
Gender Mainstreaming: What is it (About) and Should we Continue Doing it?

Prudence Woodford-Berger

1 Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is rapidly assuming rather mythic proportions in the development industry.¹ Purporting to counter “gender neutral development planning”, the myth behind the myth is that gender mainstreaming exists more or less independently of international politics, power hierarchies and persistent ideas about human nature that drive the modernisation paradigms and theories that define what development is, without becoming, as it were, tainted itself. At the same time, the way gender mainstreaming comes to be talked about within development also contains elements of a fable in the form of a moralising edict concerning virtuous behaviour in bureaucrats and others in development as they work to promote gender equality and empowerment for women.

The powerful appeal of the notion of gender mainstreaming lies, I think, in the spirit, politics and promise of its early intentions: to imbue all systems, structures and institutionalised cultures with awareness of gender-based biases and injustices, and to remove them. The Beijing Platform for Action points to the promotion of women’s empowerment and equality between women and men through, among other measures, the establishment of “national machineries” to ensure the mainstreaming of gender perspectives *in all spheres of society* (United Nations 2001: 26, italics added). However, mainstreaming also involves efforts to make attention to gender issues the concern and responsibility of everyone in development organisations, as opposed to being only those of specialist persons, units, teams or “machineries”.

For many of us with feminist backgrounds and convictions of one sort or another who have found ourselves in various social policy contexts, the appeal of gender mainstreaming is that it is founded

on, and to a significant extent grounded in, feminist theoretical frameworks. Therefore, as a myth, gender mainstreaming can also be used strategically – potentially at least – to promote political ends. As a fable, however, it is coming under a great deal of attack from a number of directions – including some feminist ones – on the grounds that it is nebulous, elusive and has unclear goals, and that it demands too little in terms of commitment, analytical skill and resources from those who are supposed to carry it out. Even more damning are charges that gender mainstreaming is not performing well in the service of advancing the situation of many, if not most women, especially women in subaltern structural positions due to ethnicity, class and/or colonial histories or to sexual orientation and choice of a partner. Those who are sceptical of gender mainstreaming on such grounds see it as proof that modernising, Euro-centric development paradigms and theories are alive and well and continue to reign to the exclusion of other frameworks.

My own experiences as an immigrant in Sweden as well as from several periods of ethnographic research on matrilineal kinship, reproduction and perceptions of gender in another cultural setting – Ghana from 1973 to 1993 – have influenced my own feminism, as has nearly 25 years of work as a development consultant with gender equality issues at the core. I readily admit that these have been a boon as well as a source of discontent. They have been a boon because they have informed my work as principal trainer for Sida’s gender training programme since 1990, and my work at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs as special adviser since 2002. The discontent stems from the fact that I have contributed to and been complicit in the “objectification” and relay of certain kinds of knowledge in “diluted” form in order to coax better

development results and effects in the form of better conditions and opportunities for women and girls in the countries we work with.

In this article, I draw on these experiences to explore the question of whether gender mainstreaming as an idea and as a prescribed course of action can be extracted from the specific contexts and forces from which its dominant forms emerged, and whether it can continue to be sustained, and usefully converted and applied to other contexts. It draws on exciting recent work on the anthropology of policy (Porter 1995; Shore and Wright 1997; Mosse 2002) to analyse a specific case of feminist politics – those of Sweden, where gender mainstreaming has been on the policy agenda since the 1980s – to explore a particular rationale, interpretation and set of tools. It focuses in particular on the gender analytical frameworks, so central to gender mainstreaming, that are employed in the project of transforming power structures and relationships in the work of international development organisations.

2 Gender mainstreaming and development policy

Gender mainstreaming can be defined in a number of ways, all of which are contested in one way or another (e.g. see March *et al.* 1999: 10). The most common usage in Sweden is as a long-term strategy or systematic institutional approach for promoting/producing gender equality as a policy outcome. Although there is a great deal of confusion and contestation surrounding the concept itself (e.g. see Sida 1996: 1), there appears to be a relatively high degree of agreement about its aim. Gender mainstreaming seeks to produce transformatory processes and practices that will concern, engage and benefit women and men equally by systematically integrating explicit attention to issues of sex and gender into all aspects of an organisation's work. Gender analytical frameworks are used to impose tangibility and proceduralability on what is ultimately a political project based on certain theoretical underpinnings. Such frameworks are usually designed to fit into the planning requirements and routines of development bureaucracies, used in training courses and “gender sensitisation” or “gender awareness-raising” exercises to marshal support for specific values and interpretations.

