Effects of Gender mainstreaming in local government

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Abstract

During the past decades, many public servants in the public sector are experiencing an increased pressure to deliver measurable impact of their work to solve complex societal problems as gender inequality (Newman and Clarke 2009). The public service are to contribute to innovation, new markets and efficiency, and at the same time uphold the rule of law, civil rights, equality and democratic ideals. Meanwhile, gender mainstreaming has taken the step into the regular planning and implementation of community service through different forms of management. In this paper we investigate how gender mainstreaming is monitored on different levels in an public organisation and what the effects from the policy are. The empirical data stems from interviews with public servants and their experiences of monitoring and implementing gender mainstreaming. The results indicate that policymakers have to take into account all the different results from the policyprocess and that results are embedded by the management control systems.

Introduction

Gender mainstreaming belongs to a set of policy instrument that is born in an era of New Public Management and seeks to modernize, rationalize and improve existing policy processes. In terms of its context, gender mainstreaming can be said to be part of a larger trend of governance and more precisely “governance by insertion” (Jacquot 2010). This
means that it belongs to a set of transversal policy instruments aimed at managing multidimensional and complex issues, such as gender equality, through integration both horizontally and systematically at all stages of policy-making and all levels of the governance system (Callerstig 2014, Jacquot 2010:119).

In Sweden public sector organisations are legally required to promote gender equality and has been described having a “integrated approach” where the responsibility for gender mainstreaming is extended to a large number of actors involved in public policy and service (Daly 2005). The paper draws on a case study of the implementation and monitoring of gender mainstreaming in a Swedish municipality, The City of Gothenburg, in the area of education. The aim of the paper is to investigate how gender mainstreaming is monitored on different levels in local government and what the effects of the policy are. The hierarchical organisational structure in local government give rise to special challenges concerning following up the effects of gender mainstreaming. A public organisation plan, carry out and follow-up their activities in several different stages and at different levels. This could take place at a political level, in the form of overarching coordination and follow-up, or at a local level closer to the activities. In most local governments in Sweden, management by objectives, is the management control system in use.

Background

The City of Gothenburg, one of Sweden's largest municipalities, has during the last ten years been active in integrating a gender perspective into its public services. Prior to our data collection the City had decided to gender mainstream its web-based control and monitoring system for handling the planning, monitoring and budget. Gender equality was set as a prioritised goal, and an overarching and horizontal goal to “secure” all policy areas in terms of gender equality. By means of the control and monitoring system in the city new opportunities were created for following up and evaluating work on gender equality. Work was carried out on coordinating and supporting development from the municipal management office. Different managers had the responsibility for transforming gender equality work into concrete goals for the organisation and following these up. Everyone working in the municipality have the general task of implementing gender equality goals in daily work with the inhabitants of the city.

Method

The research project was designed as a case study (Yin 2006) within a frame of an interactive research approach where one aim has been to work together through out the research process with the practitioners involved (Aagaard and Svensson 2006). The empirical findings come from a research project on the organising of gender mainstreaming in public services and has been published in an earlier version (Callerstig and Lindholm 2013). The study is based on some 15 interviews with public servants in the municipal management office, the department of Education, headmasters at schools, head of preschools, and members of the municipal council of the City of Gothenburg. The interviews were semi-structured, and we started from
an interview guide covering the theme of management, follow-up and development, responsibility and roles, as well as effects of gender mainstreaming.

**Gender mainstreaming and monitoring effects**

In this paper we wish to present and analyse attempts by local governments to solve the complex social problem that gender inequality represents. The question of results and effects of gender mainstreaming initiatives is important for a number of reasons. Studies of results and effects are necessary to make possible further development of work on gender equality (Moser and Moser 2005). We are inspired by research on implementing and monitoring gender mainstreaming in institutions and organisation (Moser and Moser 2005, Wittbom 2009, 2011). One way of understanding results is that they cover everything that comes out of an organisation or an activity in terms of performance and effects (Lindgren 2006).

Performances are the products or services which are produced. Effects on the other hand are not what is done in the organisation, but rather *the consequences* of what is done (Lindgren 2006:50). Effects may be short-term and long-term, namely those that can be seen more or less immediately, and those that can be seen with a time lag. In the paper we discuss that the results and effects of gender mainstreaming varies in relation to what level we are in the organisation. Gender mainstreaming can in itself incorporate many different definitions of gender and gender equality along the lines of perspectives such as difference, similarity and diversity or liberal and radical approaches, and these differences have consequences for its implementation (Nentwich 2006, Walby 2005). It has been suggested that these different perspectives themselves create variations in terms of the actors and measures that are understood to be appropriate in gender mainstreaming (Squires 2005, Nentwich 2006).

