

Gender Mainstreaming – Possibilities and Limits of a Radical Social Concept

By **Barbara Unmüßig**.

Translated by **Anthony B. Herric**.

Gender mainstreaming: A radical idea

Gender mainstreaming is, at its core, a radical socio-political concept for achieving gender equality and equal opportunity.

Why is it radical? Gender mainstreaming is a strategic approach that initially obligates governments, as well as businesses and other institutions, to systematically introduce a gender-oriented perspective for every political and economic decision. This is a very radical idea. Something of this dimension has never been seen before. Gender mainstreaming attempts to examine and analyse all political, policy and economic decisions with regards to their effects in relation to gender. In this way gender mainstreaming finally does away with the myth that something like gender neutrality exists. There is no gender neutrality. Every political decision, as well as all economic and business decisions and measures have effects on the genders and the relationship between them. There is no sector – whether tax or other fiscal policies, foreign affairs or security policy, labour market or healthcare policy – that can be excluded from this type of gender analysis.

What are the origins of gender mainstreaming?

To start, the concept of gender mainstreaming originated in a women's and development policy context, notably in the World Conferences on Women in the 1980s and 1990s. In these contexts women discussed the fact that achieving gender equality and developing equal opportunities between the genders cannot solely be accomplished through policies for women and/or families, but that elements of these concepts must be integrated into all fields of politics – thus the term mainstreaming. Mainstreaming means integration into the prevailing structures, thus it is nothing less than introducing such gender policies as a point of intersection across all political arenas.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 marked a milestone – it was a huge success for international women's policies and the trigger for countless national initiatives for more gender equality and equal opportunity. Not only is the principle of gender mainstreaming anchored in the [Beijing Platform for Action](#), but it is also this document which included the category of gender for the first time. The Platform for Action from Beijing is thus the first international document that strove to define this concept.

What does the category of 'gender' mean? What is 'gender' in the first place? Gender roles and the relationship between the genders are embedded in the relative social, political, cultural and economic contexts of respective societies. This makes it clear that our gender roles depend on society, they are socially and culturally constructed. At the same time it also makes us conscious of the fact that gender roles and the relationship between the genders are in a constant state of flux. Societal change is created; it is politically and economically 'made'.

This clearly shows, especially to women and feminist activists, that they can influence the relationships between the genders. We must not accept the status quo of gender roles. Instead, we can actively influence and change them. These ideas experienced a breakthrough on an international level with the Beijing Platform for Action.

Another important victory in Beijing was the codification of the fact that the surmounting of inequalities and undemocratic relationships between the genders is something that is not exclusively the concern of women, but also a concern for men and a task for society as a whole. Those who wish to change the relationships between the genders must get men on board. In fact, they need the whole society on board. What became clear is that policies for gender equality – and this is the core statement – cannot be limited only to women and women’s organisations, but must also be an objective for men.

What has happened with the idea of gender mainstreaming over the past twelve years?

First, for the record, gender equality policies achieved a breakthrough around the world in the 1990s. The institutionalisation of women’s and gender policies was always one of the central political demands of international women’s movements and networks. The Beijing Platform for Action and the principle of gender mainstreaming were very supportive of this institutional approach, as it called for governments to allocate the institutional, financial and personnel resources necessary for the implementation of gender mainstreaming. In this way the Beijing Platform for Action was able to provide a further impetus for political initiatives that have improved the legal framework for women’s equality in many countries around the world.

However, despite these indisputable advances – both nationally and globally – there are hierarchies, power differentials and conditions of dominance between the genders that have not yet been dismantled.

Discrimination, disadvantages and violence are still defining factors for the living situations of millions of women in all regions around the globe. There are hardly any international documents, nor international (women’s) conferences that do not confirm that the structural inequality between the genders has more likely been increased, rather than decreased in many societies. Women are still frequently excluded from political decision-making processes. Their legal situation is precarious. The economic differences experienced by women have hardly abated despite the increase in their gainful employment – on average they are much more likely than men to be in precarious working conditions or hold part-time jobs, as well as work in underpaid trades among other reasons. However, men are also affected more than ever by unemployment, violence and marginalisation.

