Gender Thematic Group (GTG) Meeting

26-27 May 2014
Tsakhkadzor, Russia Hotel

Summary of Discussion Outcomes

A. GTG priority context:
New Issues, Challenges and Key Players in the Area of Gender Equality and Gender-Based Violence

1. GTG members discussed the context of GTG priorities in four groups (government agencies, non-governmental organizations, international development partners, and "mixed" – consisting of representatives of organizations representing these three sectors) identifying new issues, challenges and key players in the areas of gender equality and gender-based violence.

2. The groups specifically discussed the following:
   i. Developments in the global and regional levels, changing milestones and dynamics of integration processes, including unfavorable changes in the Armenia/EU integration process, new priorities and rapid development of Armenia/Customs Union and Armenia/EU integration;
   ii. Policy reforms hot in the public agenda, including pension, constitutional, local self-governance reforms important in terms of ensuring gender equality;
   iii. Territorial, sectorial and line specifics of issues related to gender equality and GBV, including significant differences in terms of awareness and gender stereotypes between individual marzes, education, sector characteristics, availability of adequate capacities among the national and local executive bodies in the marzes and government to ensure gender equality and implement public policy on combating GBV;
   iv. New technologies and current social-political processes, including social networks and civic activism during the last few years; and
   v. Developments in the law enforcement practice alongside with improvements in legal regulation of ensuring equal rights of men and women and prevention, prosecution of GBV and protection of victims of violence during the recent years.
3. More important issues and challenges presented and discussed in the general session that have credible evidence base are listed below.

4. Soon the Public policy on Gender Equality and Gender-Based Violence (GBV), documents determining its goals and objectives, priorities and mid-term measures will come to an end. The development of public policy in this area for the coming years and the need to support it is in the agenda.

5. In the current context of lacking public resources, public policy priorities and budgetary fund allocation priorities, as well as considering the remarkable reduction of the sources of funding aimed at promotion of gender equality and combating GBV in the late stage of mid-term strategic plans (in number of areas no financing sources are available at all) the development of more realistic programs in line with the set policy priorities, as well as the expansion of funding sources and volumes are high in the agenda.

6. The number and scope of quality gender studies, analysis does not adequately ensure and support to the process of developing evidence-based policy and programs.

7. In terms of the above-mentioned statements the role of the GTG becomes important for the support in the process of developing the upcoming mid-term state sector policy and measures for its implementation.

8. GTG’s role can be essential in terms of ensuring stronger evidence base, including proper quality research and analysis, in order to ensure proper coordination in the development process of policy and programs.

9. The GTG’s role is also important in terms of coordinating the resource mobilization according to the current and future priority areas in the public policy.

10. The practical application of Law on Equal Rights and Responsibilities for Women and Men adopted on May 20, 2013 (in force since June 29, 2013) remains very limited. For the enforcement of the law is necessary to develop and adopt respective sub-legislative base, including the procedure of monitoring and information sharing of public policy programs on ensuring gender equality, respective procedures, develop capacities of government agencies responsible for their implementation, raise public awareness on legal regulation and procedures, as well as support in the protection of rights guaranteed by the legislation and in efforts of citizens and institutions targeted at application of opportunities.

11. In this regard the GTG’s role in coordinating the steps toward the implementation of the above tasks, development of sub-legislative field, formation, expansion, revision and analysis of the law enforcement practice, capacity development of authorized entities and support in the cooperation of agencies involved is important.

12. In the view of gender equality norms not properly enshrined in the Armenian culture, unfavorable gender stereotypes, inadequate awareness and understanding of specific Armenian groups of discrimination, high poverty level and difficult socio-economic situation, recent regional developments, deviations recorded in integration process dictated by priorities of ensuring Armenia’s military and political security as a result of aggrieved Russia-West relations, growing external pressure on Armenia’s foreign and domestic policy and on the public life, including direct and indirect pressures on the political elite and “anti-gender campaign” through civil society organizations and social networks had negative impact on the implementation of gender equality policy in Armenia, on activities of civil society organizations, on cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organizations and have drawn dividing lines between the government, political, public and religious institutions and the society in general.
13. There are no sufficient conditions for inculcating gender equality in the formal education system having a central role in transformation of unfavorable gender stereotypes in the public, education of youth and families at pre-school, general education and professional levels.

