

Reflections on Gender Mainstreaming

Taking stock of a radical social-political concept ten years after the Beijing World Conference on Women

I. What is Gender Mainstreaming? – The Concept

The UN World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was a milestone in the history of international women's policy and was a global trigger for numerous state initiatives for more gender equality. The Beijing Platform for Action, signed by 189 states, embodies a historical consensus: civil society and state actors have reached an understanding that

- women's rights are human rights,
- that gender justice is a basic prerequisite for socially and ecologically just development and that it must be a constituting element of democracy, and
- that all countries are committed to systematic and state women's and gender policy.

The Beijing Platform for Action introduced the category of gender into international politics. Thus, it was recognised in an international document that gender roles are embedded in social, political, economic and cultural contexts. They vary significantly within and between societies. Gender roles, in their social contingency, are subject to constant transformation and are changeable.

With the gender mainstreaming instrument — anchored in the Beijing Platform for Action as strategic approach — state institutions, international organisations and enterprises are to focus on gender relations. Gender sensitive restructuring of all levels of institutions and enterprises, calling into question stereotypical gender roles both in private and public space, and calling for change in an emancipatory sense - these are the objectives of this strategy. Gender mainstreaming aims explicitly at the dynamic between the genders. The dismantling of inequality between the genders should not be the exclusive task of women, but a matter for men and a task for the entire society as well.

“Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively” (UN 1995, para 202).

In other words: there is no place anymore for the myth of gender neutrality in political and business measures and decisions! No sector — whether it be finance and tax policy, foreign and security policy, labour market and social or transport policy — may be excluded. Taking gender mainstreaming seriously means reflection and analysis of the impact of gender relations must precede political, organisational and entrepreneurial action and aim at more gender equality. Moreover all social structures, which (re)produce inequality and stereotypical gender roles have to be reshaped.

Gender Mainstreaming is a radical concept that could change gender relations since it potentially obliges all actors in a political field, an enterprise, an organisation.

Ten years after Beijing, the questions must be asked:

- How has this concept of the Beijing Platform for Action been implemented?
- Was it realistic and appropriate to make gender mainstreaming the central vehicle to enforce a claim for comprehensive gender-political transformation?
- How can the potential of gender mainstreaming be used?
- Where are the limits of this concept?

II. Challenges and limits of institutional policy

Political action necessarily is expressed through institutions. Consequently, the institutionalisation of women's and gender policy has always been central to political demands of the international women's movements: beginning with the fight for suffrage, for full citizenship, and extending to the recognition of women's rights as human rights. The pursuit of national legislation and international treaties and conventions has always been at the very top of the agenda of women's movements and organisations in order to commit the political actors, bureaucracies and supranational organisations to their implementation.

Women's networks and organisations rely heavily on state institutions and organisations for the implementation of the gender mainstreaming concept. The Platform for Action supports this strategy through its demands on governments to provide the necessary institutional, financial and personnel resources.

Transformatory claim and institutional approach

The Beijing Platform for Action provides an important and valuable international frame of reference. It supplies a basis for demanding gender-just policies at all levels of political and social action. The most important levels of action remain the nation-states. Governments and their institutions should assume the vanguard roles in the implementation.

The gender mainstreaming concept de facto presumes functioning institutions which are to a certain extent committed to the general welfare. The reality in the majority of countries is quite different.

The institutional prerequisites and institutional addresses for gender mainstreaming at nation-state level are fundamentally different in the industrialised countries and developing countries. The action and design potential for gender mainstreaming is anchored in heterogeneous national and local contexts and traditions.

It is therefore necessary to analyse the various frameworks for institutional action in order to draw conclusions about the effects of the gender mainstreaming concept and instrument. Only a rough sketch can be offered here.

Despite all the differences in political systems: there are common structural features that determine the limits and potential of the instrument gender mainstreaming.

