Too late for mainstreaming?: Dealing with difference in Brussels

Paper presented to the workshop ‘The future of gender equality in the European Union’
Granada, 14 - 19 April 2005

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Too late for mainstreaming?: Taking stock in Brussels

‘Diversity, I find that a nice concept… That is actually more equal than gender in the manner of speaking that it also brings other, for example the relation between Belgian/migrant and others, that sort of element, culture, the multicultural and such, that is contained. So it is an important concept, but gender is a part of it, which has its own specific identity. The danger is that the parts, the components of the concept diversity will lose their own identity. That can’t happen. I find that important, it cannot just disappear… (van Roemberg and Spee 2004:61)

GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND EQUALITY

Will gender fall out of mainstreaming? In its brief ten year history as official United Nations and European Union policy, the idea of mainstreaming as a policy technique has gained widespread acceptance, and some might claim that it is European feminisms’ biggest victory of the last years of the 20th century (Social Platform interview 4)\(^1\). The proof is in its imitation and adoption by other equality movements. However, others that its most glorious promise, the transformation of policy making to include the promotion of gender equality, is still far from realized. Predictions that by speaking the language of power to gender test the state, revolutionary potential might get lost (Woodward 1999, Swiebel 1999) have to some extent become true, even if not for the reasons originally espoused. In some ways Gender Mainstreaming has been a victim of its own success. ‘To mainstream’ is a policy verb now frequently used without the prefix ‘gender’ as a technique for inserting a policy theme horizontally. If one mainstreams other equality issues, will gender get lost?

This article focuses on the challenges for gender mainstreaming in a reconfigured European landscape and the extent to which experience with mainstreaming in the last ten years can be utilized to meet the evolving demands for equality of opportunity from new groups. There is a significant challenge to make mainstreaming relevant for all categories of men and women without losing sight of the focus on the dynamics of gender oppression.

An official story and an industry

Gender mainstreaming has become established, and an industry on to itself. This has been aided by the development of professionalism and expertise, thanks to the establishment of women’s studies programs and institutionalisation of the women’s movement. Most European countries have a number of highly qualified gender specialists. Breaking out of the ghetto of ‘women’s policy’ has provided job opportunities for gender expertise in other policy areas.

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\(^1\) This article utilizes ongoing interview work with informants in transnational equality organizations based in Brussels and with Belgian gender and sexuality advocates (Wiercx and Woodward 2004). Earlier versions were presented in Leeds, Zagreb and Granada.
The phenomenon has also provided a subject for policy and academic research. It has existed long enough for there to be an ‘official story’ and established ‘names’ without whom no conference is complete. For example, The ERSC funded project on Gender Mainstreaming in the UK demonstrated in its several sessions that one can easily fill an international speaker’s roster with highly qualified speakers from all over Europe who have a common scientific focus (Walby 2004). There are mainstreaming stars, a canon, mainstream talk, and research projects and networks (MAGEEQ, EQUAPOL, EGG, Rees 2004), in short an epistemological community.

**Threats to continuing gender mainstreaming**

There are several sets of challenges for the continuance of mainstreaming at the European and perhaps also at other levels. First there is the problem of the issue-attention cycle (Downs 1972). Policy concepts and issues can become burnt out. A key advantage of the mainstreaming approach was its novelty, both as a technique and in its insertion from a global governance and treaty-based source (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; True 2003). However novelty wears off. In the meantime there is insufficient evidence that there is an interchange of learning from mainstreaming experiences in recent years. The canon mentioned above has been primarily definitional and theoretical rather than directed at evaluating effective practice, and learning from experience.

A second challenge has been the popularity of the idea. It is borrowed by others, and as a technique it becomes generalized. While gender activists arguably borrowed the mainstream approach from the disability movement in the U.S. and from the Women in Development community (Geyer 2001; True & Minton 2001; Baden &Goetz 1997), other social equality activists co-opted the term early on. Child rights, poverty, or the rights of ethnic minorities also claim a need to be mainstreamed. In the process the original centrality of the term ‘gender’ could become lost. This would mean that ‘mainstreaming’ as a horizontal equality technique survives, while the other essential contribution, a demand that one look beyond ‘women’ as a category and examine policy as a producer of gender relations becomes lost. Further, gender mainstreaming begins to be seen not as an original approach, but as just one expression of ‘horizontal’ approaches to policy. In the EU context, it is sometimes even seen as one tool in the workbag of approaches known as the Open Method of Coordination (Rubbery 2003).