14. At the same time, the role and influence of NGOs in raising awareness of the public and specific groups on gender equality remains strictly limited. Among the reasons we should mention especially the low institutional stability and lack of cohesion among the NGOs dealing with gender equality issues. In such situation, despite the large-scale projects implemented during the last two decades the NGOs continuously have limited impact on the formation of absolute public opinion on gender equality and on countering the influence of extreme intolerance. The NGOs mostly do not have tools and capacities for countering to such influence, especially to its extreme manifestations.

15. In this regard the GTG’s role in coordinating measures aimed at raising public awareness, including contributing to inclusion of more unaware and vulnerable "difficult" groups of the society.

16. In the conditions of intensifying external pressures and increasing negative influence the GTG role becomes even more important in terms of ensuring continuous and inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogue and constructive cooperation between the state, political, public institutions and international partners for the development, making sure complementary distribution of and mutual cooperation between the GTG member structures to resist and promptly respond to "anti-gender campaign" and its mores extreme manifestations.

17. GTG role in the Armenian society becomes important in terms of excluding new "dividing lines" between the specific groups of the society and institutions in relation to gender equality, bridging the existing gaps, harmonization of specific problems and different approaches towards them, efforts of understanding the different approaches of the above-mentioned groups and institutions, restoring tolerance, mutual respect, including through inclusion of line agencies and civil society organization, namely, the Armenian Apostolic Church, major education institutions, Ministry of Education and Science having greater role in raising awareness among the more vulnerable groups of the society in GTG.

18. Provision of respective methodical assistance and coordination in the frames of GTG to organizations involved in gender equality issues to more effectively respond, confront and neutralize the interventions and influence by groups and institutions involved in advocating intolerance and "anti-gender campaign".

19. The scope of gender issues is comprehensive and includes human rights, discrimination, violence, various family and society issues enabling the discussion of the issues on equal rights and opportunities for women and men in a broader context of human rights and development. The societies, where gender equality approaches are already deeply rooted in cultural and value layers, enable raising of new issues and guarantees for eliminating discrimination, promoting minority rights.

20. Similarly, when the attitude towards rights and opportunities for women and men attitudes is not yet rooted and instituted in the society and culture the above-mentioned aspect often compromises the gender equality efforts. Thus, in cases when discrimination and its specific manifestations are not yet fully rejected in the specific stage of society development, but, unfortunately, are still tolerated by a wide strata of the society the groups and agents representing women’s and men’s equality issues alongside with other segments of a wide spectrum of gender equality issues get a chance of mobilizing the opinion of more unaware layers of the society against gender equality. This situation is more typical for Armenia and countries being in the respective stage of development currently, where gender equality issues are used as a tool and means of the manipulation of public opinion.
21. In this regard it is important to develop the GTG as a platform for the coordination of general approaches and development of common tactics and projects by member institutions.

22. In the frames of various public and information events, including press releases and/or press conferences it is also important to disseminate such messages and notes on behalf of the GTG about which GTG has unanimous and harmonious position.

23. Although standing committees dealing with gender issues were established in marzpetarans and Yerevan Municipality and had their significant role in the implementation of public policy and projects aimed at establishing gender equality and fighting GBV in the marzes during the recent years, nevertheless their capacity for addressing problems and challenges that are intensifying on daily basis remain inadequate.

24. Furthermore, there is severe lack of proper specialists, experts, public opinion makers and simply well-informed citizens in gender issues. Moreover, the organizations and specialists dealing with the issues of ensuring gender equality, especially in the regions are not properly utilizing, using the modern tools arising in the context of new information and communication technologies.

25. If opportunities and tools provided by the new technologies are not being used by entities conducting activities to promote gender equality, for raising public awareness and protection of equal rights and interests for women and men, then very often are used in “anti-gender campaigns” aimed at misleading public opinion having the Western values as a real target that are fundamentally consistent with the values and aspirations of Armenian people. In the current situation the available human and institutional resources cannot effectively respond to the challenges that require operative reaction, interference and coverage at local level.

26. Furthermore, currently the GTG acts primarily as a platform for information sharing. However, current format of information sharing and tools used for it need to be improved especially given the fact that the GTG meets quarterly.