Institutions and the contexts of (non-) democratic quality of political systems

Many developing countries and former socialist countries (still) lack the minimum principles of the rule of law, including separation of powers, free elections, freedom of expression, as well as parliamentary and civil society participation and control. Institutions — especially in so-called failed or failing states — are weak in many ways. They are often dominated by clientelistic power and interest groups and incapable of providing central public services such as education, healthcare and vital infrastructure.

This is where exclusively institutional-oriented equality policy relying on gender mainstreaming definitely reaches its limits. Where there are no women's or gender policy organisations (or none allowed) or their space for political articulation is heavily circumscribed, gender mainstreaming is a meaningless instrument.

Violations of the governments' commitments to the Beijing Platform for Action are part of soft international law with the UN incapable of imposing sanctions. Moreover, since the 90s, the United Nations Organisation itself has sunk into a deep legitimacy crisis. It has lost the strength to enforce interests and effect — even on the normative terrain.

Is it possible to use gender mainstreaming as a vehicle in the establishment of democratic structures and functioning institutions? Whether in South Africa or Kenya, Mexico or Brazil: women's political organisations have used the political window of opportunity and demanded gender mainstreaming. In phases of democratic opening and transition, everything depends upon how well gender policy issues are socially organised.

Gender knowledge in institutions

In the developed countries of the North Gender Mainstreaming can rely upon functioning institutions and administrations. It can tie up to a longer tradition of equality and equity principles in legislation and administrative implementation. In the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) the EU Member States commit themselves to “abolish inequality and to promote the equality of men and women”. In Germany the concept of Gender Mainstreaming has been agreed upon by a decision of the federal government in June 1999, in which the government commits itself to make the equality of men and women the overriding principle and cross-sectional task of its activities.

But here as well critical questions have to be asked. First of all, with what gender knowledge and with what understanding of gender roles do the state institutions and public administrations operate? Repeatedly, there is a call to take the interests and needs of men and women into account, to inject them into political decision-making processes.

- What women and men are we talking about? What are their needs?
- Who articulates them? Where and with how much negotiating strength?
- What constitutes just interests and needs for women? Would they encompass e.g. a woman's part-time work for the benefit of the family?
- What constitutes just interests and needs for men? Would they include e.g. the cementation of men's traditional role as the breadwinner of the family?

Overall it must be said that there is a broad range of definitions and interpretations of gender as a category and gender mainstreaming as an instrument. The justifications for gender mainstreaming shift between the efficiency argument (e.g. in the course of modernising public administration) and aims such as civil equality (citizenship) or — even more demanding— claims to overall social justice. In the interstices, there is substantial verbal appropriation:

“empowerment” and “engendering”, both central target and process categories for women’s political emancipatory discourse, have for example long been absorbed in the vocabulary of the World Bank and have come to mean there the mere capacity to surviving of the marginalised and the instruments targeted at them.

The broad bandwidth of justifications shows that gender mainstreaming is “hostage” to a multiplicity of bureaucratic instrumentalisations and abuses.

III. Experiences in Gender Mainstreaming

The **experiences** in gender mainstreaming, remarkably similar worldwide, have been studied from various angles and reveal more than a few **disappointments**. In numerous of her analyses, the African sociologist Sara H. Longwe has used the metaphor of a patriarchal cooking pot in which gender-policies evaporate.¹

