

## Beyond Gender Mainstreaming: online discussion, November 16 and 17, 2011

### Summary of Topic 1 – Do we have a clear diagnosis of successes and failures of gender mainstreaming?

This thread aimed to diagnose the problems with gender mainstreaming in development organisations.

Some of the questions posed by **Alyson Brody** at the start of the discussion were:

'What is preventing GM from having the impact it could – is the approach itself flawed or is it more a question of poor understanding, inadequate framing of the problems and inadequate resources?'

'Is poor understanding of the differences between mainstreamed and 'stand alone' gender equality work at the heart of some of the issues, and is this distinction relevant?'

'Who defines the problems, and are they more the results of resistance, lethargy and unwillingness to invest resources, all of which lead to the famous 'evaporation' of gender issues?'

'Are instrumental and rights-based approaches to gender mainstreaming irreconcilable or can we see them as different, compatible elements of a complex story?'

'Has gender mainstreaming really failed and if so, can it be resurrected if it is re-injected with feminist meaning?'

#### Synthesis of the discussion

Around 25 people from Asia, the Middle East, Europe, North America and South America contributed to this discussion over the two days. The debate was extremely rich and provoking, and deserves to be read in full, but here is a flavour of some core questions and issues that were raised.

#### Has gender mainstreaming failed?

There was an overall sense that, despite reservations around GM, it cannot be classed as a failure – rather we should be proud of its achievements.

**Aruna Rao** said: '*gender mainstreaming has not been a failure. It is a very difficult strategy to implement because of individual and collective, technical and political push back to equality and justice for women. But it's also not the only strategy - it's one of many.*'

**Helen Derbyshire** commented: '*sometimes we seem in danger of regarding anything other than complete success as failure and losing faith in our purity of purpose, or in the effectiveness of our tactics. We are engaged in a long term highly complex and contested process of societal and organisational change.*'

*What is more interesting is that policies do not always evaporate, they do not evaporate completely, and sometimes they exercise considerable influence. What may look diluted and superficial from the outside may in fact be a major breakthrough for internal gender advocates at an early stage in battling to be heard and taken seriously in a male dominated bureaucratic hierarchy. I would like to see a more sophisticated, nuanced understanding of what constitutes progress in gender mainstreaming reflecting the very different contexts and constraints under which internal gender advocates are working.'*

**Alda Facio**, said: '*I do not believe that gender mainstreaming has failed so much as that gender has never really been mainstreamed in any institution. Gender has only partially been mainstreamed in*

*some institutions. So how can we say that gender mainstreaming has not delivered what it promised when it has never been done!*

*I agree with those who have commented that gender mainstreaming is complicated. And of course it is complicated because if we understand it as a path towards gender equality it cannot be otherwise. Gender equality is very complex and therefore not easy to achieve by following a few simple steps which is what many gender mainstreamers have tried to do.'*

### **Is Gender mainstreaming (GM) still a useful and relevant approach?**

A range of opinions were expressed around the question of whether GM is still useful as a concept and approach.

Some argued that the term GM and the approach not the problem but the way it is being implemented. They noted that if we retain the concept but imbue it with our own context-specific meanings and see GM as a flexible entry point for change and for 'bottom up' application, does that make GM less problematic?

For example, **Sanja Sarnavka** said; *'we just can't blame one term. I embraced it and gave it my own meaning - I was fed up with discussions women held for more than a decade among themselves without producing any significant resonance among majority of women and almost all men. For me gender mainstreaming means going into a public, talking to women and men and introducing new values...with the intent to destabilise traditional patterns, etc'.*

**Shawa Wakefield** from Oxfam USA noted: *'As a regional gender (mainstreaming) advisor, I took a pragmatic approach, trying various angles, with various teams of staff, but most of all starting with where they were at and going 'where the energy is'. Mostly this entailed helping teams to understand gender equality issues related to their areas of work, and come up with intelligent plans that took away any 'mystification' and made the plans for address gender or women's rights explicit. Frequently, I found a similar level of frustration to the staff I worked with in that gender mainstreaming requirements could seem a bit vague, and resulted in commitments that were equally so. This only lessened when we were able to get to agreements that they could lead and manage themselves with specific, mutually agreed support.*