**Findings**

**Results from Gender mainstreaming on different levels in local government**

The hierarchical organisational structure in the municipality gives rise to special challenges concerning following up the effects of gender mainstreaming.

Public organisations plan, carry out and follow-up their activities in several different stages and at different levels. This could take place at a political level, in the form of overarching coordination and follow-up, or at a local level closer to the activities. Gender mainstreaming differs between local and central levels in the organisation. Table 2 shows differences and similarities. For instance, there are different perceptions of work on gender mainstreaming at different levels, this is important coming to types of results that come out. From the local perspective, work is based on directives to the organisation, and also central following-up systems. From the central perspective, it is important to understand how the result of (specific) local development work can be used to manage and develop the work being done in the whole municipality. This means that specific experiences need to be asked for, generalised and applied more generally at all levels.

Table 1. Follow -up of gender mainstreaming in a municipality based on three perspectives – central, intermediate and locally in the organisation.
Table 1 shows how gender mainstreaming becomes context dependent and related to organisational levels. At a central level it is possible to see differences between gender equality work in many different service sectors in the municipality. The disadvantage is that it may be complicated to make correct analyses without qualitative data available. At the local level often the "small goals" for the local school or preschool are important, whilst it may be difficult to describe the work in a more generalised way. Difficulties at the intermediate level in administration are to understand the context where effects occur.

Gender mainstreaming is run at different rates in different parts of the municipality, and inertia to change is stronger at higher levels. Questions concerning priorities must be taken up at a higher level and decisions take longer to make. Local levels can see effects more rapidly, but the impact is often limited to their own units. It may also be difficult to create an
understanding of analyses at an aggregate level based on different perspectives of the organisation was one aspect that emerged in the interviews.

We never get anything from the people, we get it after it's been screened. We never meet people, it is only through follow-up reports that we get our information.

(Employee city management)

At the intermediate level, detailed accounts about the work are not always interesting, rather the major features are analysed. It is possible to compare at the same time different and similar activities, and see in what way they differ.

I would like to get a picture of whether there has been a change, but don't want to be overwhelmed by a mass of data.

(Intermediate manager)

One disadvantage may be that it is difficult to get a complete picture of what goes on in the local service units, at the same time as this is necessary for managing development. At the local level, development of gender equality work focuses on a specific activity. Here it is important to have a close understanding and follow activities through "small goals". It may be difficult to describe effects achieved locally, and how they are used to develop the organisation.

We must have small goals which we can implement. It may be the case that we can review all the books we have at the preschool with a gender perspective. There should be a breadth to the books. One can continue looking at toys, and pictures on the walls etc. What we have understood and what we see as results are what children meet in their everyday reality, the material we buy affects children, the books we read, and how we read them. Small things like this.

(Head of preschool)

In the interviews different effects were pointed out for users, such as the following:

• teachers' practices and treatment of pupils and preschool children
• increasing choice of options in activities in the preschool
• support for pupils choosing a non-gender typical education
• better working environment for both girls and boys in preschool and school

As we see there are "soft effects" which are a result of increased knowledge and changing attitudes amongst the city's staff. Our study shows that there are a number of obstacles to achieving effects, as well as following up effects that have been achieved (both positive and negative). We have seen that there is a problem with a lack of communication between different parts – upwards and downwards – in the organisation. A lack of communication in an organisation can have a negative impact on gender equality work as it makes it more difficult to get support and participation (Halford 1992). Resistance or indifference to gender equality work is given as an explanation by interviewees as to why it is difficult to measure
results, and this is confirmed by earlier studies into gender equality work in Swedish municipalities (Pincus 2002).

**Difficulties in following up**

The majority of interviewees are doubtful about measuring the effects of the work. Measurement takes place primarily in traditional and "soft areas", such as school and healthcare, where experience and knowledge exists from before. The interviews have shown that a lack of knowledge, as well as shortcomings in the material for analysis and how gender equality should be measured exists at all levels in the organisation. Interviewees referred to changes that they can see in the organisation, but they can't put their finger on how they would measure this. One problem, taken up by an interviewee from the education administration, is that the requirement for measurable goals may run the risk of ignoring important parts as they are considered difficult to evaluate. Interviewees think that shortcomings in the system are sometimes connected with the fact that it is only managers who communicate with each other between different levels of the organisation.

