviewed by Mensah-Kutin et al. (2000) in the late 1990s stated that the NCWD (then in the Office of the President) had become "one of a host of hard-to-place agencies lumped together under that office and competing for attention." At the same time, the NCWD can be credited with having made women's rights a public issue in Ghana, both through its advocacy work and public education and also through its project activities which gave them access to ordinary women (Mensah-Kutin et al., 2000).

From about 1987, the NCWD faced competition from the 31st December Women's Movement (DWM) headed by the then First Lady, Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings. The DWM had been formed in 1983 by a group of radical young women with links to the PNDC. However by 1985, the leadership of the organization had changed, and it began to assume national stature, mobilizing women behind the regime and dominating the landscape for women's work for over a decade. DWM described itself variously as 'a revolutionary organ', and 'an NGO', and claimed a membership of 1.5 million members



at the height of its power (Manuh 1993). While donors were initially hesitant to support it, they soon began to line up to fund its many projects in income-generating activities, day-care centres, construction of wells, tree-planting and the like. It monopolized the space for gender work until after the return to constitutional rule in 1993, thus constraining organizing by independent women's groups. The situation in Ghana was similar to other West African examples, where wives of military heads of states formed organizations to mobilize support for the regimes of their husbands' regimes, often the guise of improving conditions for women. These tendencies have been labelled as 'wifeism' (Abdullah 1995) or the 'First Lady Syndrome' (Mama 1995, 1998; Okeke 1998) and have led to a contentious relationship between the state and other women's organisations.

Several civil society organizations emerged in Ghana following the return to constitutional rule in 1993. While organizations led by men focused on work around the state, democratization, governance and free speech issues, those led by women tended to focus on women and gender issues around gender violence, women's property rights, legal literacy and other critical issues from the Beijing Platform for Action, through service delivery and/or advocacy (Manuh 2007). The work on gender and women's rights was framed within WID and GAD frameworks and combined critiques of the state with calls on the state to institute reforms in law, political participation, culture and economic life, and gender relations, to create an enabling environment for women.

It is instructive to recall the socio-economic context within which such movements emerged. In reaction to deepening economic and social crises, several African countries began implementing economic reforms programmes from the mid 1980s. Typically these consisted of programmes of structural adjustment (SAPs) negotiated with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund that sought, *inter alia*, to re-align various sectors of the economy, decrease the role of the state in economic life and privatization of social services, and emphasize export-led strategies. A wide literature has been generated on



SAPs and their deleterious impacts in Africa (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999; Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995; Green 1993; Cornia and Mkandawire 1990; Elbadawi et al. 1992, Rimmer 1993). In particular, the gendered impacts of SAPs have received attention from several authors (Sparr [Ed.] 1994; Gladwin [Ed.] 1991; Elson 1994) who analyze gender bias in the design of programmes that deepened poverty for women as a group, placed heavier burdens on them in terms of workloads and the assumption of the burden of care as social services declined, and led to loss of livelihoods and employment opportunities. The retreat of the state from public life and in the provision of services also affected the state's ability to meet the commitments it had assumed under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, as it implemented policies designed more to achieve macroeconomic stability than social justice or gender equality.

In 1995, Ghana signed the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) and committed itself to implementing the twelve critical areas in the PFA and integrating gender perspectives through policy and planning processes. However, despite commitments made in the PFA to strengthen institutions set up to promote gender equality, the National Council for Women and Development (NCWD) was not given much support. This acted as a drawback on the implementation of the 12 critical areas of the PFA in Ghana (Awumbila 2001) and led to NGOs taking up the mantle as the main vehicles for women's development. A national gender policy and an affirmative action programme were announced in 1995/6 as part of Ghana's post-Beijing activities. Policy guidelines towards ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women in Ghana were purportedly issued to all Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). Tsikata (2001) has questioned the policy and programme on account of their analysis of the problems and, more importantly, the processes by which they were produced. While the gender policy was only a draft and was never circulated to any group, the affirmative action plan was drawn up by a committee established by Mrs. Rawlings after Beijing. The draft was not debated but was sent straight to cabinet, and very few people actually saw it. Subsequently it was reported in the media that government had accepted the affirmative action proposals.



Despite the spate of activities by the DWM and the increasing numbers of women's organizations, there was slow progress in several areas of women's lives. Women's participation in decision-making and political life continued to lag behind those of men, and was low compared to that of several other African states. A national study on gender-based violence found unacceptably high levels of physical, economic, sexual and psychological violence (Coker-Appiah and Cusack [Eds.] 1999). The famed high labour participation rates of Ghanaian women found them in increasingly segmented labour markets, earning low wages and barely surviving above the poverty line, while a majority of rural women experienced high morbidity and maternal mortality. What brought matters to a head was the spate of increasing violence against women in the form of femicides, murder, rape and sexual assault from around 1999, that galvanised the fledgling women's movement and coalition-building activities, at the same time as the state's implementation of neo-liberal macro-economic frameworks and strategies led to more radical critiques by some women's organizations, including NETRIGHT (Mama 2005). Together with the group *Sisters Keepers* set up in the wake of targeted killings of women around Accra, NETRIGHT brought out the scant attention to gender issues and popular concerns in demonstrations that it organized in December 2000, and is credited with contributing to the electoral loss of the National Democratic Congress, the successor government to the PNDC, and ushering into power the government of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in run-off elections (Mama 2005). In an interesting turn, the new President spoke about women in his inaugural address, and about strategies to empower them, including the establishment of a Ministry for Women, headed by a Minister with Cabinet status.