27. GTG also offers an opportunity of sharing opinions and approaches by making them more harmonious. At the same time it is necessary to improve effectiveness of the GTG in terms of coordinating relevant projects, initiatives, efforts and resources.

28. Given limited resources the coordination role of the GTG becomes of greater importance in professional capacity building in regions (marzes) of Armenia through directing program and human resources and funding to the regions and through respective recommendations and directives.

29. It is also important to expand the tools required by the GTG for sharing information, opinions and approaches and for coordination.

30. In recent years the government of Armenia with the assistance of its international development partners initiated series of reforms of critical importance for the country and society and implementation of those reforms will have a considerable impact on the situation around gender equality and ensuring equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women.

31. Pension reforms, integrated social service reforms, constitutional reforms, decentralization, consolidation of communities and several other reforms in local governance and important processes in terms of gender equality in Armenia.

32. Furthermore, in developing those reforms it is critical to incorporate into them the gender component, and ensure participation of entities representing interests of men and women in an active and representative manner.
33. In this regard it is important to present and discuss significant public policy reforms within the GTG with a focus on gender equality and their impact on equality of men and women.

34. Armenia’s international commitments and its participation in international platforms is key for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for men and women. Certain global processes are very important, including the process of preparing national and alternative reports on how Armenia is meeting its commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, preparations for the Beijing +20 (1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing) by summarizing the progress achieved on implementation of Beijing Declaration and action plan; strategy and program discussions “ICPD beyond 2014” in the framework of the 20th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994), the Post 2015 process for reviewing MDGs, etc.

35. The role of GTG is important in coordinating the assistance to Armenian government entities and NGOs for Armenia’s proper preparation for the above-mentioned processes.

B. GTG Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in Responding Issues and Challenges Discussed in the context of GTG Priorities

36. Participants of the discussion identified the following strengths (S) for the GTG:

S.1 Multi-stakeholder representation in the GTG. It includes representatives from different UN entities, authorized government entity (Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of Armenia), international development partners (including OSCE Yerevan as a co-chair) and active NGOs;

S.2 Multi-vector activities of the GTG members: entities represented in the GTG are engaged in activities in other spheres of public policy;

S.3 The GTG offers and opportunity for harmonizing approaches of its members;

S.4 The GTG brings together the cumulative experience and know-how of the country in this sphere;

S.5 Diversity of experience, role and approaches of the GTG member organizations;

S.6 The GTG is also a network that allows for effective communication and partnership between the members, establishment of new ties and bringing them together;

S.7 The GTG offers the opportunity for promptly responding the challenges the members are facing through communication, a unified approach and voicing that unified approach;

S.8 The GTG offers some flexibility for its members thanks to coordination and assigning roles;

S.9 The GTG is a “safe” environment where member entities in an atmosphere of trust have open and thorough discussion on issues and matters of concern;

S.10 The GTG is an established “brand”: The GTG is well known to all entities and experts dealing with gender issues and the messages of the GTG are weighty;

S.11 The GTG as different from other coordination platforms has a clear theme framework.

37. Participants of the discussion identified the following weaknesses (W) for the GTG:
W.1. Inability of the GTG to timely respond to challenges, excessive forms of discrimination and intolerance (S.7);

W.2. The GTG mandate is not binding for donors and implementation partners and decisions within the GTG are made on a consensus between members (S.3);

W.3. Information sharing is not sufficiently effective within the GTG, particularly information updates on library and projects implemented by members (S.6);

W.4. Not enough exposure of the activities of the GTG (S.7, S.10);

W.5. Given the current format of the GTG, current logic behind shaping its agenda and frequency of meetings the opportunities for comprehensive and thorough expert-level discussions are limited (S.4);

W.6. The GTG does not have a strategic program and specific events/activities are rare and opportunistic and lacks unified resources/budget for joint activities (S.8).

38. Participants of the discussion identified the following opportunities (O) for the GTG:

O.1. Flexible format and charter of the GTG that could be modified based on the needs to accommodate development;

O.2. The GTG format allows developing joint strategy and shaping approaches;

O.3. The GTG format offers the opportunity of attracting new entities and members;

O.4. With improved effectiveness of the GTG’s coordination function its role and impact over the processes will grow;

O.5. The GTG format offers an opportunity to improve capacities for promptly responding to challenges;

O.6. Use of information technologies may improve effectiveness and timeliness of communication, role and impact of the GTG;

O.7. The GTG may become a bridge for the dialogue between government entities, NGO-s, religious organizations and international development partners which might have different approaches on some of the issues or even serious differences in some cases.

