



Rethinking Gender Mainstreaming in Development Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Perspectives on gender mainstreaming, like all matters of gender, are socially constructed. The politics of that social construction intersects with complexities of geopolitical identities, professional backgrounds and envisioned goals for gender equity and equality. In this reflection Jane L Parpart and Deborah N McFee both share their perspectives on gender mainstreaming. Parpart, a feminist scholar, is clear as she espouses on the limitations of gender mainstreaming. Her underlying concern with the inability of gender mainstreaming to provide that necessary shift in development theory to critically accommodate feminist thought is an observation that has dogged the transformational potential of gender mainstreaming since its inception. McFee, who comes to gender and development research via a practitioner grounded lens, remains invested in the need to provide a multi-sectoral language of gender equity and equality that recasts and complicates women and men in the development project. This co-reflection brings to the fore the disciplinary cross-fertilization involved in translating policy goals into action and the necessary global debates that situates the making of public policy in women, gender and development within the multiple realities in which it finds its relevance.

Keywords: gender mainstreaming; Anglophone Caribbean; gender and development

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Gender mainstreaming (GM), with its promise of gender equality, empowerment and transformation, became a central pillar of development discourse, policy and practice in the 1990s. Introduced into the development lexicon at the 1995 UN Conference on women in Beijing, gender mainstreaming was presented as a do-able and practical solution for gender inequality and disempowerment around the world. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action emphasized the importance of creating policies and programmes that would strengthen women's empowerment and gender equality. Defined by the United Nations (UN) as the integration of gender into "the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres" (ECOSOC 1997: chapter 4), gender mainstreaming was promoted as a solution for the persistent inequality found along gender lines around the world. GM became a key solution by which "the gender order of a society can be changed through deliberate and focused interventions at every level" (de Waal 2006: 210). The optimistic, policy-oriented "can-do" language of gender mainstreaming advocates entered the development lexicon, becoming a central pillar of development agencies. Indeed, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) argued that the "why" of gender had been replaced by the "how" – GM had to be everyone's responsibility and gender equality would emerge naturally from this commitment (UNDP 2003).

Gender mainstreaming increasingly became a key strategy for solving the problems of gender inequality in developing countries. Development agencies began to focus on integrating GM into all relevant development policies and programmes. An impressive array of analytical tools, including checklists, training manuals, Gender Impact Assessments, expert meetings, data collection and progress reports reinforced the assumption that gender mainstreaming was a do-able and necessary approach for achieving gender equality (de Waal 2006). Gender mainstreaming moved from being seen as a largely political project to being regarded as a crucial solution for development agencies committed to improving women's lives and fostering gender equality. The goals of gender and development were reduced to a technical fix, guaranteed to work when GM was applied with rigour and care (Cornwall et al. 2008). Gender

mainstreaming became a key development mantra, regarded as the best mechanism for achieving the goals of gender equality promised by government officials and development agencies. Indeed, it became “something that just needs to be done” (Verloo 2005: 351-52).

Yet the achievements of gender mainstreaming as a policy and practice have been disappointing. While there have been some improvements in women’s participation in parliaments, governance institutions and peace processes, these “successes” have often been temporary and largely ineffective (Rao and Kelleher 2005). Gender mainstreaming has continued to be seen as a key tool for achieving gender equality, yet the understanding and application of GM has often been framed on the assumption that gender is a synonym for women. Indeed, the larger development agencies have focused on projects aiming to mainstream women into educational, economic and political institutions. Yet these all too often produced little change in the ability of these women to leverage their positions into greater power, respect and authority. For example, the introduction of a gender quota in the Guyanese parliament increased the number of women, but not their ability to effect political change and to increase the power of women parliamentarians (Khan 2017). From 1990 to 2010, the African Development Bank (ADB) supported gender mainstreaming projects on the continent that used the language of gender equality but treated gender as an equivalent for women. This led to numerous projects where gender and women were conflated and gender dynamics were largely ignored, particularly the impact of gendered assumptions on the ability of women to take on leadership roles (ADB 2012).

While many mainstream development officials and programmes have continued to focus on women in gender mainstreaming projects as developmental solutions, some scholars and practitioners have taken a more pessimistic stance. Andrea Cornwall argued that gender mainstreaming has run adrift and “the heart of the gender agenda -- transforming unequal and unjust power relations -- seems to have fallen by the wayside (2007: 69). Deep-seated

and entrenched resistance to gender transformation has been discovered in many development organizations (Rao and Kelleher 2005). Nine international development agencies were discovered to have widespread, although rarely acknowledged, internal resistances to projects aimed at improving gender equality (Aasen 2006). Evaluations of UNDP gender equality projects reported effective opposition to GM at the more senior levels, both in 1998 and again in 2006 (Schaljwyk 1998; UNDP 2006). Clearly, gender mainstreaming has not been the hoped for solution for achieving gender equality in development projects around the world, especially in the global South.