A final vaguer threat is the stability of political support for gender mainstreaming. In Western Europe the impetus for the articulation and insertion of mainstreaming in public policy came primarily from highly placed actors in the policy process and academic feminists. It can look quite technocratic. It was not a top priority for grass roots European women’s movements in most countries. Indeed, the first five years in Belgium were dedicated to educational programs informing women’s organizations how they could use mainstreaming (van Roemberg and Spee 2004). Now, without continued pressure from civil society, gender mainstreaming could easily become a dead letter.

Another concern related to the political foundation of the demand for mainstreaming is the reconfiguration of the equality landscape in Europe, which we will discuss in more detail below. Even if it is the case that other social movements claim mainstreaming as a valid

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2 List of papers from ESRC sessions
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/people/swdocs/ESRC%20Gender%20Mainstreaming%20seminars.pdf
technique for their issue, they don’t always do this in cooperation with women’s movements. Social equality movements at the national level are seldom trans-issue networks, except perhaps in the case of the United Kingdom or Ireland. It is only recently that social equality networks have had structured interaction at the European level in the Social Platform (Cullen 2004). The knowledge transfer between equality groups is not intense. Gender mainstreamers do not cite race mainstreamers and vice-versa.

LEARNING OVER TEN-YEARS

Path dependencies

Given the requirements of reporting adopted by many governments, it is surprising that there has not been a more concerted effort to take stock of the experience with mainstreaming. There has been an explosion of scholarship about mainstreaming, investigating its inherent interest theoretically in terms of democratic theory (Squires 2004), the tensions and challenges it poses for feminism (Walby 2004), and as a policy strategy for social change (Mazey 2002; Verloo 2001) as well as providing guidelines for how to do it at various levels of government (Council of Europe 2000, McKay and Bilton 2000, DIGMA project).

The various efforts frequently do not seem to speak to each other, nor address the policy activity in government. Walby (2004) undertakes a comprehensive survey of English and European language literature on conceptualizations of gender mainstreaming. The impressive multi-national MAGEEQ (website) project focuses on discourses and framing rather than the actual work floor practice of overcoming resistance and putting strategies into practice in everyday public administration. Two comparative projects focused on implementation do take into account several countries simultaneously, for the Central and Eastern European regions, and EQUAPOL, which includes a sub-selection of 8 countries. There does not seem to be a large amount of cross fertilization between these projects in their academic products and evaluations of the difference mainstreaming is making and the level of transformation.

There seems to be relatively little academic utilization of the numerous evaluation reports prepared by national governments and international organizations on their definitions and implementation of mainstreaming. Of particular interest here are the variety of reports from the European Institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council) about their own progress with mainstreaming. Both the Commission and the Parliament file yearly evaluations, for example. These reports are often quite candid about the roadblocks and problems in achieving a transformation of policy making in the European Commission. Their standards are high in terms of what could be considered success. Yet authors still seem to rely on a few sources such as Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2000); Mazey (2001); Rees (1998, 1999) for their interpretation of the success of mainstreaming, to the extent that several of these sources have become ‘canonical’, despite the fact that significant change has occurred since the late nineties. There is little shared knowledge between countries that is visible in the academic literature since the beginning of gender mainstreaming efforts, although policy makers may meet to exchange good practices. A consistent problem for European comparative work is that most governmental reports are written in national languages, so that only the most skilled researchers will be able to work comparatively to look at the mainstreaming record.

What is the situation today in one of the areas of Europe that was particularly instrumental in the launching of Gender Mainstreaming in the European Union? For this article 4 recent studies dealing with the Dutch speaking area of Europe, which was a forerunner in launching
and instrumentalizing Gender Mainstreaming, are examined in the context of a changing environment for equality issues. Such studies are seldom utilized, because they were published in Dutch or circulated in other networks than the ‘mainstream’ academic network. They evaluate gender equality and mainstreaming strategies from several different perspectives and are primarily based on interviews with policy actors in government, trade unions and the women’s movement.