Nevertheless, it can clearly be said that the 1990s were very good years in getting legal regulations around the world off the ground. The Beijing Platform for Action and UN conventions like CEDAW ([Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#)) are important political frameworks that supply the foundations for appeals and claims for gender-equitable policies.

In the context of the European Union, for example, some speak of a ‘golden age’ of gender equality policies because so many initiatives for equality have been passed. One example of what has happened in the EU is that the principle of gender mainstreaming was anchored as a responsibility for all member states in the [Treaty of Amsterdam](#) in 1997. The treaty codified

that all member states and all European bodies are required to consider gender perspectives and analyses at all levels of decision making, to develop and establish gender-focused processes in all phases of decision making. Within the EU they developed a five-year road map identifying core political fields where gender mainstreaming was to be implemented on a priority basis. For example, in the current action plan, [the road map for the period 2006-2010](#), these core fields include the equality of men and women in industry and in the labour market. The latter is especially concerned with nations providing appropriate services that make possible the compatibility of family and career, as well as the compatibility of caretaking and career.

This EU road map also includes suggestions beyond this, recommending that each country adopt initiatives and create the conditions necessary to assist in overcoming traditional gender stereotypes. It includes requests that countries like Germany and Poland, Austria and Italy do more – institute gender training, put together handbooks and provide numerous other forms of support. All in all, these are good approaches, and in actuality the concepts and principles of gender mainstreaming have been able to accomplish many positive things in numerous institutions, administrations and in furthering learning processes.

Institutional learning

Gender mainstreaming can achieve many positive effects where the political will to make it a reality exists. It makes a huge difference whether or not bureaucracies are required to think about the gender dimensions of their political decisions using the principles of gender mainstreaming. This in and of itself is very positive, as it can change awareness in institutions. Gender mainstreaming challenges people to increase their knowledge about gender. Usually there is only little, if any, information about how political decisions affect gender relations. The majority of statistics collected around the world are gender neutral, which is why collecting gender-differentiated data is necessary. Using the principle of gender mainstreaming there has been much success in creating this sort of knowledge and collecting the appropriate data. This has brought about the realisation, for example, that women and men are affected very differently by healthcare policies, by therapies, etc.

Now, new instruments and methods, like gender analysis or gender budgeting, contribute to new (socio-) political insights and perceptions of the gender-related consequences of policies, creating innovative standards of knowledge for policies and administration.

When the political will exists to provide financial and personnel resources, then gender mainstreaming can set processes of change in motion, start processes of awareness-raising and make institutional learning possible. These can all lead to new actions, as well as new administrative behaviours. There are many positive examples for the numerous positive effects that gender mainstreaming can have, especially in Europe.

Limits of gender mainstreaming

1. The lack of political will

Moving on, there are several critical points to be made. On the one hand, there was a gender-political awakening in the 1990s that can be summarized as follows – there has never really been so much gender. Everyone was being forced to move, to act on the concepts of gender mainstreaming. Because the EU took up this principle it became a very, very important frame

of reference in order to move forward national gender non-discrimination policies, especially for EU newcomers like Poland.

But in this millennium we have experienced a gender-equality political standstill. This includes Germany, which I will get back to later. What are the reasons for this standstill? Firstly, there are several general political causes. The European Union has grown from 15 to 27 member states, which has led to shifts in majorities. Additionally, within the EU there have been changes in national governments – as is the case in my country – where conservative parties have come into power. These conservative EU-member-state governments try to water down progressive objectives and/or implement EU gender-equality policies either hesitantly or half-heartedly. In many regards, these governments strengthen a rather conservative view of gender roles in public discourse. In some countries, like Poland, homophobic and xenophobic attitudes have increasingly come to the fore, which also makes it difficult to publicly discuss sexual orientation, ethnicity and culture as discriminatory elements. Overall there is a more hostile environment for the debate about antidiscrimination and a more hostile environment for discussing gender-equality policies overall.

A second cause for the political standstill for gender equality can be found in the fact that gender-equality political approaches are much too heavily and almost solely directed at the compatibility of family and career. This makes them subordinate to family policies, or even completely replaced by such.