Indeed, many mainstream development agencies have moved away from gender, focusing on women and especially girls instead. Girl power has become a romanticized “solution,” where strong young women convince reluctant men to take them seriously by proving their developmental potential through carefully tending a cow, building up a small herd and becoming economically independent.¹ This focus has sidelined efforts to bring men, masculinities and gender hierarchies into discussions of gender inequality. However there are glimmers of hope. Some development agencies have begun to focus on men and masculinities as part of gendered processes. For example, development NGOs, Instituto Promundo, based in Brazil, and Sonke Gender Justice, based in South Africa, are both working with men in partnership with women and girls to achieve gender justice. Promundo’s work began among the six million men “missing” in Brazil, largely due to traffic accidents and homicides - mostly gun-related - and in low-income, urban areas. This work with men on masculinities and violence aims to increase understanding and commitment to gender and social justice (Cornwall, Edstrom and Greig 2011: 13). Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa has not only focused on male violence, it has also taken a broader perspective, challenging the former head of the African National Congress Youth League, Julius Malema, by winning a case against him in South Africa’s Equality Court for his sexist and homophobic public statements (Greig 2011: 231).

The rising interest in addressing male and masculine behaviour is crucial to producing a more effective gender mainstreaming approach to development and social change. However, this approach has to include more than simply adding men and masculinity/ies to development activities and programmes. A transformative approach to gender requires attention to gendered practices and their role in defining and reinforcing the “legitimate and natural” wielders of power and authority in a given society. As long as political, economic and cultural power is tightly associated with hegemonic masculinity (as defined in a particular society), alternative gendered identities (including feminine men and butch women) will only be able to enter these realms as honorary men. We have seen this happen in corporate and political leadership where “successful” women do best when they take on masculine behaviour/practices (Cornwall, Karioris and Lindisfarne 2016). Moving beyond the identification of masculinity with power will require fundamental changes in attitudes as well as practices. This transition will have to move beyond the numbers game, where adding women to circles of power is seen as the litmus test of gender equality. More fundamental change in gendered attitudes to power, leadership and community building will require developing more gender-balanced and diverse notions of leadership and power. It will also require attention to gender analysis that can provide more gender-neutral definitions of power and authority.

Rethinking gender in a more inclusive, global and grounded way is thus essential, but relevant policies and programmes are also fundamental for ensuring social change. Policy makers need to take this broader gendered understanding of power into consideration in order to create policies with a more fluid, interactive understanding of gender. This goal runs against existing notions of “the normal” embedded in power relations and practices around the world. It will find few friends and many enemies. Yet development policies and programmes committed to gender mainstreaming can play a significant role in this effort, especially when they adopt a more gender-equal and interrelated approach to social progress. Programmes such as Instituto Promundo and Sonke Gender Justice are examples of how development programmes can challenge existing masculinist gender hierarchies. While gender mainstreaming has too

often been simply an effort to bring women into a masculine-dominated world, an approach to GM that draws on and contributes to progressive gender analysis, policies and programmes can play a critical role in the production of a more gender-equal and tolerant world (Connell 2016). While still the exception rather than the norm, this goal is worth pursuing and gender mainstreaming, when attentive to gender theory and praxis, can play a pivotal role in this effort.

My mentor and friend Jane Parpart invited me to share her reflection on gender mainstreaming. The idea of co-reflecting with Professor Parpart is an intimidating exploit. However, Jane is a feminist scholar who practices what she preaches and has invited the politics of another standpoint into her reflection -- in this context, a Caribbean woman, new to scholarship and more comfortable with the idea of being a public servant, committed to research centred on working through the responsibility of public policy to create equitable access for all. I come to this reflection via almost 20 years embedded in the national and regional public policy processes in the area of women, gender and development in the Anglophone Caribbean. My reflection on gender mainstreaming in policy and practice is unrepentantly Caribbean in location, and largely informed by my work in the Trinidad and Tobago state. Therefore, I choose to ground my understanding of the regional significance of gender mainstreaming in the work of the co-editor of this CRGS issue, where she identifies the importance of the gender work of region mainstreaming as follows:

With the exception of the region's history of feminist legal advocacy, mainstreaming stands as the primary vehicle through which discussions of gender equity occur in the Caribbean region (Rowley 2011: 56)