Van Roemberg and Spee (2004) interviewed 21 experts in academics, policy and the women’s movement in Belgium and Flanders to evaluate the state of the art in conceptualization and implementation of mainstreaming. From this material a qualitative appreciation of the difficulties in gender mainstreaming was generated. Although gender mainstreaming had a stumbling start, the experts said that in general there was now a high level of familiarity with gender mainstreaming3. People in the field have a fairly accurate idea of what gender mainstreaming is, ten years on, with most working with a variant of the Council of Europe definition (1998). The report concludes that for gender mainstreaming, the ‘who’ involved is all important. If the effort is to work, there must be sophisticated actors in several sectors including civil servants, politicians, specialists, the women’s movement and academics. The threat that ear-marked women’s policies will disappear is real. The informants argue that vertical policies for women’s issues need to stay. The biggest necessity is means, as everyone is completely agreed that gender mainstreaming is a long term process, even in policy areas where the connection should be self evident.

However the report shows

> there is a real fear that GM will be used as a strategy to stop support for specific target actions for women. There is also a fear that gender mainstreaming will disappear in a larger whole of diversity policy, wherein the specificity of gender not, or scarcely more will be accounted for. It needs to be made clear that GM is not just a synonym for diversity policy, and that GM should not hinder positive actions being taken for (specific groups of) women. (Van Roemberg and Spee 2004:65)

These qualitative findings find echoes in a second study, the official document filed by Belgium in answer to the United Nations questionnaire on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) (Kingdom of Belgium 2004). The first progress report in 2000 showed little progress on mainstreaming. The various levels of government struggled with the localization of the mainstreaming effort. The next five years of experience demonstrate that to make progress resources must be mobilized. Since 2000 new structures have been put in place at all levels of government. Now at the federal level each minister is accountable, while at the Flemish level, a special cell has been created at the level of the Minister-President and effort has been made to strengthen relations with extra mural actors such as the women’s movement so that continued pressure is put on the authorities.

Finally, two comparative research projects with Belgian participation examine the interest in mainstreaming in public administration and in labor unions. Facon, Hondeghem and Nelen (2004) studied the broader arena of equal opportunities policies and compared the situation in Holland, Flanders, and the U.K. using an institutional lens of public policy analysis. Both Holland and Flanders had difficulty anchoring a mainstreaming strategy, structurally. Further Flanders needed to build up knowledge in civil society. Even though Holland has provided

3 This is backed up in our survey study of 74 Flemish and transnational Brussels based gender equality organizations (Wiercx and Woodward 2004).
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gender mainstreaming, and is usually thought to have been doing gender mainstreaming
‘avant-la-lettre’ and had launched Gender Impact Assessment in 1992 (Verloo and
Roggeband 1994, 1996), the authors find that it is not really until 2001 that there is an
organized approach to gender mainstreaming. At the same time emancipation offices had
been restructured. In terms of gender, the authors argue that this restructuring has weakened
the effort by spreading resources to other groups (2004: 179). The fear that mainstreaming of
gender may fade thanks to the lack of essential resources in terms of an active external
women’s movement network keeping the pressure up, and because of competition from the
new issue of diversity are present in both Belgium and Holland.

The UK takes a rather specific place in the study, having had explicit ‘equal opportunities’
policies since the seventies and a very specific dynamic around them. After the departure of
Thatcher, equality issues become part of a discourse around contact with the citizen, and
mainstreaming is coupled clearly to ‘Modernizing Government’, where international
influence had been important. In contrast to Belgium, the UK from the beginning had a focus
on several equality concerns such as race and disability. The authors argue that under Blair,
making the Business Case for equality has been a main thrust.

All three countries have been preserving a dual strategy of specific policies for target groups
(women) as well as an increasing attention to mainstreaming as an approach. Important is the
argument that the focus on mainstreaming is primarily to be found thanks to the activities of
international organizations such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the EU, where
experiences are exchanged, and the popularity of mainstreaming is increased (2004: 268). I
would argue that if the international pressures and opportunities decrease or are reconfigured,
as they are at both the UN (no Beijing 10 years later conference) and at the EU level
(increasing resources to an anti-discrimination approach), mainstreaming may loose some of
its appeal.