- A consistent and systematic gap between stated policy and implementation has been found: it can be seen that in the political and public discourse and decision-making processes the impact of gender relations continues to be a marginal topic. Gender mainstreaming as a method of measuring gender impact and checking economic policy for direct and indirect exclusionary mechanisms is nowhere to be found, neither in the so-called structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank nor in the current restructuring of the social systems and labour markets in the Federal Republic of Germany and other European states. This reality conforms to the mainstream “business as usual” approach and remains unaffected by gender as a central category and cross-sectional task. It applies — with corresponding differences — likewise to the North, South, East and West.
- Under the reference to Gender mainstreaming there is an alarming decline in the support given to emancipation-oriented women’s organisations, projects and programmes. Women’s organisations have been recast as social enterprises owing more accountability to their funders than their base. Hence they are placed to pursue an empowerment mutated into a market category à la Worldbank – making the “business case for gender” – in the service of neo-conservative and radical free-market governments. In general, gender mainstreaming is being linked to a discourse borne and shaped by political and economic fundamentalism rather than concepts embedded in self-realisation and social justice.
- The remaining women’s and gender departments in the OECD countries are underfunded and have insufficient political resources although they continue to be the major motors for gender mainstreaming.
- First of all, gender mainstreaming is a demand on institutional leadership (from the top down) to make gender policy commitments. Whatever gender mainstreaming sets – or doesn’t set – in motion within an institution remains governed by the rules of confidentiality and procedures rooted in hierarchical structures and the male-bonding (or networking) of business culture. Moreover, gender mainstreaming takes place on a terrain

¹ Longwe, Sara H. (1997). The evaporation of gender policies in the patriarchal cooking pot. In: Development and Patronage, Oxfam.

which is barely sensitive to gender. Yet, it is from this base that gender-just results are to emerge.

- The numerous detailed catalogues, handbooks, checklists and audit manuals for individual ministries, departments, and specialist sectors indicate how much the process has often acquired a technocratic character. In many cases, these written guidelines are not even known within the institution, let alone by anyone outside it. The available social gender knowledge is neither systematically collected nor comprehensively integrated.

Where there is political will and a functioning equal opportunity policy in institutions, however some gains can be recorded in many countries:

- Gender Mainstreaming in organisations presumes the leadership's declared political will and the provision of personnel and financial resources (top down approach). This creates good conditions for institutional learning and changes.
- Recognition of the gender dimension at the level of public administration can open new perspectives. Gender knowledge and new forms of private life can enter into administrative action.
- Male dominance culture within organisations can be called into question in favour of a more gender-democratic viewpoint.
- Even if the impulse and dynamic for change in gender policy still comes primarily from women, gender mainstreaming offers men space in which to make their own gender roles visible and to become active on their own behalf — as a supporter or obstacle to women's policy goals.
- Gender mainstreaming has made it easier to form new alliances and coalitions: between women and men, activists and academics, institutional members and women and men organised in civil society.
- New practices such as gender analysis and gender budgets contribute to new socio-political knowledge about the gender consequences of policy and create thereby pools/stockes of innovative knowledge for policy-makers and public administration.
- Gender-differentiated data collection — even today often missing — supplies the foundation for targeted decisions. Thanks to this data, empirical support is given to empowerment approaches for women (and men).
- Finally, a specialised segment of the labour market for gender competence is emerging (with gender specialists, gender training, coaching, moderation, organisational development, gender differentiated surveys, evaluations, etc.), whose professional expertise contributes to the subject area's recognition.

VI. Strategic disaggregation

Despite all the (isolated) successes and progress, the disappointments and experienced limitations of gender mainstreaming predominate. The disappointments were formed against a set of high expectations. This ought to give us pause to review this set of high expectations.

The goals of the Beijing Platform for Action are ambitious. Gender mainstreaming has already anchored "gender" and "gender relations" as a deeply social category. Gender justice is the aim of all policy fields. At the heart of gender justice is the issue of allocation of power and resources.

However, the virtually exclusive focus of gender mainstreaming on institutional actors and methodological-instrumental procedures negates the fact that gender hierarchies, power structures and identity models are difficult to change in any society.

Where institutions function can promote learning processes, emancipatory goals and projects from the top down. To what extent gender knowledge can penetrate political concepts and decisions as well as institutional processes essentially depends on the degree to which a society is (non-)democratic and the organisational strengths and negotiating power of gender-democratic actors. This implies that gender justice as a challenge for society in general and its implementation are seen as part of the implementation of democracy.