Public reactions to the news of the establishment of MOWAC were mixed. While the idea of a Ministry was welcomed as an indication of governmental and state sensitivity to gender issues, a section of civil society did not agree that the chosen vehicle was empowering, given the experiences from other countries in Africa which showed that Ministries of Women had not been very successful in addressing women's concerns, and



tended to become ghettos, compared to constitutionally mandated institutional frameworks that have proven to be more effective (Mama 2000). Through press statements and other activities, NETRIGHT expressed its position: Because of the multi-faceted nature of gender equality work, it wanted a body with a constitutional mandate with authority to reach across different locations, including within policy-making, in contrast to the proposed location of gender issues in one ministry. It also wanted space for independent civil society formations. In addition to concerns over the institutional vehicle, dissatisfaction was expressed over the merging of women's and children's issues in one ministry, when historically the two domains had proceeded differently, and when legislation and action at the international level emanated from different bodies and interests. For many, this was an attempt to 'naturalize' the two domains and to fix women securely within the maternal and care fold. To cap it, the expressed agenda of the Minister, a very conservative woman, generated doubt among gender activists, as she saw micro-credit as the mechanism for empowering women, and eschewed any focus on policy work. Her hostility to a proposed Domestic Violence Act led to its being stalled in Parliament for nearly four years, and passed only after she had been designated to another Ministry.

With their new-found confidence, and the knowledge that the DWM could no longer dominate the space, the women's movement sought audience with the President and told him of their reservations. The new Ministry drew up a gender strategy document and invited various organizations, including NETRIGHT, to a consultation. Many of the organizations and individuals present were disconcerted when it became clear that they were only expected to assent to what had been done. However it soon became clear that there were deep differences between the state and women's organisations on policy direction, but it was also clear that the government was set on its decision to create MOWAC.



## **Functions, Structures and Interactions**

Established by Executive Instrument 18 of 2001 ostensibly to strengthen the institutional foundations for promoting greater responsiveness to gender policy measures, the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs is designated as 1 (one) of 8 (eight) Central Management Agencies (CMA) headed by a Minister of full Cabinet status. This is intended to highlight the importance attached to the Ministry and the cross-cutting nature of its mandate and work. As explained by the current Minister, its designation as a Central Management Agency (CMA) with Cabinet status provides it 'with a comparative advantage with the role and responsibility to monitor policy implementation and programmes in the sector areas, coordinate cross-sector issues and evaluate the impact of sector policies on women and children. Its specific mandate is to initiate and formulate policies and promote gender mainstreaming across all sectors to lead to the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women, and the survival, development and growth of children, as well as ensuring the protection of the rights of women and children.'

MOWAC is organized in two functional departments, the Department of Women (DOW) and the Department of Children (DOC), and maintains oversight over them. Until the creation of the Ministry, policy coordination and formulation was part of the work of the department of women, but this has now been ceded, and the department is only supposed to implement programmes of the Ministry, even though some of its staff have competencies that do not exist in the main Ministry. But coordination between MOWAC and DOW appear weak, and DOW is careful not to appear to be overstepping its mandate.

Not surprisingly, resource allocation to the ministry is seen as inadequate, with the Ministry receiving only 0.1% of government budget. The Ministry uses the bulk of funds and subdivides what remains between its two departments. In turn, the DOW must allocate funds to its regional offices and implement programmes from these inadequate



resources, with an obvious impact on its efficiency. For staff, inadequate human and financial resources signal an inadequate commitment to gender issues, and the DOW spends time finding partners to assist it to implement what it sees as its mandate.

DOW also has ten (10) regional offices, headed by Regional Directors. Because they operate as part of the civil service, staff of DOW believe that this offers them protection and security from the political interference suffered in the past. In terms of career progression, grades have been made analogous to what exist in the public services, with a scheme of service etc. However the Ministry and its departments exist only up to the regional level and the DOW has not received clearance to establish offices at district level. Even the regional offices are not fully staffed, and they have only recently been given clearance to recruit staff.

The Ministry has attempted to place gender focal persons or Gender Desk Officers (GDOs) at the district level since 2002. This effort has not been very successful as these GDOs are not core staff of the Ministry and their mandates have been unclear. Sometimes, as with DISCAP (the Canadian-sponsored District Capacity-Building Programme), gender desk officers are appointed in consultation with the Ministry of Local Government, but with little involvement of the DOW. Many gender desk officers are also not appointed full time, and are only seconded to an office, often as a condition for receiving a grant. One interviewee, a regional director, relayed the makeshift ways in which GDOs work at the regional and district level:

‘... You know these multilateral donor-agencies, (they say) these are terms and conditions – ‘you have to get a gender desk officer or we won’t sponsor you’. So the district says ‘okay, I can get a gender desk officer for you’. So they pick a teacher – ‘can you come and do this on secondment? Or a nurse can become one. So most of the gender desk officers already have their mother jobs - I mean [they have] mother organizations that they belong to and then they are at the assembly just as volunteers - not even on secondment, they are volunteers. So if the district assembly does not get money for their



activities, they relax. But since we need them because we don't have officers in the district--the department of women don't have officers--so we collaborate with them. If we need them, we have to do a lot of networking with them so that they are able to give us information or feedback from their districts and then help us implement the policies at the district level. ' [Interview with Regional Director]

The placement of GDOs within the assembly structures has also been found to be problematic because of the limitations of gender-sensitive institutional mechanisms in the assembly structures, and the fact that policy formulation and implementation processes have tended to ignore women's concerns (Ofei-Aboagye, 2006). At the same time, staff of the Ghana Education Service (GES) have been placed within the assembly structures as District Girls' Education Officers (DGEOs). Such officers have served as focal points for coordinating the promotion of girls' education, public awareness-raising and other gender-related issues. There are also Community Water and Sanitation Committees (CWSACs) in place that have quotas for women in making decisions about community water.

The DOW has a finance and administration unit; a programmes and projects unit; a monitoring and evaluation unit; and a research, information and counselling unit.

The research and information unit conducts research to identify gaps in policy in the course of implementing programmes and policies. This research may be commissioned or executed in-house, if possible. Apparently the DOW handles several requests for information on gender and women's empowerment from researchers and the general public. The research and information unit also sees itself as a depository, although it does not as yet appear to play that role. Under its current head, two staff members have the responsibility of monitoring trends in women's empowerment, gender and development and women's rights as presented through the media and to make an analysis of trends. This is done through keeping clippings of news and information items which may be used for preparing annual reports.