Gender mainstreaming was slow to take off, and

indeed, continues to compete with earlier praxis and modes of thought that focused generically on women, Women in Development (WID) frameworks and on separate measures for compensating women for disadvantages and discrimination experienced by them in development. Since the 1995 Beijing conference, gender mainstreaming has increasingly gained currency at the higher levels of national and international policy-making. At the meetings and negotiations of the 47th Session of the UN subsidiary body, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2003, a resolution was adopted concerning the mainstreaming of a gender perspective into all policies and programmes of the UN system. Likewise, a similar resolution was proposed for adoption by the meetings of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2003 and 2004. Both resolutions define gender mainstreaming as a critical, globally accepted strategy for the promotion of gender equality, and both provide indications of how it should be implemented. Examples of measures include formulating and implementing gender equality policies and strategies; developing and using data disaggregated by sex; gender-specific studies and information; gender analyses of budgets where relevant; establishing or strengthening institutional mechanisms, such as gender units/focal points, networks and task forces; and strengthening staff skills and capacity to integrate gender perspectives into policies and programmes.

These measures may be seen as comprising specific kinds of concrete practices that lend substance and give meaning to the creation or production of “gender equality”. The assumption is that these and other activities and practices are affirming to policy as well as to particular models of social change that are to be encouraged. The hope or conviction is that carrying them out, for example, in development planning and through various models for intervention design, the goal of gender equality will be promoted. Thus, they become elements in institutional and personal practice, and as such, are products of policy. At the same time, they also work to produce, protect and legitimise policy (and therefore themselves). To a significant extent, the emphasis on mainstreaming in planning at the expense of mainstreaming for social transformation (it is necessary to work with both) is due largely perhaps to the complexity of

policy-making and the correspondingly perilous translation of policy into manifestations of operational practice.

In recent years, less emphasis appears to have been put on affecting the “mainstream” of societal structures, processes, organisational cultures and politics through gender mainstreaming as socially transformative, while more is being put on the “mainstream” of development administration’s policies, planning routines and processes, programmes and projects, i.e. through gender mainstreaming as an instrumental technique. The increasing demand for useful, usable practical tools or frameworks and for accessible reference materials has led to a considerable number of these. Recent years have also seen a renewed and enhanced emphasis on rights-based frameworks as well as a revival of “efficiency dimensions” of promoting gender equality.² Women’s human rights are focused and this focus has been greatly enhanced since the introduction of language concerning sexual and reproductive *rights* in the programmes of action from the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women.³

Policy can of course be forcibly imposed, but more commonly is dependent upon some sort of rationale to be credible and at least minimally implementable. The substantiation, reification, or “objectification” of policy in Shore and Wright’s terminology (1997: 5), involves actions, events, discourse and processes of interpretation and instrumentalisation to make policy ‘real’ through the gradual establishment of practices to implement it. The transformation of policy into practice, and through practice into specified products or other results, occurs in turn by means of institutional mechanisms that are perceived to be legitimate, and that supersede the will and agency of individuals. In the context of gender equality and other cross-cutting development goals, “objectification” involves not just top-down governance and political decision-making, but also the use of emotive idioms and metaphors to translate political activism and advocacy, academic theory-building and development assistance norms, values and practices into popularised communication and actions.

In the objectification process, the various knowledge, interests and “interpretive communities” of actors (Porter 1995) in these three fields of

engagement – activism, academia, development assistance/cooperation – may become involved in struggles over meanings and pragmatic measures both within and between themselves, in order to determine courses of action and pursue specific gains. In this context, myth-making with regard to gender may be the result of these communities’ each jockeying to get the most out of an idea, so to speak, by settling for “thin” or “thick” (Fraser 1989: 163) descriptive concepts, themes, labels or tropes so as to legitimise claims to and the mobilisation of resources, and a range of phenomena or courses of action. At the same time, there is no denying that such myth-making contributes to the dilution of concepts and the generalisation of meta-narratives based on rather narrow universes of experiences and interests, rendering them considerably less useful than they could be.