The limitations and potentials of institutional policy must be more clearly analysed than in the past. The gender mainstreaming instrument can shape negotiating space within institutions for social and political actors with different interests and perspectives. The focus should thus not be on the size of the gap between expectations and reality but the question on how much political stamina is needed to reach which stage on the route to gender justice.

Today, it is certainly possible to see some of the road signs for the **institutional development of gender mainstreaming**:

1. It is right to insist on thoroughgoing gender-sensitive analysis and reflection at all levels of administrative action. Gender-specific demands and corresponding institutional resources must be kept available.
2. Rarely has gender mainstreaming been equipped with mechanisms for accountability. There are no binding, enforceable connections between personnel development and career planning within institutions. Externally, there is no reporting system which stands up to review. Hence, core elements and prerequisites for democratic design, such as transparency and public deliberation, are seriously hindered or called into question. Occasional evaluations — which at best are results-focused, not process-oriented — do not disclose processes and are hence no substitute.
3. Gender mainstreaming should be understood as institutionalisation of women policy demands, which has emancipatory aims concerning the liberation from traditional gender roles for men and women likewise. Thus Gender mainstreaming could at least be partly defended against the take over by economic efficiency strategies, which are in line with the currently applied neoliberal paradigm.
4. As an exclusively institutional process, gender mainstreaming has changed dramatically the scope of action and focus of gender policy organisations. In contrast to the politics of social movements with their base mobilisation, its pressure from “the street”, and its public character feeding back to negotiation processes at the grassroots level, the mode of political influence is now radically different. Now, in practise only the highly-specialised organisations and professional groups with their “gender competence” in the labour market alone have the chance to be heard.
5. It is to the field of interaction among gender-policy actors inside and outside of institutions that we have to look. Bridge-building forms of participation have to be found and budgeted for, which then serve to make the seemingly impervious manner of work and perspective a good bit more porous. Gender advisory boards, round tables, sector-related networks may be suitable participation forms. This assumes the willingness of the actors as well as their ability to engage in a dialogue, which does not fundamentally question the respective discourse and logic of action but accepts and tolerates them. In such perspectives neither the top down approach of gender mainstreaming and the grassroots mobilisation of civil

society organisations nor their varying political sets of expectations are necessarily contradictory. Rather they are an expression of the respective sites of political engagement.

Even after loading the concept of gender mainstreaming to a maximum with emancipatory women's and gender policy concerns, the serious question remains whether it is truly reasonable to expect this instrument, with its institutional orientation, to overcome and liberate patriarchal institutions and hegemonic masculinity from widespread authoritarian, neo-conservative and radical free-market policies.

In the discussion about the future of the gender mainstreaming as a concept and instrument, there is no choice of "for" or "against" but the strategic application and mix of institutional and socio-political processes.

Even the Beijing Platform for Action refrained from prescribing gender mainstreaming as a panacea for attaining all its objectives. As a complementary strategy, gender mainstreaming can deliver its impact through and in institutions.

Like all fundamental socio-political changes gender justice must be pursued and won.

In the context of Beijing+10, global discussions are taking place as to the status of women's policy and feminism. The Congress "Femme Globale — Gender Perspectives in the 21st Century" is one of several venues for such a discourse where central areas/fields of political action as well as future tasks related to global bio- and knowledge policy, security and peace policy, labour market and global and economic and financial policy, will be discussed. It is possible to re-politicise the gender and women's policy network. This re-politicisation must be material and focused on issues.

It is high time to take the available gender knowledge and make it publicly visible while discussing strategies for how this knowledge can challenge and influence the political mainstream. This is the task before us all — with all the divergences in the women's policy, feminist, and gender policy "arena".

The development of women's policy into gender policy challenges both women and men to commit themselves as gender-democratic actors and pioneers of gender justice. It remains to be seen in which form and centered around which issues durable alliances are possible — with all the intra- and inter-societal hierarchies, differences and conflicts of interest, not only between the genders but also among women themselves.

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