Silvera et al. (2003) also carried out comparative national studies about the level of
sophistication in mainstreaming in trade unions. Gender mainstreaming was adapted as a
strategy to address organizational and equal pay issues both inside the unions and in terms of
their strategies to influence government policy. Although gender equality issues are closely
allied to labor market issues and have a longer history, which should have boded well for
successful mainstreaming, there was substantial variation. The report focuses on the
governmental structures around employment policies and National Action Plans for
employment. They discovered very different uses of mainstreaming ranging from Denmark
with a very broad and transformative set of definitions, through the Netherlands, to a second
group of countries (Austria, France and Belgium) which do not practice true integration, and
then what the group terms the limited approach in the Southern countries and the UK.

On the basis of this review of recent research from northern continental Europe as well as
insights from an on-going interview project with equality activists in European transnational
interest groups and Flemish social movement organizations (Wiercx and Woodward 2004),
some general conclusions about implementation as well as the pluses and minuses of
mainstreaming as a transformational strategy can be posited.

Generally it can be concluded from the experiences above that beginning with mainstreaming
was difficult. The sets of comparative papers on mainstreaming produced by the European
Trade Union Committee under the Behning and Serrauno (2001) and Magnusson, Liljesdottir
and Serrauno (2003) also come to the conclusion that the beginning of mainstreaming and the period from 1995-2000 were extremely uneven. The gender mainstreaming approach that was put into practice often simply meant renaming previous women’s policies as gender mainstreaming, and the learning process was quite extensive. Certainly there is evidence of heavy path dependency in the implementation of mainstreaming, as can be seen in the comparative studies. Countries where there was a longer history of equality between men and women as an issue for state policy and where there had been public discussion and progress on gender equality were able to implement mainstreaming efforts more swiftly than countries where the discussion still had to begin, but even in gender sophisticated countries it is first after 2000 that strategies really begin to take form. The form implementation took was also path dependent, as the comparative study of Facon et. al. demonstrates. The progress with mainstreaming both within government and between countries and settings is uneven. This supports the early hypotheses (Rees 1999) that mainstreaming, as it aimed at the normative framework of policy would require a long term perspective, as one was dealing with a long term and deep transformation of people’s most fundamental values. Launching a gender equality approach into policy areas that have little surface connection with social issues requires champions (Braithwaite 2001). Whatever may be said about the Belgian experiences, one latent positive consequence of pursuing mainstreaming in government was that civil servants talked about gender and could perhaps see that transformation in their practice would be positively rewarded. The training sessions and exercises in developing policy instruments suitable for different areas of policy moved the envelope further even if not leading to transformation.

The advantages of mainstreaming strategy thus far
The advantages of the mainstreaming strategy as a means to improve policy making and proactively increase gender equality seem thus far to center on an impact on policy maker’s awareness. Its novelty as well as its aim at normal policy practices have given it strategic advantages. The fact that the approach has become relatively well known (if perhaps misunderstood) has also had positive consequences for other equality movements. Some of the positive consequences which can be seen in the comparative research thus far include the following.

First, gender mainstreaming is known among experts in both government and other sectors such as trade unions and NGO’s. The wide-spread and quick discussion and adoption of mainstreaming as a gender equality strategy by prestigious international organizations (ILO, UN, EU, CoE, OECD) was an extremely important asset for the mainstreaming approach. Not only did international organizations submit themselves to the technique, but they also bound their member organizations through treaties and agreements to apply mainstreaming and report on results. While such a reporting exercise can cynically be seen as so much wasted paper, it must have helped in dissemination of the ideas.

Thus, in marketing terms, gender mainstreaming had high brand recognition among policy makers close to gender equality issues, either through direct involvement in one or another international network, or through obligation required by treaties. In the European Union context an extra dimension was brought about by not only treaty obligation, but embeddedness in ongoing EU funding programs (European Employment Strategy, Regional Development, Development cooperation, and Science and Research Policy among others) where funding criteria includes a gender mainstreaming requirement.
The brand recognition led also to innovation diffusion, as other actors in other contexts also took up the idea of mainstreaming as a tactic for moving the envelope of gender equality further, as we have seen in the case studies above.