In any event, in the case of gender mainstreaming gallant efforts have been made to make practical use of theoretical developments and research findings in the fields of feminist and gender studies that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s after the relative dearth of such materials during earlier years. These are used to inform, or are translated into concentrated or distilled forms in *inter alia* gender analytical frameworks. Contrary then to accusations of “theory-lessness” directed at some areas of development cooperation work, we neither lack nor ignore mental models, theories or empirical data that can inform gender equality policies and the gender analytical frameworks currently in use. However, it is clear that these by and large are formulated in terms of the inputs–outcomes planning models common to the “mainstream” of social and development policy and organisational contexts.

3 Swedish approaches to gender equality policy

As Rabo (1997) points out, gender equality policy provides a way for the Swedish state, the social democratic government and its historical legacy of safeguarding a comprehensive welfare system, to organise, direct and control the pursuit of gender equality in Sweden. Sweden has a history of “social engineering”, a form of social planning stemming from the 1930s that combines research, politics and an aesthetics of rationality in order to create “the good society” (*det goda samhället*) and produce a particular kind of new, aware and socially desirable

person or citizen (*den nya människan; den nya medborgaren*). Present-day gender equality policy in Sweden is also the result of allying research with politics and a firm belief in and commitment to the production of gender equality and the achievement of political goals through legislation, top-down directives and the adoption of gender mainstreaming as the government's official strategy. Gender equality as fable in Sweden is illustrative of notions and manifestations of cultural belonging that are closely bound up with Swedish identity and notions of justice and social equality.

In the context of Sweden, gender mainstreaming involves a process of objectification in which virtue/virtuous behaviour is demonstrated through the rather ritualistic use of “gender analysis” as a tool to bring about gender mainstreaming as practice and as a kind of craftsmanship in pursuit of the goal of gender equality. The most common measures for implementing gender mainstreaming in terms of the dimension mentioned above as ‘strengthening staff skills and capacity to integrate gender perspectives into policies and programmes’⁴ takes place through “gender” training courses aimed at awareness-raising and at relaying the basics of gender analysis. During such courses, information is provided on reference materials, manuals and handbooks, checklists and guidelines. Gender mainstreaming is also supported through organisational adjustments such as the creation of special units or “focal point” positions.

The theoretical underpinnings of Sweden's gender equality policy and of gender mainstreaming as a strategy to address gender inequalities are to be found in the works of *inter alia* Swedish feminist researchers such as Y. Hirdman (1988). Contributing to a major breakthrough in feminist research and analytical thinking about gendered structures in the Swedish national historical contexts, Hirdman posited the existence of an intractable, hierarchical sex-based power order (*könsmaktsordning*). This was based on two principles: the principle of absolute separation of the sexes (*isärhållningens princip*), and the primacy of “man”/“men” as the norm (*den manliga normens primat*), standard and yardstick for valuation and evaluation of human behaviour and entitlement. In this perspective, men are superordinate/superior (*överordnad*) and women are subordinate/inferior (*underordnad*) in terms of power and authority. Based on two opposing and seemingly mutually

exclusive categories of adult “women” and “men”, Hirdman's work has been used to analyse not only employment, working life conditions, and labour markets in Sweden, but also education, leadership and family life. Her analytical framework is used as a foundation for the construction of gender analytical frameworks, used to mainstream attention to gender in national policy contexts as well as in the practice of gender mainstreaming in international work.

4 Doing “gender” in Swedish international development work

How do representations of sex, gender, “women” and “men” in the gender analytical frameworks currently used in Swedish international development work fit with the realities of particular women and men in non-Swedish cultural settings? And how can we better understand and communicate complex realities and situated knowledges so as to make sense of inequalities and injustices and mobilise support for the purpose of doing away with them? To a considerable extent, both of these points concern bodies of theory and practice that involve so-called identity politics, the politics of difference, and the political pursuit of justice and genuine empowerment by disadvantaged or oppressed groups through “recognition” and inclusiveness, and/or “redistribution” of goods, ideas, positions and power (Young 1990, 2000; Fraser 1997). The evidence is that in many respects, we are clearly gaining ground as far as our claims for “recognition” and women's inclusion is concerned, while progress continues to be slow with regard to “redistribution” and true empowerment.