*It feels like we need an agenda for validating what we know works (in ways that capture context, complexity, and diversity). A significant mobilisation that shows what gender equality work is all about, rather than cookbooks for how to get there, should factor strongly into how we plan future endeavors in this field.'*

**Alyson** asked: *'would seeing or rebranding GM as a malleable 'tool' rather than a fixed approach help us to move beyond our concerns that it has become outdated?'*

**Anouka Vaneerdewijk**, said; *'If we would opt for a new term, I would be careful not to lose what gender mainstreaming as a concept has brought. For me, the break of this concept with preceding concepts and strategies was that it identified institutions and policy making processes as a key cause of gender inequality in society.'*

Others felt gender mainstreaming works as a theory but not as an organisational practice or 'brand'

**Joanne Sandler** acknowledged that gender mainstreaming has been a catalyst for change to an extent, but argued that it has become too rigidly associated with a set of formal toolkits, trainings and guidelines. She suggested it is *'a 'methodology' that was lauded as one of the achievements of the Beijing conference in 1995 -- at a time where the world was very different.'*

She noted: *'gender mainstreaming, as a 'branded' approach, has outlived its usefulness. It is not a theoretical failure, but it has deviated from its political purpose and its link to feminist analysis. In practice, it has become maligned and distorted. I think it would be useful to re-package and re-brand.'*

*'I have four main concerns about gender mainstreaming as currently practiced: a) No matter how many times we clarify that it is a pathway, not an end in itself, it too often is understood as a goal; b) While it works as a theory, it does not translate easily into organisational practice; c) It is often in opposition to the real incentive systems that drive resources and practice (e.g., how many more times should we accept the 'cross-cutting' designation, when it is distinct 'sectors' that get the attention, the expertise and the resources?); d) it is labour intensive (e.g., how many gender equality specialists does it take to mainstream gender into the 5 to 15 'sectors' that exist in a national development, post-conflict, or legislative process? It almost always takes more than exist.)'*

**Steven Arxer** noted that GM may have become too formalised as a field of expertise: *'I do wonder about the effects of gender mainstreaming becoming an "official" field of study. For example, to what extent does that further "professionalize" the topic/practice of gender mainstreaming or partially reproduce an "educated class".'*

### **Are the dichotomies between GM and gender-specific/women's rights approaches helpful?**

**Joanne Sandler** noted: *'I'm not sure we are doing the path to gender equality and women's rights a favor by creating dichotomies (e.g., the two-pronged approach...gender mainstreaming OR women's empowerment). The 'blur' might actually be a good thing, because change does require a holistic strategy that involves specific support for women's rights and empowerment, along with what we have come to call gender mainstreaming. Feminists and women's rights advocates were engaged in gender mainstreaming long before we applied the label and will continue to be, because it makes sense. But how does it become a strategy to push organisational and institutional transformation?'*

**Helen Derbyshire** said: *'I have always found the twin track distinction very helpful, conceptually and practically. One track is projects and initiatives for women working with women, with the explicit objective of promoting women's rights and empowerment, space for women to grow, to define their agenda etc.. The other track is gender mainstreaming which (in my very broad definition) is the process of gender advocates inside Governments, donor organisations and CSOs seeking to influence all other legislation, policies, programmes and expenditure, with the (long term) aim of ensuring equal benefit for women and men. These are very contrasting working environments. The first is our space, where we can control and define activities etc. In the second, we seek to influence often with very limited resources and in highly constrained circumstances.'*

*Women's lives are far more affected by mainstream processes of development and change than they can ever be by women's projects on their own - so, to my mind efforts to engage with this mainstream are critical whatever we chose to call this process.'*

### **Why is GM not being taken up as effectively as we had hoped post Beijing?**

Some argued that gender mainstreaming is poorly implemented because of a lack of understanding and of a clear definition.