An important role of the DOW is offering counselling services. The department reports receiving many women who come to see them over marital problems; divorce, separation, child maintenance, sharing of property, and other issues are dealt with at the DOW. While most of the cases are brought by women about violations of women's and children's rights, it was reported that a few men also came in with complaints about their wives and partners. This results in interactions with other agencies such as the Police, the courts or health services, as a DOW administrator recounts:

Well, let me say that one of the units we have in the department is counselling. And we do get a lot of clients, because when they get to know that there is a department of women, they bring a lot of problems, and we need to link them with up with the relevant agencies, maybe the police, the courts, the health, wherever we need to send them, to get their issues addressed we do. So through that we deal with the police a lot. And now when it comes to, of course, domestic violence, we are supposed to monitor the policy and all that. And in the area of training of police officers on gender sensitivity and looking at DOVVSU facilities and as to how it responds to domestic violence and all those things, yes, we do interact with them a lot. [Interview with DOW administrator]

MOWAC and the DOW interact with several Ministries, departments and agencies whose work directly impact on the lives of women. These include the Ministries of Health; Education; Local Government; Finance; Trade and Industry; the Attorney-General's Department; the Police and the Domestic Violence Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU). In pursuance of the mandate of gender mainstreaming of public sector policies and programmes, GDOs are supposed to be appointed in other sector ministries. These GDOs are not MOWAC staff, but are appointed by their sector Ministries as gender desk officers, and MOWAC and the DOW are supposed to liaise and work with them. In a few key Ministries, highly qualified and competent staff such as Directors or deputy Directors may be appointed as GDOs, but in other Ministries, even executive officers can be appointed, resulting in challenges with their understanding of their roles and their



performance. However, neither MOWAC nor DOW has found the clout or the time to set firm criteria for such appointments of which the Office of the Head of Civil Service has official oversight. DOW organizes gender training for the GDOs or other staff who are seconded to it and might detail some duties for them, such as drawing up gender-sensitive budgets. This training which is given at the beginning of their work consist of an introduction to gender concepts and their importance, and to the Ministry and its role and functions. However, there appear to be no structured training manual and few hand-outs are prepared or given out. Staff are also expected to learn from workshops they attend and the occasional in-house seminars. However there is a recognition on the part of DOW staff that structures have to be put in place to support GDO work in relation to policy interpretation and planning as it they believe that this would make more of an impact in empowering women in Ghana.

Given MOWAC's low budgetary allocations as well as the influence of bilateral and multilateral organizations on Ghana's development agenda, donors (the development community) constitute an important constituency for MOWAC and its departments. The UNDP and UNIFEM have been involved in attempts to restructure the NCWD over the years, while UNIFEM was involved in the 2001 attempt to formulate a gender policy for MOWAC. Ongoing interactions with donors interested in gender work are organized through the Gender Equality Sector Group (GEST), a group initially composed of donor partners. Currently the chair of the group rotates between MOWAC (DOW) and a donor partner. Fairly regular meetings are held to review activities and discuss support. There appears to be some concern by the GEST over the capacity of MOWAC/DOW to formulate policy and implement programmes, and DOW has not received resources it expected for various activities. The GEST has also argued for government commitment for MOWAC programmes and sees itself as meeting funding gaps, rather than picking up the whole tab. GEST members also express worry over commitment to gender issues within their own organizations. Interestingly, many of these same organizations support projects in similar areas by civil society groups, but the difference in their support to



MOWAC is attributed to the system-wide approaches that are now implemented with government. Fundamentally however, the worry appears to be over the capacity of the Ministry/DOW to carry out donor-funded programs and to achieve the required results. Sometimes also, private remarks to potential donors over the capacity of DOW filter back to staff.

DOW also has interactions with NGOs and women's organizations. In Accra and the regional capitals, this occurs through the monthly meetings with women's groups that date back to the time when the NCWD played a coordinating role. Then the meetings used to be quite vibrant, as there was little organized independent support to women's groups, and the NCWD acted as a broker. The proliferation of NGOs and grants has meant less control of the DOW over established women's organizations, while smaller or less bureaucratic membership organizations have dwindled or been subject to political interference from parties and governments which channel support to party members. The WOMM meetings are now described as 'a pale shadow of themselves, but they still allow interactions and collaborations with both international and local NGOs; in the Upper East Region for example, there were interactions with Action Aid, and local NGOs like CENSUDI (The Centre for Sustainable Development Initiative), the Widows and Orphans' Movement, the Single Mothers' Association, and almost all the women's groups and societies.

The meetings are also supposed to occur in the regions and districts, but are less frequent in the regions because of inadequate staff, and do not occur at all in the districts. Individuals and different groups, including workplace women's associations and faith-based associations, attend. It is used as a forum for giving information and for ventilating opinions on diverse matters. According to DOW officers, themes for discussion are chosen on the basis of their topicality; doctors might be invited to give talks on health issues, while staff of the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) or the Electoral Commission might provide civic education. Apparently, attendees can also



suggest topics they want education on and DOW finds the necessary resource persons. Staff see this as contributing to empowerment as women obtain knowledge on pertinent issues.

### **Conceptualising 'Women's Empowerment' in the National Policy**

It has been noted that the establishment of the ministry seems to have led to greater visibility and articulation of concerns to women (ABANTU, 2004). However the strategy for addressing such issues seem to be hinged on a priority interest in livelihood questions rather than pursuing this as one component of a comprehensive policy advocacy agenda by a state institution. Thus MOWAC's interventions in the district assemblies have been mainly through the Women's Development Fund (WDF) to provide micro-credit for women. Another initiative has been the attempt to formulate a policy and strategy document to guide the Ministry's work, which is analyzed in this section.