In Germany, on the other hand, we have witnessed quite a phenomenon. Of all people it's the Federal Minister of Family Affairs and Women, Ursula von der Leyen – a member of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) – who has managed a breakthrough of mobilising more funds and infrastructure for childcare nationally. This shows that there are also conservative politicians who can initiate a push for modernisation, at least in family affairs policies. But in Germany there are hardly any other additional attempts at promoting political gender equality from the current government beyond family affairs policies and debates about reconciling the needs of families and careers. In fact, at the moment our government is dismantling nearly every programme that was established to promote gender mainstreaming. A steering committee of ministers that was supposed to organize gender mainstreaming activities across all ministries no longer exists - it has been abolished. Policies for the promotion of women are hardly visible to the public, or concentrate for the most part on women's career advancement. Overall, whether at a national level, in the EU or UN, programmes related to budgeting for women's advancement are being slashed or cut in their entirety.

In fact, there is a lack of political will to truly seize the radical core of gender mainstreaming and to examine political decisions in regards to their gender-political consequences. In the everyday business of politics, gender mainstreaming is hardly ever practiced, both within governments and within institutions and both nationally and internationally. This instrument was never really utilised beyond a few pilot and showcase projects. Gender mainstreaming needs to be reintroduced into the political discussion at a national level, especially in the majority of EU member states.

2. Limits of the concept?

Along with these underlying political conditions and the lack of political will, there are also other factors that may have hampered, and continue to hamper, the success of gender

mainstreaming, specifically the methods used for its realisation. For some time now there have been discussions about whether or not gender mainstreaming is a good, positive instrument at all in helping us reach gender equality and break down gender hierarchies. From my point of view this basically radical concept was much too narrowly defined and politically interpreted, especially by institutions and also partly by women's organisations. We were not successful in bringing gender policies forward in important, so-called hard fields of politics, like economic and labour force policies, pension plans and social policies, and creating public discussions about the topic.

Looking at the EU, it would have been interesting, for example, if the Structural Funds and the regional EU programs, which set the course for economic and social policies and invest large sums into poorer regions within the EU, were analysed using the principles of gender mainstreaming to see how they have been influenced by gender policies. There are studies showing that gender mainstreaming played absolutely no role whatsoever in these relevant economic decisions and processes.

In the end, we focused very strongly on institutions and left out the spheres of economics and economic decisions that play a direct, important role in the relationship between the genders, simply disregarded them. For example, Germany – putting aside gender mainstreaming – recently passed labour market reforms that have increased the interdependence of the genders on one another in the case of welfare payments. This is a setback for demands such as men and women being able to remain autonomous in securing their basic needs.

Gender mainstreaming has not successfully intervened in large policy areas, in important decision-making processes. In my country, in Germany, there are really just pilot projects. Pilot projects were started here and there, they allowed a bit of 'toying' with the idea, but it never got beyond this phase. The previous Social Democratic-Green Party coalition government commissioned a feasibility study on the topic of gender budgeting. The examination of budgets according to gender criteria would have been a true breakthrough for influencing decisions from the perspective of gender. Initially the government did not even want to publish the results of this study. It was predominantly women who applied public pressure to urge the publishing of the results. Now the federal government has placed the study on the Internet. However, the government refuses to engage in any political discussion about how gender budgeting could be accomplished in German municipal and federal budgets. The political risk is apparently too great, as it would revolutionise decision making processes, and not just from a gender-political point of view.

A second point of critique is that we were too one-sided in our focus on institutions. To start, it is correct that decision makers in ministries, in institutions like the World Bank or in city halls and in corporations must have the will to implement gender equality policies and create more gender equality. Similarly, the top-down approach is a central prerequisite for the successful implementation of gender mainstreaming.

However, institutions and companies are not neutral in their actions. They do not act in a sphere free from domination and self-interest. Institutions are directed to follow their own interests, just like governments and all other establishments. Commercial enterprises have long since discovered women as an economic factor and support gender mainstreaming and/or diversity processes in this way. They consider women solely as an economic factor and are less interested in gender hierarchies and gender roles.