There are difficulties for staff at the central level collecting all the statistics from all parts of the city to understand contexts and local settings. The quotation below gives an example of this.

> It is difficult on the basis of aggregate data to build up a complete picture, the various units think we don't understand anything.

*Employee city management.*

Several interviewees consider that following up results can support work, and that this gives rise to new issues (and measurements). According to the interviewees, there is a progression in gender equality work, where it is possible to see development taking place in the types of questions made, and in what is followed up in gender equality work. This can reflect changes in gender equality work – from more rudimentary questions about gender representation to studies of gendering processes. Another interviewee says that it is possible to see a clear distinction as things are now done based on results that have been achieved. Statistics by gender are asked for, and you go further and put new questions.

> Work must be done in steps, first we had education initiatives, but that was not sufficient, now we have statistics disaggregated by gender, and now questions about how funds are allocated. You have to take small leaps, but first there must be conditions for making analyses.

*Employee city management*

The risks of measuring and tiredness from doing this is mentioned by several persons, as well as the difficulties of changing structures by working through the ordinary systems. Many decisions cannot be made through a system. The majority of the public servants we
interviewed consider that the follow-up system in the city is somewhat problematic, as results are seldom fed back. Learning takes place in another way – primarily as an exchange of experience in "face-to-face" formats between practitioners sharing similar tasks. Examples mentioned are head teachers meeting, preschool heads meeting, and teachers in a school forming a group to work together to apply a gender perspective in their teaching. According to some interviewees, these meetings can be further developed in terms of gender equality to facilitate learning between the different perspectives of the organisation. At the same time gender equality work is often run outside regular work, and exchange of experience and learning are generally under-developed.

**Effects reflect initiatives**

The majority of persons interviewed stated that one of the clearest effects of gender equality work in the City of Gothenburg was an increased awareness amongst employees in the municipality.

**Organisation development effects**

Organisation development effects, arising as a consequence of raising awareness were according to the interviewees common, but these effects were only marginally reported, and not required in the existing management control systems. One such effect could be that the staff through greater awareness and knowledge of gender equality reviewed routines in a school and changed their pedagogical practices for example choice of playing materials. A employee in education administration describe that he meet teachers and headmasters in schools that work with gender equality but the results does not spread from each school because as he points out that the “system is very rigid and inflexible” and that the schools does not know how to report. A person from the preschool also highlighted problems related to the static nature of the reporting system and that results experienced by children disappear in the reporting system.

**Informal reports about effects**

Narratives from gender equality work travel informally in the organisation. The reports from the work are important for the staff, and they cover descriptions of effects arising from gender equality work. Qualitative stories as the interviewee mentioned above can be used as a form of learning between educationalists.

**FINAL DISCUSSION**

In our study of the results and effects observed in the City of Gothenburg, we would like to highlight some aspects that have been particularly important. These are that work on gender mainstreaming produces effects that are difficult to measure as they do not fit into traditional (logical-rational) measuring systems. The effects are often hidden or embedded in general processes and organisational development, and sometimes appear only in informal and
qualitative reports. We have noted that informants experience gender mainstreaming as leading to effects of changing awareness, but not in terms of changes in resource distribution. We have also seen a number of factors which impact follow-up work. Organisational structures, as well as different meanings attributed to gender equality work at different "levels" in the organisation impact what can and should be measured. Other conclusions are that a lack of interest in or opposition to gender equality work makes the follow-up of effects more difficult. There is also unawareness and an inability to analyse observed gender differences.

**Hidden effects**

On the one hand, gender mainstreaming is difficult. It involves complex problems and encounters resistance in the organisation. There is a lack of knowledge of gender equality issues, how they can be studied and analysed. On the other hand, the initiative on gender mainstreaming in the City of Gothenburg has taken the initial steps, training has been carried out, awareness of the staff has increased, and studies of their own activities have been initiated. We have seen that there is a discrepancy between what effects are expected and how they are measured, and effects which actually occur, and how they are reported.

How should the work in the City of Gothenburg be interpreted? The study shows that there are a number of different effects, both intended and unintended, which for different reasons are not described as effects in the follow-ups that have been carried out. Below we discuss some explanations of the results, and also the reasons why these are sometimes "not captured".