MOWAC has produced two primary documents that are to guide its work: *The National Gender and Children Policy* (GOG n.d) and an accompanying *National Strategic Implementation Plan* (GOG 2005).

By its own account, *The National Gender and Children Policy* is a framework that "sets the agenda for the development of women and children within the framework of the national development agenda" (p.1); and guides all relevant institutions on their role in that agenda. The document sets out the Ministry's mission statement, its policy goals, objectives, strategies, and the institutional framework within which it operates.

The document also describes MOWAC's institutional linkages (MDAs), and "women and child-focused organisations" at all levels, which linkages should facilitate the implementation of its policies at all levels. In *The National Gender and Children Policy*, MOWAC sets itself the task of making gender an integral part of the planning of the



other ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs). Among the strategies for doing so are sensitization and training of planners in gender and child analysis skills at all levels and sectors of the nation (p. 1, 16-19).

The plan operationalises the National Gender and Children Policy within the GPRS framework (p.8). The document outlines five specific approaches for achieving the vision laid out in the national policy:

- First is the establishment and strengthening of national, regional and district institutions to support the implementation of the ministry's mandate.
- Second, ensuring that policies affecting women and children are formulated, reformed, implemented and monitored.
- Third, undertaking sustainable programs that will improve women's social, economic and political status.
- Finally, developing strategic partnership with public, private and civil society stakeholders and development partners.

Gender mainstreaming is clearly the guiding principle for the policy document and in MOWAC's interpretation of its mandate: to profile and "mainstream" gender issues in the workings of other ministries, and within the "national development process".

Gender mainstreaming is supported by two other concepts: *gender equity* and *gender equality*. These terms are defined in *The National Gender and Children Policy*:

"Gender Mainstreaming is [the] strategy for addressing gender equality, accepting and valuing equally the difference between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society" (p. 21).



“Gender Equity also means fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between the genders” (p. 20).

The concept of ‘women’s empowerment’ itself is not used in the national policy document, although it is mentioned in the strategic implementation plan, albeit without a clear definition. However, from contextual readings, it can be surmised that ‘empowerment’ is synonymous to the achievement of ‘gender equality’ and ‘gender equity’, as these concepts are variously defined in the document.

A reading of the two documents – the national policy and the strategic plan -- suggest that one source of disempowerment is social constructions of womanhood which concentrate on women’s reproductive roles, and which limit their access to land, to credit, to training and education, and to decision-making structures at both community and national levels. The main strategy for addressing these social and structural obstacles is to institutionalize a decentralized national machinery with the capacity to reform policies, initiate innovative programs, and collaborate with stakeholders to advance the status of women and children in Ghana. The policy documents suggest that the technical process of gender mainstreaming is a means to achieving structural transformations that will result in social and institutional changes that will promote equal recognition and benefits for women and men. These changes would indicate increasing empowerment of women.

The MOWAC national policy document is, in theory, to inform the drawing up of policies and programs internally, as well as within each sector ministry. By all accounts, few of the ministries have a gender policy. One of the Gender Desk Officers (GDOs) interviewed was located in one of the few ministries that had a gender policy. At the time of our interviews in mid-2008, the final draft had been reviewed and was expected to be published the following year. When asked how the MOWAC broader policy influenced her ministry’s policy, our respondent replied that the consultant called into to author the policy had presumably “pulled out [the relevant] issues” from MOWAC’s policy document. Not having read the MOWAC document herself, the respondent trusted that



the consultant would be familiar with its content. After the document had been submitted however, the review committee (made up of administrators in other ministries as well as a representative from the UNFPA), asked the consultant to produce an 'issues paper' because, according to our respondent, the review committee "didn't know what the issues are".

*The National Gender and Children Policy* lends itself to a number of critiques, not least that it is not framed within any explicit theoretical or conceptual framework, although it is dotted with occasional and ambiguous references to GAD and WID. There are copious references to what are considered to be women's issues -- essentially issues having to do with security, health and bodily integrity such as domestic violence and human trafficking -- but these are divorced from broader political and economic issues. For example, infrastructure is not perceived as a 'gender issue', even if lack of good roads and access to hospitals are a factor in maternal deaths. Clearly, the policy lacks a framework within which to account for the underlying situation of men and women within Ghana's social and developmental context.

On a related note, there is not a clear examination of the structural challenges and strategic needs of women and how these are significantly different from those of children, a critique which was levelled at the onset of the setting up of the Ministry by the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT 2001).

Without this conceptual clarity, the stated goal of gender mainstreaming becomes extremely problematic in terms of conceptual, strategic and intended and actual outcomes. Gender mainstreaming as a set of programs and as a goal has been critiqued for being vague, variable, and therefore difficult to implement and assess (Subrahmanian 2004; Woodford-Berger 2004). In the case of MOWAC whose conceptual starting point is shaky, these critiques are even more damning.



The lack of policy clarity is again evident in the disjuncture between the agenda of societal transformation MOWAC sets for itself and the strategies it proposes to achieve its stated goals. The broad mandate MOWAC gives itself is gender equality and equity in society; it proposes to fulfil this mandate by initiating policy and programs that enhance women's social, economic and political circumstances. These policies and programmes are squarely located in the goals of national development which, under the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy I (GRPS I), are articulated as "economic growth" and "poverty reduction" (GoG 2005). Predictably, therefore, the policies and programs laid out are those that cater for the "marginalised" and "vulnerable" (safety nets) and those that draw women into the process of growth and 'wealth-creation' by providing them opportunities to acquire skills and capital (ibid.) These initiatives fall squarely within the discredited paradigms that suggest that women merely require opportunity to have access to social, economic and political spaces in which presumably development takes place, and that ignore or simplify the political demands and structural challenges of women. It appears then that the concept of gender mainstreaming has been layered onto old ideas and approaches without much critical reflection. Thus, stripped of its feminist theoretical frameworks and political goals, and constrained by prevailing mainstream neo-liberal development ideology, gender mainstreaming becomes a bland enough to fit into any framework – a process that has been referred to as 'policy evaporation' (Standing 2004; Subrahmanian 2004).