O.8. Through gaining in the authority the GTG response may serve as a sound countermeasure against the promotion of discrimination, homophobia and “anti-gender campaign”;

O.9. The GTG format offers a good opportunity for coordinating and organizing preparation works prior to important international developments and forums (Beijing +20, MDG post 2015, CEDAW report, etc.).

39. Participants of the discussion identified the following threats (T) for the GTG

T.1. Increasing anti-gender (O.8);

T.2. Political pressures over those responsible for national gender equality policy, its development, implementation and monitoring, NGOs implementing projects and other actors in the light of current processes of regional integration;
T.3. High level of poverty and socio-economic tension

T.4. Migration flows, as well as social outcomes of migration;

T.5. Challenges to local democracy as an outcome of consolidation of communities;

T.6. Reduction of funding for implementation of projects aimed and gender equality and sources of such funding.

40. SWOT analyses of the GTG demonstrated the diversity of expectations and perceptions of the GTG members in regard to the GTG role and pointed towards the need for their harmonization, which was partially facilitated through this GTG meeting and separate discussions.

41. It is necessary to make a maximum use of the opportunities available for the GTG. Unlike challenges, which are of external nature and strategically incorporate uncertainties, the opportunities for the GTG are more specific and their implementation largely depends on the next steps of the GTG members.

C. GTG Actions Aimed at Priorities and Challenges

42. GTG members discussed several actions aimed at the issues and challenges the group was considering, which are described below:

i. Review the TOR of the GTG to enhance the coordination role and effectiveness of the GTG with consideration of the conclusions and recommendations drawn from the current meeting;

ii. Enhance the representation of the GTG, clarify and enhance the GTG composition by excluding from the GTG entities that are not involved and including new segments and entities, such as Armenian Apostolic Church, other religious organizations, youth organizations, line ministries;

iii. Develop and discuss feasibility of the budget for the GTG, sources, procedures and priorities to increase the role of the GTG harmonized actions and activities, GTG responsiveness and coordination efforts;

iv. Coordinate the process for evaluation and review of government policy and programs in this area and summarizing the accomplishments, progress, lessons learned and success stories in view of the nearing completion of the program cycle of gender strategy;

v. Coordinate assistance to government policy and action plan development, including through technical assistance, by organizing discussions on draft documents and by coordinating the process for collecting comments, recommendations, additions to those documents;

vi. Coordinate the process of technical assistance for Beijing +20, MDG +2015, CEDAW 5-6 reports, organize hearings and discussions on Beijing +20 and CEDAW national and alternative reports prior to their release, coordinate the process for technical assistance for implementation and monitoring of recommendations regarding CEDAW convention implementation progress;

vii. Include gender aspects of important public policy reforms into the GTG agenda and regularly discuss to ensure gender component in public policy reform initiatives;

viii. Conduct press conferences (1-2) after the discussions to publicize the position of the GTG on gender aspects of the above-mentioned reforms, to draw public attention on the issue and shape public opinion;
ix. Assist with enforcement of the Armenian Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Men and Women by coordinating the process of developing sub-legislative framework and providing technical assistance to the NGOs facilitating enforcement of the law;

x. Initiate and coordinate introduction of tools to improve effectiveness of information sharing between GTG members to increase the coordination role of the GTG, including use of data sharing through events calendar available at Google platform;

xi. Organize working expert discussions on gender issues to promote the process of harmonization of views of GTG members;

xii. Initiate and coordinate efforts to promote the GTG and ensure its presence in social platforms;

xiii. Strengthen the response capacities of the GTG and its members in the light of “anti-gender campaign” and the need to face intense forms of its impact by developing a guide for NGOs and other entities to get oriented and act in challenging situations, coordinate exchange of practices, organize discussion to develop actions to respond to the “anti-gender campaign”;

xiv. Coordinate the assistance to capacity building for coordination entities (Governor’s office commission), other entities and experts in regions (marzes) of Armenia; discuss ways of cooperation the local/community level.