What assumptions might we be making about the way societies are organised and the way “gender work” is best done, that are stopping us from making more of a difference? How might Swedish ideas about “gender equality” and the kinds of notions of “gender” that are supposed to be “mainstreamed” be perceived from the standpoint of women and men in a very different cultural setting? For example, that of the Dormaa District of the Brong-Ahahu region of Ghana, where I conducted ethnographic research into such issues as descent, residence, the “domestic” domain and reproduction, and notions of personhood, female collective identities and interests, connectedness and solidarity (Woodford-Berger 1981, 1997)?

In Dormaa, the creation and mediation of social and gendered identities takes place through the Brong Akan matrilineal kinship system. Domestic arrangements are in effect matrilineage sub-systems characterised by duo-local residence for most married people. Living and nurturing arrangements can be dispersed over a number of different residences, particularly for children and young men. Brong Akan motherhood is a highly idealised condition and culturally elaborated process and a primary status marker for women. Female-ness is strongly associated with hard physical work, with the provision of food and care, as well as with prowess in economic ventures in ways that male-ness is not. Women and children do the bulk of the farming and collecting work that provides the bases for people's livelihoods, and women by and large usually have adequate access to cultivable land through their matrilineage, whether or not they are married.

Despite clear distinctions between conceptions of female-ness (in Twi *béré*) and male-ness (*nyin* or *nini*), these are for the most part not firmly attached to physiological sex, or to particular duties, ways of being or behaving. Neither do "female" and "male" categories or persons necessarily embody notions of dichotomous relations or dually constructed social persons considered to be the exact opposites of one another. "Gender identity" can shift over the life course as well as with respect to specific existential situations, conditions and requirements. In terms of power relations, women should defer to men. However, although authority is associated with male-ness, it is also associated with positionality, for example with royals, with ritual specialists and with wealthy people regardless of sex.

Conjugalility is an important strategic basis for resource mobilisation, as well as affection, for both women and men. Both women and men strive to achieve personal economic wealth and independence, as well as a personal base power and the exercise of authority represented in house headship during their lifetimes. Women consciously form various kinds of alliances with men as brothers, fathers, mothers' brothers, husbands, sons and sisters' sons. The degree of actual or potential "equality" in these relationships varies a great deal, although women have a stake even in unequal alliances and are well aware of this. At the same time, there are clear differences in opportunities and circumstances between most women and most men due to history and to rigid, underlying

structural inequalities and biases. These are reflected in gender-based disparities – sometimes extreme – in indicators such as literacy and education levels, morbidity and health status, livelihood security, human security and vulnerability to various kinds of violence, and poverty (ROG and UNICEF 1990).

The most common models for gender analysis used in Swedish gender mainstreaming would face difficulties in capturing the complexities of gendered life in Dormaa. Conventional definitions of the "household" that continue to be employed, despite our awareness of their limited usefulness, would have little relevance in this setting. The representation of female-headed households as particularly impoverished (see Chant, this *IDS Bulletin*; see also Moghadam 1997; World Bank 2001) equally finds little place. The assumed oppositional positions of women and men in the social, economic, political and ritual order, the very basis of gender frameworks and of the kind of gender thinking that is so much part of Swedish gender equality work, simply does not match the Dormaa reality. What they work to obscure is the way in which women mobilise resources, their affective as well as economic bonds with the men in their lives and the cross-sex alliances of various kinds, especially amongst kin, that can be so critical a part of women's livelihoods.

Critiques of the kind of ideas on which Swedish gender equality work has been based have been part of mainstream gender theory for over a decade. Swedish anthropologists, writing in Swedish, have taken Hirdman to task for her ethnocentric and static portrayal of gendered relations, her presentation of "gender orders" as clear-cut and unambiguous and of "sex" and "gender" as being unmediated by other differences such as ethnicity and class and on the basis that she simply ignores patterns of differences among women and girls and among men and boys as well as similarities between different categories of females and males (see Gemzöe *et al.* 1989; Thurén 1996; Gemzöe 2003). Researchers in Sweden from various non-Swedish ethnic origins have, equally, drawn attention to some of the shortcomings of Hirdman's assumptions and the binaries on which they are based (see de los Reyes *et al.* 2002). Yet Hirdman's work remains the mainstay of Swedish government policy for the promotion of gender equality and for gender mainstreaming.