According to MOWAC's policy documents, the attempt to change women's situation is funnelled through gender mainstreaming of government administration. In other words, MOWAC will make the changes in policy and programming by changing their bureaucratic procedures and systems. Again, this feeds into another set of criticisms put forward by Subrahmanian (2004) about the 'narrowing' of gender mainstreaming in terms of the arena in which it is applied and in terms of its tools and processes. First, MOWAC's focus is at the state national level, despite Ghana's decentralised system of government. This is clearly seen in the fact that the targets of its capacity-building and



policy advocacy are the sector ministries in Accra, and that its organisational structure is top heavy at the national level and virtually non-existent at the district level. Second, from the documents and interviews, gender mainstreaming is limited to attempts by MOWAC to have other sector ministries engage in gender budgeting and in drawing up sector gender policies. As has been mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the onus of carrying out this mainstreaming in other ministries is placed largely on GDOs whose training is limited in both duration and scope.

### **The Perspectives of Staff and Practitioners**

To establish the place of the policy in the work MOWAC staff, it is important to note, first, that none of the staff members of MOWAC and DOW, with one exception, reported being involved in any way in the process of putting together the policy document. One staff member had only become aware of the existence of the policy document on the day it was officially launched in 2004. Beyond the two top administrators in MOWAC and DOW, none of the other five respondents (DOW Schedule Officers, the DOW regional director, and the two GDOs) had read the national policy.

Despite being removed from the process of the creation of the policy and while admitting to a lack of familiarity with the contents of the policy, our respondents unanimously endorsed the existence of the policy as being significant and important for their work. The following quotations, the first two from interviews with DOW schedule officers and the third with a Regional Director, are illustrative:

RPC: What is the [policy] document supposed to do exactly?

DOW: I think it is guiding us as to how to achieve gender equality– that is how I see it.

RPC: Do you see the department using the document? Is it useful for the department and for you and your work?



DOW: I think it should. I am not able to say much about it because I have not really read it. But since it is a document for the ministry, I think it is. For what we are doing now I have to get it and read it and have more information. But I know it is helping to achieve gender equality.

RPC: So that means in meetings it is not really talked about. Is it referred to? Does somebody mention it? Do they quote part of it or talk about it in anyway?

DOW: Looking at what we are doing now I think most of the things come from in there. Like I told you, the plans are sometimes done in the ministry before it comes to us, so I'm sure they make use of it.

[DOW Schedule Officer1]

DOW: In fact I think you have to forgive me. I read it only once and that was about to three years-- ago, I, I, yes--

RPC: I'm not going to ask about the specifics, but when you read it what were your impressions?

DOW: I realized that it talked about (ehmm), or it talks about women's you know, women's positions and the need to push women's issues forward and, how do you call it, gender issues, whatever you call it, and children's, you know, it's for both women and children....It's a broad something so you don't really see the details, the, little, little details in it, you understand?

RPC: Then what is the use of---

DOW: No, no it captures, you know, it talks about women's issues broadly, and the need to support women and the various institutions that are supposed to work... So it's just like a guide, it's a guideline, yeah, as to what women need, what we need to do and



whatever, and in our own small way as a department. I think we are also trying to implement some of the provisions in the policy

[DOW Schedule Officer 2]

RPC: Let's talk about the policy. What do you know about it?

DOW: I haven't seriously studied it. Like you are saying, you just said there is a gender policy. It is unfortunate. Those are the difficulties I'm talking about – the difficulties of civil service. I don't know sometimes how things work. Some of us are too radical for this. Sometimes you are not happy with the way things work. Because something like this, regional directors, we are not aware. Nobody knows how it started.

RPC: You were not involved in any way with the planning or --

DOW: No, no, no. So it would be difficult for me to say much about it. The only thing I would say is that for us to have a gender policy, it is one of the best things. And so far I think a lot of things are happening on the ground that this ministry should be congratulated for. Because I know that with this gender policy we are talking of, even the gender budgeting, is one of the issues that it is supposed to be tackled. And for me that alone is even a great deal of achievement. This issue of gender desk officers at the various ministries and the district assemblies are all good things that are factored into the gender policy. But I haven't had time to actually study so much to be so abreast with it.

[DOW Regional Director]

The question can be asked, "With no real knowledge of the national policy, how were staff at DOW to implement it?" The following response from a senior administrator at DOW is revealing:

"Well the Ministry's gender policy is supposed to give the broad framework for other sectors... to develop their own sector specific policies. Now I--speaking as a gender



specialist or whatever - I don't like using those words - specialist, expert...I don't think that this policy-- the policy document as it stands gives people that kind of, how should I say, direction that is required for sectors to really take a cue and develop things from it. It is very broad and very generic, and if the gender person in question does not have the requisite skills and knowledge, the person would have difficulties in coming up with a policy."

The administrator added that, from her perspective, they could only "take inspiration" from the policy and the action plan. One might guess that taking "inspiration" did not require a close reading of the policy since, as she said, it was too vague to provide adequate direction for planning in DOW and in the sector ministries.

It appears that the utility of the national policy document is not in its ability to provide detailed guidance for MOWAC/DOW, but in the perception that it legitimises their work. Even those who admitted ignorance of the creation or content of the document were nonetheless convinced that the policy must be in line with what they were doing. Thus, even though the existence of a national women's policy does not seem to affect their work directly, it is a bureaucratic underwriting or formalization of their existing discourses and practices, and also a validation of their work.