**Tina Wallace** said: *'the term 'gender mainstreaming' is one I find few people really understand, even in INGOs working on gender, and it has so many meanings, definitions and approaches that it is probably hard to critique. Do we have an agreed definition? Is there any good analysis linking it to other discourses such as post colonial studies, feminist debates from the around the world (which are very diverse), concepts of complexity?'*

**Brita Schmidt** said *'How do we define gender mainstreaming - that in itself is going to determine our actions, and in my experience this will vary depending on the people who have identified the need for 'gender mainstreaming' in the first place.'*

**Aruna Rao** argued: *'I don't think the problem with gender mainstreaming or the intention of gender mainstreaming is that people don't get it. I think it is that for various reasons they don't do it. So, I would say that clarifying the terms or coming up with new ones is just busy work. It's more useful to systematically share our successes and problems in a framework that allows us to see clearly the context in which the intervention is carried out.'*

**Anouka Vaneerdewijk** felt there that GM is too associated with and embedded in policy and that this can lead to a lack of constructive internal critique: *'policy making is not the key solution, but actually the object we seek to change, in order to promote gender equality in society. I suggest there are two lessons to draw. One, that not all efforts should be put on gender mainstreaming, as policy making is not the only factor that contributes to gender (in)equality. So we need other strategies as well'.*

### **How effectively can GM capture or respond to complex realities and perspectives?**

According to **Brita**, *'when our own perceptions of gender get imposed on individuals/communities I cannot see much chance of that ever really working very well. We should not be judgemental about different approaches, who can honestly say what is right or wrong when it comes to attempting to address deep and entrenched gender dynamics in difficult contexts?'*

**Tina Wallace** saw complexity as an missed opportunity: *'There are many amazing women and men doing incredible work, inside aid agencies and on the ground, but the current approaches to learning do not value these at all or record them. Have those working in gender been able to tell the real stories in all their complexity and contradictions than others in international agencies? Can we share examples? Can we resist the homogenisation of the stories being told about girls and women currently, the artificial focus on success and positive profile, and reconnect more actively to complexity and the messiness of confronting power inequalities and the exhaustion of fighting the same battles time and time again.'*

**Sally Theobald** argued that: *'qualitative data and analyses are important to enable the ongoing interrogation of categories through deep understandings of lived experiences and the creation of spaces for the voices and agency of women and men with different positionalities. Qualitative and particularly participatory approaches offer more potential with regard to facilitating or awareness and analyses of how multiple structural power inequalities shape embodied experience for those oppressed by them, which offers potential for creating change.'*

### **What is the role of institutions in gender mainstreaming?**

**Franz Wong** talked about the 'fit' of GM to organisations: *'Gender mainstreaming approaches have tended to not understand that we are working in diverse epistemological and cognitive spaces that are concerned with relations of power. A starting place for me would be to try to understand these given a particular context: for example, what are we assuming about "what" and "how" people perceive gender knowledge? What are the power relations in which such knowledge is embedded?'*

**Diana Højlund Madsen** talked about the need to *'get the institutions right for gender mainstreaming'*. She said: *'paradoxically, it seems like the institutions that are supposed to be in charge of mainstreaming - the national gender machineries - are not very institutionalised themselves at the state level and (often) suffers from unclear and broad mandates, few human and economical resources and instability in terms of shifting placements and strategic directions.'*

*Clearly the idea of mainstreaming implies that 'gender' should not referred to individual women who either happen to be assigned this task or actually really wants to deal with it - the femocrats. But in practice there is a need to ensure that being everywhere does not translate into being nowhere - with the focal points at least it is 'somewhere'.*

**Alyson** commented that: *'it may be more useful (and realistic) to stop thinking of institutions as monoliths but instead to see them as organic and flowing. They may often be internally incoherent but these differences in perspective can provide opportunities for change. They can be influenced by individuals who create movements or waves of new thinking and understanding, but it is important that momentum does not rest with a few individuals as it can evaporate if they leave the organisation. One of the challenges is to get the institutions right for gender mainstreaming but it is also a question of getting gender mainstreaming right for organisations.'*

*Have too many institutions have been looking for quick fixes, seeing gender mainstreaming as a magic bullet without giving sufficient thought to its implementation and, with more good examples of what works, could GM be given a new, more dynamic lease of life?'*

**Aruna** also pointed out strategies need to be tailored to organisations: *'I think another part of this is to be clearer about what different types of organisations and institutions can deliver. We muddy the waters when we clump all kinds of organisations in the same bag and demand the same things from them.'*

**Aruna** also made the important point that *'Bureaucracies are not transformational agents. People carry out social change.'*