Often times we acted as if we could tell these institutions what to do, but forgot that these institutions reflect the constructions of power and domination of the society at large and thus also reflect the common perceptions of gender roles. Who defines what a traditional gender role is? Who gets to define what is considered 'fair for women' and 'fair for men'? Who articulates needs and goals and, more importantly, with which negotiating power? Who has the power to define this within institutions?

Institutions and bureaucracies are certainly not areas that are sensitive to gender considerations per se. Additionally, decision making structures and practices are hierarchical in structure and business cultures are often still characterised by 'old boys networks'. They are dominated by rules and systems that are based more on confidentiality than geared toward transparency and a culture of open debate. Thus it is hardly surprising that gender mainstreaming pilot projects in ministry bureaucracies and other institutions were more likely to result in handbooks, criteria and checklists and that these processes were, especially in the beginning, often technocratic in nature.

Without wanting to throw out the baby with the bathwater, it is clear that institutions can promote learning processes. It is true that we need well functioning institutions that implement political ideas, including emancipatory ones. But from my point of view – and this is one of my basic theses – we also need a society-wide movement from the grassroots level, we need political pressure from the society at large, so that these institutions transform themselves. Political decisions will only change in character when the need for change comes expressly from society itself. Only then will institutions have to implement the political and policy specifications. I think many of those who believed and believe that institutions would/will be able to straighten it all out somehow have lost sight of this correlation. To influence institutions and bureaucracies through lobbying is one thing. Organising societal pressure through the media and general public, through noisy protests, is another.

Gender equality policies that focus solely on institutions through the instrument of gender mainstreaming have hit a massive political wall. This is especially true where there are no women's or gender-political organisations that have negotiating power to influence parliaments and public opinion from the outside and thus also indirectly influence institutions. In many countries this has been successful. Whether in South Africa, Kenya, in Mexico or Brazil, women's political organisations have been able to take advantage of political upheavals in their countries during particular transition phases and successfully introduce the principles of gender mainstreaming as found in the Beijing Platform for Action. Ultimately, how gender political topics are organised within a society is decisive in all countries.

Finally, and many know this is a different problem, a number of institutions have misused the concept of gender mainstreaming to block the financing of other women's political initiatives. Gender mainstreaming was used as the excuse, so to speak, to stop funding other women's projects, using the explanation: 'we're now taking care of gender issues via gender mainstreaming'. This has been and still remains a disastrous exploitation on the part of political and other institutions. From the beginning, gender mainstreaming clearly stated that we need both – we must strengthen and foster women's political and economic participation in society, while at the same time getting the men on board for gender-political issues. The fact that women's projects have fallen to the wayside has led to a decline in solidarity with these concepts, instead of strengthening them. There is a great deal of disassociation and critique of gender mainstreaming worldwide. The idea in its practical political application has suffered a loss of its radical core for a variety of reasons.

In conclusion

To me, gender mainstreaming clearly remains a radical social concept. If it was taken seriously and truly succeeded in bringing gender perspectives into all political decisions, it would be a breakthrough for more gender equality, for more equity and – from my perspective – would bring about totally different policies and politics overall. We want changes with gender perspectives in taxation, in foreign and security policies, in labour policies, etc. The problem is that we were too focused on technical and bureaucratic solutions within institutions. We all have work to do to again make gender policies a topic for society as a whole and one that is not only discussed in specialised circles. Gender equality must be propagated throughout society and we have to organise more political pressure from the bottom up. Policies for gender equality, including gender mainstreaming, are just one of many instruments within the EU that remain an extremely important frame of reference for national policies as well. I feel that women and men who want equality in many EU countries should feel fortunate that there are EU directives forcing national governments to act. I believe that we have no reason to lower our sights. We need this framework. But in addition to this legal framework we also need bottom-up policies, a strengthening of initiatives that target equality and we, furthermore, need more men on board. We need role models, male role models, who are willing to advocate for gender equality in society, in administration, in industry and in unions. It cannot remain the domain of women alone to do the work needed to fundamentally change the relationship between the genders.