It is noteworthy that the confidence of these staff members did not necessarily correspond to any significant degree of training in the area of gender. Three of the seven interviewees had a teaching background. Five of the seven had, while in public service, acquired post-graduate degrees in public administration or related fields, during which they may have taken a "gender course" of some kind. Our interviewees also mentioned on-the-job training (in the form of seminars and workshops) as a significant part of their qualifications, and respondents (particularly the mid-level staff and schedule officers) based their gender 'expertise' on their experiential knowledge in their work and personal lives. Their understandings of empowerment were informed by the situations they encountered in their work, especially at lower administrative levels, where there was



more direct contact with the constituencies they served. A good example is the case of a Gender Desk Officer within a sector ministry who had once worked in a local government office who explained

“in general administration, you bump into gender issues. You receive complaints – especially in the district – you receive complaints about a man who is so authoritative and has found another woman and wants to remove his wife from the government quarters...Oh, there are so many issues – especially women who come with issues like some who can't pay their children's fees. So many.”

She added that her first-hand experience of these issues informed her interest in “gender issues”; she had grown up in a polygamous household “so I know what kind of suffering women go through.” Her personal interest and professional, experience was layered over with some basic training:

“I learnt a bit about gender...at my master's level, it was a basic kind of course so I studied a bit of gender.”

The GDO quoted above had recently been promoted in her ministry and was contemplating passing on the position to another woman in her department who was “mature” and could “understand the issues”. It can be inferred then that the qualification of this candidate as a Gender Desk Officer was, first that she was female<sup>1</sup> and, second, that she was old enough to have acquired life experiences which presumably would stand her in good stead in her professional capacity as a GDO.

In general then, it was suggested that it was not training that was most important in handling gender issues, but personal interest and an intuition or empathy that came with being a woman. A regional director put it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> From interviews and observation, it appears that the convention is to appoint only women as Gender Desk Officers.



DOW: When you are looking at issues, no matter who the person is, you are able to sit and then analyse it from the perspective of a mother. And you can only do this particular job we are doing best if you are a mother.

RPC: Why do you say that?

DOW: Because that is the only way you can do the job, a mother for mothers, for fathers, and for children. You've got to see it from the perspective of a mother. Mothers are unique. They understand issues the way others will not understand. It is a unique gift from God. So when something is happening to somebody and you see it from the eyes of a mother, no matter who the person is – the person could even be your mother, but if you are looking at it from the perspective of a mother, you will understand it better.

Our interviewees did not have a common policy frame of reference in terms of formal courses on gender with significant theoretical content, nor in terms of a national policy document that they had read, understood and were actively seeking to apply. It is striking then that their construction of women's empowerment and, correspondingly, of their job descriptions were quite similar, even between staff members who had admittedly little contact with each other in the course of their work.

We argue that, in the absence of a working document that informed their discourse and practices, the GDOs and the staff of MOWAC and DOW drew on socio-cultural frameworks to understand women's empowerment and disempowerment. The five non-managerial staff (that is the two schedule officers, and the two GDOs and the regional director) all blamed Ghanaian women's disempowerment on "culture" or "tradition".

"I think some of the problems may also come from the traditional beliefs and whatever. You know, looking at gender violence in some communities, they tell you your husband has to beat me if you talk too much – yes, that is what the people think. So when you go there preaching against domestic violence, they tell you 'no', you are coming to destroy



the system they have. So I think our beliefs contribute to our not being empowered. Yes! You go in and that is what they believe in and don't want you to change anything."

[DOW, Schedule Officer1]

RPC: So when you look, with all your experience, when you look at Ghanaian women what do you think is disempowering, what are the things do you think that cause us to be --

DOW: Our culture!

RPC: Our culture?

DOW: There is so much impact, and it will be interesting for you to hear that even at this...masters programme [in Human Rights] that we attended, the men who are, who *say* they are doing human rights, if you listen to the way they talk about women--! So once I got up and I told them, 'Look here, you are doing human rights and human rights doesn't mean only men's rights, we are talking about, women's rights, children's rights as well, so if you come to this course with all these baggage of you know, cultural, customary whatever it is, you can't get anywhere. Then when you go back [to your offices] what are you going to do?" You understand, we are expected to be ambassadors and you are carrying this thing as a big, huge luggage, and you don't want to leave it behind. What are you doing? You can't move forward, because it will be weighing you down."

RPC: And these were people in government?

DOW: Yes, they are in government.

[DOW Schedule Officer 2]

As the preceding representative quotes suggest, "culture" was a barrier to both women's advancement in society as well as a barrier within the very institutions that should be



advancing women's causes. Implied in the interviews was understanding of culture as a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and expectations that devalue women or hold them back.

However, there was a disjuncture between what was seen as the problem and what was proposed as solutions. On the one hand, interviewees stated that the problem of Ghanaian women's disempowerment is a cultural one which encompasses historically and socially constructed institutions and norms. On the other, the solutions they offered tended to be couched at the level of individual effort and transformation. The five interviewees who reference culture as the cause of disempowerment all offered anecdotal evidence that pivoted around marital abuse and economic dependence of women on husbands. In other words, their working understanding of the effects of culture was located at the level of the household and of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, their suggested solutions were also couched at the micro-level.

According to our interviewees, the predominant pathway out of disempowerment was education. With education (preferably formal, but also informal forms such as 'sensitisation' on specific issues), a woman would be economically independent and therefore unlikely to be abused or oppressed within their households. Obtaining employment or other avenues to earning income was mentioned as another pathway to empowerment. In other words, the proffered solutions did not include changing the structures that disempowered women but rather aimed to allow women some degree of physical and financial security within prevailing conditions. The following quotes are illustrative of this perspective:

DOW: The empowerment – I think that is where we are looking at developing the woman for her to be sound in all spheres of life –economically, socially, whatever. So that once she is really developed, she can-- she has the-- it's like you don't depend on somebody; you are self-dependent, you are independent. You don't really depend on somebody for something. I think in MOWAC, they look at economic empowerment so they are giving micro-credit. But I think that is not all, we need to do more than we are doing.



RPC: In what areas in particular?

