

Comments on the HBF's paper on "Reflections on Gender Mainstreaming"
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I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to this debate that I believe is an important contribution to the stock-taking being undertaken everywhere by feminist and women's movements ten years after Beijing. This assessment of gender mainstreaming is also coming at a time when the United Nations is seeking to get the mandate from the international community for a massive UN Reform blueprint and process, an aspect of which is the issue of international women's human rights and their more effective implementation. (Sadly, however, this aspect is often drowned out in the dominant gender blind and state-centric debates on UN Reform.)

Consistent with CEDAW, the HBF paper re-emphasizes the need for states and multilateral institutions to take deliberate steps in modifying political, social and culture-based gender biases. And despite having acknowledged several challenges, the HBF paper also reaffirms the Beijing Platform for Action's commitment to gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for the UN, other multilateral institutions and states in following through their commitment to gender justice goals and gender equality targets. Overall, the paper's key message seems to be that *"it is too early to throw in the towel for gender mainstreaming; there were possibilities opened up and various opportunities still to be pursued!"*

The HBF position on gender mainstreaming reminds me of what my colleague in DAWN, Peggy Antrobus, had said elsewhere – "Talk MDGs but Think BPF!" We all know that there is a global dissatisfaction of women with the MDGs where women's equality was straight-jacketed into a single un-ambitious goal. But because so much of institutional effort had been focused on the MDGs, it might be best for women to take advantage of this and use the MDGs as a springboard for pushing forward more meaningful understanding of women's rights and gender equality. Antrobus did not harbor any illusion about the MDGs and her political objective was crystal clear.

This brings me to reflect on what the HBF paper says is "the strategic application and mix of institutional and socio-political processes" when it speaks of pursuing gender mainstreaming. We have to remember that there is a permanent tension between 'official, governmental and institutional' agendas and processes with those that spring from the socio-political dynamic of contestations among a broader range and diversity of socio-political actors. The question is: "What is the concretization of this mix?" – one that moves beyond the dangerous "mixing and evaporation of gender from the pot of institutional agenda" that Sarah Longwe spoke of and which the HBF paper picked up as a forewarning.

In the section on 'road signs for the institutional development of gender mainstreaming', the HBF paper provided five (5) guide posts. All refer to how gender mainstreaming could make governments work more democratically, with transparency and accountability, and in a socially-oriented way, not just on the gender equality front but in

its overall public policy formulation and implementation as a whole. Unfortunately, nothing was offered in terms of the political substance of a more progressive official gender equality agenda. For instance, it would be very interesting and informative to know what the political elements of the gender equality agenda in Germany ought to contain, an agenda that is rooted in the current complexities of its governance and societal dynamic and which responds to issues arising from these.

Let me give an example. In regards to gender mainstreaming in the World Trade organization, DAWN the network I belong to, came to the Seattle Ministerial Conference in 1999 with a strong position of resistance to the inclusion of social clauses in the WTO. Given its narrow framework of market access and competitive deal-making around trade, DAWN cautioned about the potential use of social clauses as a further market access restriction to developing countries. In Cancun two years ago, a kindred network of DAWN – the International Gender and Trade Network – categorically came out in opposition to any gender mainstreaming mechanism in the WTO. The political critique of both networks was clear – the invisibilization of the care or the social reproductive sphere of the economy in the market ideology underpinning the WTO regime, and its preoccupation with trade rather than social outcomes, would only lead to the instrumental cooptation of gender, not by all states but by the already developed economies that could and would use this to exact deals from developing countries. As an alternative, both networks together with other feminist networks, called for several processes, as follows: an increased feminist critique of free trade and marketization linked to the WTO and the Coherence Policy in the international community, a defense of women’s human rights in the midst of fundamentalist and conservative assault, an increase in the use of the rights framework in challenging and making national governments accountable to gender equality commitments, and called on feminists and women’s movements to come together with other traditional and new social movements in the deepening and radicalization of democracy within the global women’s and people’s struggles against neo-liberalism, war and fundamentalisms.

Coming back to Germany and to the HBF paper, we need to ask the question: “What are the main political learning and strategic insights gained from your own experience in pursuing gender equality and women’s political, economic and social empowerment that could inform your next or new gender equality agenda at home and in the international front? What are your next set of emancipatory process-oriented goals for women’s empowerment and gender equality if not for the 21st century then perhaps in the 2nd ten years of the BPFA? Without these being interrogated, one will be left with a gender mainstreaming strategy that is exclusively focused on infrastructure engineering, whose preoccupation is exclusively aimed at the securitization of an institutional mechanism, a set of processes and budgetary allocation. Not that these are not important – they are! However, the paper did say – and I agree with this – that gender mainstreaming ought to be a “mix of institutional and socio-political processes.” It is disconcerting that only one aspect seemed to have been pursued at this time. I look forward to hearing more of this from this afternoon’s debate. Thank you!