**Caroline Sweetman (Editor, Gender and Development)** agreed, arguing for the need to *'start from where institutions actually are'*. *Obviously we don't want to lose sight of a critique of the kind of development vision - or lack of vision - offered by organisations like the World Bank, but we DO have to work with it and we SHOULD support any work inside such organisations which takes us a little further along the path. There is no alternative since we cannot go and live separately in an alternative reality where these organisations can be safely ignored. So I think we need to be less dismissive and apply more nuanced organisational and institutional analysis.'*

**Sonia Lowman** argued that institutions are not the right bodies to enable gender transformation: *'it's not that people don't get it. It's that people don't want to get it. It's not that institutions don't know how to do it. It's that they won't do it. And why should they? Power protects power. Trying to legitimize gender's place at the institutional level allows these very institutions to hide behind the abstractions and distortions created by giant posters of African women's faces, while we get bogged down debating the internal schisms of feminism in a mostly rhetorical realm.'*

*Women in this country didn't get the vote, for instance, by politely waiting to be invited to the polls by Congress. They got dirty; they got real; they refused to be ignored; and they were willing to be unpopular. I fear that we are getting to a place in the "women in development" field where we try to work too much within a broken system, and diffuse our efforts by embedding them in mainstream trends like "women as smart economics" and women as a peace and security imperative. I understand that there's a strategy to working from within. But the international community is not going to politely step aside and invite women into the ranks of power anytime soon. Women still have to fight their way into the room and up to the table.'*

The need for both top down leadership and bottom up innovations were both mentioned as prerequisites for effectively mainstreaming gender into institutions.

**Haven Ley** noted: *'I will say that is one success that is clear from my time at the Gates Foundation in agriculture, where a clear vision (implemented from the start from then Senior Fellow Catherine Bertini) that a thoughtful strategic approach to women's needs in agriculture would not be possible without a dedicated, consistent hand on the tiller.'*

**What are some of the potential risks of 'mainstreaming gender mainstreaming?'**

Some raised concerns about ways in which GM could have negative implications for gender equality goals.

**Sally Theobald** noted that GM could inadvertently (or deliberately) become a means to reinforce gender binaries? She asked how we can *'strategically identify the 'best' categories in such contexts to challenge the gender binary without over-essentialising the fluidity of identities?'*

**Jenny Birchall** alerted us to the potential for GM and gender equality issues to be misappropriated. She said: *'I recently read an interesting blog about the appropriation of LGBT discourse for strategic purposes by right wing nationalists. It made me realise how goals that we take for granted as forward thinking and positive things to work towards, such as gender equality, could actually be turned around for other purposes. From this perspective the comments made by Srilatha, Tina and Tahseen about listening to and learning about people's realities, avoiding the homogenisation of stories told about women, and sharing successes and challenges within particular contexts, seem even more important.'*

**Sonia Lowman** pointed out the drawbacks of an instrumental take-up of gender mainstreaming, for example the World Bank approach that 'outwardly embraces gender equality'. She noted: *'At the project-level, spending on gender remains abysmal, gender integration in project activities is sporadic at best, and there is zero accountability for measuring project impacts on women because the Bank does not mandate the collection of sex-disaggregated data.'*

*Recently, I attended a civil society meeting with the World Bank's US Executive Director. He started out his presentation by stating that we have a "moral, strategic and economic imperative" to address the fact that 1 in 6 people is living in poverty worldwide. So I pointed out to him that 1 in 3 women worldwide will be raped in her lifetime. And that, despite hanging up 40 foot banners of women's faces from the developing world during the World Bank/ IMF Annual Meetings in September, and producing a 300+ page report on gender and development the Bank has invested in precisely 3 projects on gender-based violence, totaling less than US\$ 5 million. I asked him, "Where is the 'moral, economic and strategic imperative' in that?"*

### **Do we need a new agenda for research and action linked to gender mainstreaming and equality?**

**Sally Theobald** reported the outcomes from a seminar series on gender mainstreaming that identified core issues and proposed the following agenda for research and action to improve the reach and impact of GM and address some of its failures:

1. Address the disconnect between gender mainstreaming praxis and contemporary feminist theory;
2. Develop appropriate methodologies to enable an accurate understanding of gender issues and the impact of GM policies and practice;
3. Develop a coherent theory of change in GM;
4. Seek resolution to the dilemmas and uncertainties around the 'place' of men and boys in GM as a feminist project; and
5. Develop a politics of intersectionality.