DOW: Educationally. In fact I think educationally is the number one because if you really educate the person and she knows and then later you help her financially, she would be able to really do something better.

[DOW Schedule Officer 1]

DOW: So anytime I'm organizing a programme I give this thing on domestic violence, I explain to them... if you are sitting down at home and you say that, even though you've been educated, you will not work. But at least even if you are earning five pesewas, it is for you, you understand. You support the house, you know that you are supporting your partner, you are supporting the home with even two pesewas, [and] he will respect you. So that is that sort of education we give them to open their eyes to know that these are some of the indications, these are some of the things that make-- you know men abuse women ultimately...

RPC: So that is the way to get women empowered?

DOW: Exactly.

RPC: To educate them?

DOW: Precisely, because, through this we train them, at least if you are trained [and] you are given some basic support, then you have some kind of [empowered].

[DOW Schedule Officer 2]

RPC: If a woman gets the opportunity to work, she would earn a little income and the person is not totally disempowered. One of the basic means of disempowering a woman is to take away every income. If a woman is able to provide a meal for a child, the



woman is not disempowered. [An empowered women is] educated - sometimes even not educated, sometimes the person could be educated, but she should be self-sufficient.

RPC: As in--?

DOW: As in, economically...[Also] her husband must understand and love her. In the case of the woman who is not empowered, the husband does not -----because even if the husband does work, that alone is an empowerment for the woman. The love of her husband is empowerment. She is able to sit in public and she is so proud to have a husband. That alone gives you some comfort. A typical woman who is disempowered is somebody whose husband is abusive. It could be physically, it could be mentally. In the case of the empowered woman, the husband must love her. If the husband does not, it will not help.

RPC: So to get there, you have to turn this [disempowered woman?] typical, into an empowered one. It would take education, and what else?

DOW: Financial, economic--

RPC: As her getting a job?

DOW: Exactly, a job, building her capacity to become assertive...If the person is not educated and the person is already old, they kind of begin women's groups – this thing is a very effective tool that we are using now --they form women groups, they meet, they discuss issues-- I was talking of mentoring- they mentor each other, others come, that are a little bit empowered than the others, then you learn from them, 'How did you do you it'? 'I did it because my husband used to beat me, he didn't like me because I was always asking. Now because I'm selling this 'I don't always have to ask. He appreciates me'.



[DOW Regional Director]

This micro-level orientation to what is acknowledged to be a bigger structural problem was further illustrated by statements that suggested that men were not to be directly challenged in this quest for empowerment. Four interviewees (the two schedule officers and two GDOs) spoke about how they were effective in their work because, though they challenged ideas about gender relations, they were at the same time careful not to antagonise their male colleagues because it would be counterproductive; therefore, they were 'balanced' in what they said, or they used a 'soft' approach. The following quote was representative of this perspective:

DOW: I think if we do the right thing we can achieve the gender equality we are talking about. My problem is the equality. You know the way we are going about it, it's kind of pushing the men.....I don't know. For them they don't want to understand us. I think we really have to look at the equity and not the equality, because we can never be equal.

RPC: So.....?

DOW: So we should rather ---Like we came in with affirmative action. At least some percentage of positions for women in politics or women in decision making positions should be given to women. Maybe we should be doing that, **but we should stop saying we are equal. We are not equal and we can never be equal** [our emphasis]. But then if we really do our education well, we can achieve the equity, but the equal, that is where the problem is.

In terms of institutional responses to the problem of disempowerment, two staff members made references to gender mainstreaming when they were asked about the broad goals of DOW/MOWAC. However, when asked to translate gender mainstreaming in terms of their day-to-day work, the language of mainstreaming was entirely lost, except for the



mention of gender budgeting by a DOW Schedule Officer, and an account by one GDO of her attempt to derive a gender policy out of MOWAC's policy for her own ministry. Instead, in keeping with their construction of both the problem of disempowerment and the pathway to empowerment, the mid-level and 'field' staff at DOW and in the ministries saw it as their job description to "educate" and "sensitize" women (and also men when the opportunity arose) about women's rights and the need to be empowered; to support women with micro-credit and other means of gaining a livelihood; and to provide welfare when needed. Consequently, the main obstacle they perceived to their ability to do their work was not a proper policy or development framework, but cumbersome bureaucracy and lack of logistics:

"I can use my position to influence decision making policies. Last two weeks there was a forum for the Regional House of Chiefs on negative practices that are inimical to women - the whole regional house of chiefs. And after from the deputy regional minister, who is a woman, I was the next speaker to speak. I was there as the regional director for women. I'm sure if I would not have had that opportunity if I was just a radio presenter...but I was there as the regional director for women in the entire region - that is an opportunity. I don't think that my expectations are different from what I am realising. The only thing is that the difficulty here is the bureaucracy...Sometimes when something is coming from the government, then your hands are tied; it is a straight-jacket thing and you've got to find yourself fitting in anyway. And then [there's] the financial constraints. But if you are effective - which you are supposed to be as a director, then you should be able to go out of your way to impact seriously on the lives of (word indistinct) from other sources."

[DOW Regional Director]

"What we do as a department is we train women, we educate them, we do advocacy on basic human rights --a lot of them don't know. They don't even know that as human beings they have rights, you understand. So we do that, we organise training workshops for them, especially when it comes to micro-credit, you know we train them and together



with the ministry we give them some soft loans, even though the money is not enough. And we have something we call monthly meetings with our women's groups – the WOMM –and we sensitize them on certain issues...[They meet] every first Thursday of the month but the ideal thing is to visit them at where ever they are in their group. Look at what they are doing, encourage them, support them and whatever; we don't have the money to do that. But at least to give them the knowledge that they need, you see that, because I believe that empowering somebody is not only giving the person money but at least educating the person to be aware of certain things.”