By the 1980's gender mainstreaming emerged as a globally accepted strategy to promote gender equity and equality (Woodford-Berger 2007). In the Anglophone Caribbean, like many other regions, the uptake of gender

mainstreaming was slow before the 1995 Beijing Conference. The Beijing conference was a catalyst for the regional buy-in to gender mainstreaming (Ibid: 124). The years immediately after Beijing, 1998 onwards, marked my entry into the world of Women, Gender and Development. I was then a young technocrat, very mindful of the hope gender mainstreaming offered to public policy around women and gender. It offered that missing language, a technical language --- a language that promised to rapidly and eloquently transform Women's Affairs from the public policy 'Ghetto of Women's Affairs'² (McFee 2017) into an authentic policy space within the machinery of government, with its own sophisticated mother tongue of Gender and Development. The promise of multi-sectoral technical plans and the complex engagements that established a logical means of integrating a gender equality perspective into all development activities of government was food from the gods for many of us who were public servants working in women and development, uncomfortably grappling with the implications of bringing gender and development to the Caribbean (Ross Frankson 2000; Barriteau 2003). Our need to provide a technical sense of the language of gender to our colleagues located in multiple sectoral sites throughout the public service was a critical driver of the regional welcome accorded to the promises of gender mainstreaming. This promise became even more enticing given the potential inherent in a discursive shift from women as the disadvantaged constituency of women and development to the comparative and more positive context of gender mainstreaming systems (Ronnblom 2005). Complicating our thirst for that easily translated language with the availability of regionally and internationally-derived resources; manuals, plans of action, post and pre-Beijing work on National Gender Policies, all fascinated with the ideals of gender mainstreaming.

The Commonwealth distinguished itself in this process. The organization printed clear, public policy-focused gender mainstreaming road maps with its first Gender Management Series printed in the 1990's. Every sector was represented in these publications and Caribbean-born feminist advocates, cum international practitioners, led the call for the adoption of the process all the way from Marlborough House. At times we were sold up close and personal. As Caribbean

public servants, trying to reframe women and development in the context of the ever-expanding gender mainstreaming vortices, we grabbed these maps, among others, and attempted to construct highways and bridges to our goals of gender equity and equality, in large part, by adding masculinity and stirring. The outcome can never be solely about whether it worked or failed or the extent to which the recommended policy action was the right fit.

Reflecting on the introduction of gender mainstreaming to our region serves as a reminder of the complexity of public policy-making in the personally political world of women, gender and development. The need for co-existence and reconciliation of diverse interests and agendas cloaked in the language of rational problem-solving never operates in isolation from the intricacies of our social reality (Mosse 2004). In these postcolonial Caribbean realities where activist, policy and scholarly work of women and gender has historically sought to respond to the conditions faced by both men and women, feminism has allowed a dialogue between women and men (Mohammed 1998). For me gender mainstreaming in Caribbean public policy is an ongoing deliberation -- deliberations that are boundless in their capacity to birth anew as public policy seeks to keep abreast with the tests presented by the ever-shifting genealogy of gender (Mohammed 1999). As the region contends with the conceptual and programmatic terrain of gender mainstreaming, a significant aspect of how we interact with these global structures is framed and affected by the processes of renegotiation and reordering required to fit our context. In working through the utility of gender mainstreaming, we are reminded of the need for the local to speak back to the global around global governance flows. To effectively frame a more equitable and just world, experiences such as the global thrust to implement the structures of gender mainstreaming need to be used as opportunities to revisit how we construct the geopolitics of global governance. In attempting to make meaning of gender mainstreaming in the context of the Anglophone Caribbean, the process challenges narrow conceptualizations of global governance as a north to south uni-directional flow of structures and ideas. As we seek to engage in this ongoing assessment, the impact of competing goals, narratives and expectations of diverse constituencies in very

specific contexts becomes evident. Our analyses must make room for heterogeneity of experiences and the complex forms that equity and equality must take in a global conversation. The Anglophone Caribbean is an excellent site for such an exploration. More such southern-based analyses are needed to gain a truly global perspective of gender mainstreaming in its many variations around the world.

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¹ Discussed at a meeting on ``Women's Political Empowerment: The State of Evidence and Future Research`` sponsored by DFID and Canadian IDRC (London, 11-12 September 2012).

² Mrs Margaret Hector, Minister and Member of Parliament for the constituency of Diego Martin West 1986-1991 described the portfolio of Women's Affairs as the 'ghetto of women's affairs' (McFee, 2017)