Why is it, we might ask, that gender analytical frameworks have not developed apace with, for

example, the recent research on men and masculinities (Connell 1995, 2002; Cornwall 2000), or with post-colonial research that calls attention to differences of being, power and privilege among women and among men (Hill Collins 1990; McClaurin 2001; Mohanty 1991; Imam *et al.* 1997; Kolawole 1998; Mikell 1997)? Why is it that they pay such scant attention to other socially constructed bases for inequality such as ethnicity, class, age, creed, sexual orientation or historical background and their significance for the construction and dynamics of gender identities and gender ascriptions (Bourdieu 1984; Butler 1990; 1993)? Analytically, the point that Connell makes – that we are dealing with not a single, but multiple, *different*, gender regimes and orders – appears to have been overlooked or perhaps even ignored by those who continued to promote the fixed, essentialised models of gender on which much gender mainstreaming has tended to be based.

5 Repositioning “gender” in development policy and practice: in search of the mainstream(s)

Despite decades of struggle, large parts of “the mainstream” in all our societies, including their androcentrism and male-bias, remain stubbornly intact. In fact, many of us fear that the most misogynist and oppressive structures have indeed been reinforced, gaining strength from an increasingly militarised and polarised world community, and the effects of conservatism and of neo-liberal economic reformism. So how then do we go about discovering the mainstream of situations we want to change with regard to the promotion of gender equality? An important step, I think, is to revive the focus on defining and addressing the mainstream of the situation that is the focus of change. This may involve the identification of several “mainstreams”, in terms of the “gender regimes” and “gender orders” in the societal and political situation under scrutiny (Connell 1987).

Nonetheless I would claim, along with March *et al.* (1999: 15), that gender analytical frameworks are not in themselves doomed to remain mere superficial, technical and token devices that are totally without the potential for addressing gender inequalities and injustices in society. Used creatively, they can be political instruments by encouraging attention to and dialogue on inequalities for the promotion of transformative change. Obviously,

their use must be accompanied by measures to promote attitudinal change and contextual sensitivity, and for the systematic use of research and other more thoroughgoing sources of data. We already know this. It is also essential that the frameworks themselves be used in such a manner that also their own underlying assumptions are critically examined. This we appear to be reluctant to realise.

The challenge we face is not only to discover ways to capture the imaginations and will of non-feminist, well-meaning but not-at-all-oriented development bureaucrats when it comes to working with gender issues. Nor is it only to introduce accountability for gender mainstreaming into planning and reporting systems. It also lies in maintaining a constructive dialogue with those who should be allies. This is difficult to do where those who promote gender equality insist on adhering to gender analytic frameworks in which “women” and “men”, “girls” and “boys” are represented as mutually exclusive categories, and continue to focus on the differences between “the sexes”. This makes it difficult for the project of “gender mainstreaming” to identify and work operationally with cross-sex alliances, across different gender identities, let alone with people whose gender identities may be more ambiguous or ambivalent, or non-normative.

To persevere and to continue to be self-critical is difficult. There is a tendency to shy away from troublesome, complicating insights ostensibly for the sake of pursuing the higher cause of equality between women and men. But we must become better at daring to incorporate nuances, and to resist simplifications that generalise, homogenise and sterilise realities. We need to get beyond the “consensus” processes that dry up dialogue and leave us unable to explore, let alone debate, commonalities in our concerns amidst the complexity of difference. Essentialising relationships between women and men, by overemphasising differences and representing women and men as oppositional categories, makes little sense of the complexity of our own identifications and relationships, let alone those of others. Not taking into account different kinds of alliances and cooperational arrangements between and among various categories of women and men comprises nothing less than a denial of the many lessons we have learned over the years. And this is the ultimate disservice not just to ourselves, but ultimately to those who gender mainstreaming is intended to benefit.

Notes

1. In *Sida's Action Programme for Promoting equality between Women and Men in Partner Countries* (1997), gender mainstreaming is defined as ensuring that attention to the conditions and relative situations of women and men pervades all development policies, strategies and interventions. All personnel are expected to have basic competence in gender mainstreaming in relation to the specific issues they are working on.
2. Promoting gender equality as a means of improving the likelihood of reducing poverty is the theme of the World Bank volume *Engendering Development* (2001).

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