[DOW Schedule Officer 2]

### **Can MOWAC lead?**

The paper has attempted to review MOWAC's policies and practices to examine how it is positioned to promote the empowerment of Ghanaian women.

When it was set up, MOWAC was to be the lead institution within the government and within the broader Ghanaian society to positively transform women's lives. However, its positioning of itself conceptually and in its location within government do not allow for an optimistic evaluation of MOWAC's likely impact on the situation of Ghanaian women. Neither does MOWAC's record suggest that it can effectively take the lead on women's empowerment; in fact, the ministry has in the past been seen to be in opposition to the women's movement in Ghana on questions of women's rights and progressive policies.<sup>2</sup>

Mukhopadhyay (2004) suggests that gender mainstreaming has two levels or approaches: 'an integrationist' and 'transformative or agenda setting' approaches. In the first instance, gender equality and equity is 'integrated' into the entire planning and policy development

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<sup>2</sup> Different coalitions of women's groups had conflicts with the former Minister of MOWAC around first the creation of MOWAC, the Domestic Violence Bill, and the process of developing a Women's Manifesto.



process from beginning to end in terms of both strategies and outcomes. This integration is done within the agencies working in the development arena. A transformative goal of mainstreaming aims at changing existing development approaches and programmes, for example, by addressing the structural inequalities that constrain women's access to land rather than simply providing them with the resources appropriate for the differences in agricultural activities. Mukhopadhyay (2004) suggests that agenda setting needs to go beyond the obvious development institutions; it requires a mobilisation of the larger society to advocate for change, and an appreciation of the socio-political environment in which such significant transformations in policy can take place. MOWAC's policy documents purport to use both integrationist and transformative perspectives, but are not convincing in their claims of understanding of or their ability to achieve either. In particular, the transformative claim rings hollow because, despite the mention of advocacy for women's rights and participation (GoG n.d.), there is no attempt to challenge the prevailing neo-liberal model of development which still see women's participation instrumentally as a means to the end of economic growth and poverty reduction. In fact, the national gender policy and implementation plan are quite explicitly subsumed under the current "growth"-oriented development framework.

Through textual analysis and interviews, we see that the ministry has a narrow view of what it considers "gender issues"; neither in its analytical framing nor in its strategy does it take cognisance of the power differentials in the social and development contexts of Ghana. Without this clarity, gender mainstreaming becomes even more ambiguous because, even in the best of times, it is "a hollow term, as its usage commits the user to neither a clear agenda on gender transformative action, nor a clear institutional transformative agenda" (Subrahmanian 2004, p. 90). It is therefore not surprising that MOWAC's policy positions on mainstreaming do not carry over clearly into the practices of staff within MOWAC and gender desk officers in other ministries. Rather, in the vacuum created by a lack of a clear theory and plan, we saw "the generalisation of meta-narratives based on rather narrow universes of experiences and interests" (Woodford-



Berger 2004, p. 67). The staff in DOW/MOWAC and the GDOs in the sector ministries articulated an understanding of disempowerment as a function of power inequities between men and women in interpersonal relationships that are constituted and supported by “culture”. This was the gender analytical framework that guided their work.

Finally, we see from the policy documents that MOWAC has grandiose ideas of its influence and has created a long list of potential “partners” whose input will be needed to carry out programs that will mainstream gender within the development process; these include the ministries and other units within government, as well as civil society organisations, donors, and the general public. (GoG n.d., 2005) However, its actual positioning within the government machinery and within the larger development ‘community’ in Ghana does not inspire confidence that MOWAC possesses the influence or the resources to play this coordinating role. MOWAC can be considered one of the weakest ministries, being relatively new, possessing a wholly inadequate budget, and having low status in the regard of those who work in the government. Significantly, DOW/MOWAC does not have the authority to hire staff for as yet non-existent district-level offices; neither does it appoint GDOs in either the sector ministries or in the local government set up. Lacking these institutionalized and material supports, any headway that MOWAC makes on its overly-ambitious mandate is mostly dependent on the personal commitment and goodwill of the Minister, the Executive, the Directors of various sector ministries, development partners and donors, and the staff of MOWAC and DOW. MOWAC staff and the GDOs reported little support or interest in their programming within other parts of government, and little confidence on the part of donors or ‘development’ partners in their ability to deliver results. In the case of internal staff of MOWAC, DOW and the GDOs, we found that the individuals we interviewed were dedicated to their own constructed causes on behalf of women (some even described it as a personal crusade) but were not supported with adequate knowledge of policy nor with the logistics.



Beyond the willingness on the part of different actors to engage in the issue of women's empowerment, what was even more conspicuously absent in MOWAC's attempt to develop collaboration were coherent and shared policy goals. This lack of cohesion in ideas and strategies is signalled by an internal disconnect between DOW and MOWAC. The lack of coordination between MOWAC and DOW may be partly attributed to the fact that the erstwhile NCWD morphed into the DOW while keeping some personnel, networks and programming; it is even housed in the same building. This may explain why the DOW seems to have a sense of being a separate entity from MOWAC, rather than a sub-unit of the ministry; indeed, some of the interviewees in DOW spoke of "them (at MOWAC)" and "us (at DOW)". At the monthly meeting of representatives of women's organisations which started under the NCWD, some participants still referred to DOW as "NCWD", which may explain why the former Minister of MOWAC had little to do with this network, suspecting them to be political stooges of the previous government that had taken over the NCWD.

Moreover, MOWAC does not have a strong constituency, since its ties with women's organisations have been frayed by conflicts with the former minister and general disappointment with the lack of impact of the present Minister. Even a ready-made organised constituency such as WOMM has been alienated from the main ministry and has not been leveraged in any way by DOW.

In sum, in order to evaluate MOWAC as the focal institution for women's empowerment, we have asked the questions, "Can it lead? Whom? And towards what goal?" The cumulative responses to these questions force us to the conclusion that MOWAC lacks both the vision and the capacity to lead Ghanaian women 'up' the path to empowerment.



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