In the study of gender mainstreaming, we have noted the problem of measuring and analysing gender equality in organisations, and at the same time found examples of different stories about work on change. We see the stories as an opportunity for developing the work on studying the effects of gender mainstreaming.

Stories and the learning that occurs in different groups of people sharing the same experiences and tasks at a workplace can contain elements reflecting their own identity, as well as experiences from practical work. A story is more than just the release of information, it provides scope for both context and feelings.

Stories can be a very powerful way of representing and conveying complex, multi-dimensional ideas. Well-designed, well-told stories can convey both information and emotion, both the explicit and the tacit, both the core and the context.

*(Snowden, 2000).*

Stories can be used for studies of an organisation's existing gender arrangements, such as by sharing and reflecting over individual experiences of gender inequality, as well as facilitating collective learning around the tacit knowledge that exists in individual change strategies (Rindfleish, Sheridan and Kjeldal 2009). The stories often contain emotional and intuitive elements that can contribute to creating change (Rindfleish, Sheridan and Kjeldal 2009). Stories can be used to increase participation in work on change, and follow-up at the organisational level, and to study specific initiatives based on contextual factors that can have
an impact on outcomes. Both are important starting points from a gender perspective. They can also help with change work by showing alternative interpretations of different phenomena, problematise norms taken for granted, and also give an insight into how persons in marginalised groups are thinking (Lara 1999). Stories can also facilitate relearning of earlier patterns of behaviour where parts of what was learned consist of tacit or implicit knowledge which is difficult to influence based on traditional models of knowledge transfer (Sole and Wilson 2003).

The problem of using stories can be taking into account all the different stories that exist concerning a specific phenomenon (Buchanan and Dawson 2007), and also why and by whom a story has been shared. Critical issues about power relations and aims must be a part of the analysis. There is a risk that stories become an alibi to demonstrate that something is being done, and then they are used incorrectly as a symbol to show effective work on change. Story data analysed systematically, and based on different theories and models, can be verified with the help of other results, which reduces the risk of incorrect assessments, such as when good stories become an alibi for the organisation (McClintock 2004ab; Czarniawska 1997). If experiences from one example of gender equality work are used to develop work in another part of the organisation, or in another organisation, it is important to bear in mind the specific context from which the example originated.

Another clear experience in Gothenburg was that gender equality problems are complex and must be handled in different ways at different levels in an organisation. The study shows that differences between gender equality work at different levels are large, and that follow-up systems do not take sufficient account of this. Differences in what are the main tasks in different parts of an organisation, for instance, between planning and practical activities must be managed. Small local results need to be captured. Different interpretations of gender equality, as well as the complexity of the issues create a tendency to solve gender equality problems in small steps. Steps which lead to desired effects are difficult to anticipate and require an openness to surprising effects. The effects of gender mainstreaming are difficult to quantify since work on change is per se difficult to predict (Callerstig 2012). In our case study, we have seen examples of goals being removed as they were difficult to measure. The requirement for measurability has an unintended, unpredictable and negative effect.

One way of understanding why the effects of gender mainstreaming are so difficult to measure is to regard them as embedded in organisations' regular processes and follow-up systems, and also in the staff's daily and informal routines. Changes which take place due to gender mainstreaming often take place within the frame of regular work. This means that the effects are not necessarily reported as a consequence of gender equality work.

One example of this is the school which reported a more tranquil and safe working environment and a reduction in complaints from students, but this improvement was not linked to the gender mainstreaming work that had been undertaken. In the future, furthermore a better work climate for students could lead to a reduction in gender differences both as regards student performance and that fewer students drop out from programmes they have started. Other examples are when gender equality work is made into a part of regular work on quality, that is applying a gender equality perspective to the goals of the organisation leads to higher quality of the service provided to citizens, but in what way this would lead to an improvement in terms of gender equality problems at a macro level is less clear for those
involved. Other examples are small improvements, such as how forms are designed, premises located, how material in the preschool is used and so on. The long-term effects of all these smaller changes are difficult to predict and specify. They are often based on an argument that it is wrong to treat people differently on the grounds of gender, unless there are good reasons rather than on a theory of what could be the effects in the long-term. As we see gender mainstreaming can lead to new solutions to old problems but there are barriers and loose couplings that make it difficult to establish learning and see effects at all different levels in the organisation.

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