A second positive advantage of mainstreaming as compared with other approaches was that it was new and thus not burdened with association with Affirmative Action and other techniques that had provoked backlash. Equality efforts in the northern European countries had sometimes reached a place of stagnation or even open resistance. An advantage of mainstreaming was that it was novel. It used the language of policy to attempt revolutionary change. It was not tarred with association with ‘women’s liberation’, but spoke policy speak and social justice. A particular strategic advantage of this policy packaging was that it brought in new policy actors and included men.

Scandinavian actors especially emphasized the fact that mainstreaming could become part of the normal policy process (Stark 1997; Sainsbury & Bergkvist 2005). Normal policy instruments could be devised and inserted into the normal policy cycle to test policy. The strategy fit well with previous experiences with environmental issues, and could use the same discourse of impact assessment, evaluation and accountability. It was novel to launch a liberation issue using normal policy tools (thereby being attractive to young policy makers still eager to make their mark), and yet the language of normal policy made the mainstreaming strategy more acceptable than justice based challenges such as affirmative action that on the surface seemed to challenge the principle of ‘equality before the law’.

The tiredness of the equality movement was a reason for a ‘novel’ approach, but it was not only novelty that was appealing about mainstreaming. For academic activists, it was also clear that gender mainstreaming offered the logical next step. Many (Lombardo 2003; Squires 2004; Phillips 1999) hammered upon what feminist academic activists call the ‘Wollstonecraft dilemma’ in policy, which is a reflection of the Equality/Difference debate in feminist theory. On the one hand, women claim they are ‘equal’ (but not alike) to men, and yet on the other hand there are significant concerns about the openness for gender specificity. How to rhyme these two concerns led to the strategies followed in Nelen and Hondeghem’s equality house (2000), or Rees’s T-3 recipe (1999). First came legal equality and catch-up strategies (affirmative action), second specific programs for allowing for expression of female values (parity and quota’s), but both of these approaches remained in a women’s ghetto. The concept of gender opened the game to the issue of men as well. Not only should policy be directed at ‘women’ in comparison to men, but it should address the relational issues that produce gender structures.

The advocates of mainstreaming see it as a policy application for new directions in gender theory. Mainstreaming was their theory made concrete, and the goal was a transformation of gender relations including everyone. In this way, gender mainstreaming was very attractive as it was the logical next stage.

A further positive consequence of mainstreaming has been the development of new tools in new areas of government. As noted more generally above, because gender mainstreaming was not a familiar government tool it required new instruments. Training packages for government were developed; and liaison groups crossing departmental boundaries created matrix situations inside hierarchically structured governments. The implementation of mainstreaming in any setting had ripple effects. Although all too often the civil servant made responsible for gender mainstreaming was female, it is certainly the case that more men had at least a fleeting
confrontation with issues in gender equality than ever before. One can be cynical about the lasting value of a one day training session that is not backed up by follow-up measures, but confronting male top civil servants and policy makers with statistical demonstrations of the inequality produced by their policy, or present in their policy terrain opens the eyes of all but the most resistant.

The final advantage of mainstreaming, that it has provided a strategy useful for other equality causes, is of course a mixed blessing in a situation of competition. ‘Mainstreaming’ without the prefix ‘gender’ has been demanded by other causes. They also want policy to pro-actively contribute to an improvement in their situations. This means that ‘mainstreaming’ as a technique is positively regarded. But women fear that this positive regard can have negative consequences for their ability to continue to make claims. As women have argued, a dual strategy approach must be maintained, where targeted policies to address gender disadvantage co-exist with an integrated strategy. They also argue that there is a specificity to gender inequality not shared by other forms of inequality. Another mixed advantage is that by making policy makers work on gender mainstreaming they may become more open to considering other equality issues, but it can also prime them to develop their own strategies to avoid extra work.

Of course the positive consequence that would be most impressive would be demonstration that the application of gender mainstreaming in a policy area actually led to the improvement of gender relations in that field. Thus far, it seems there is little evidence that gender mainstreaming in and of itself has transformed the policy setting or led to dramatic changes in the field. It may take time for the advantages of heightened awareness to become palpable in societal change. Meanwhile however, mainstreaming has also revealed a number of problems.

The disadvantages of the mainstreaming strategy

The problems with the mainstreaming strategy are those that face any new policy area that competes with others, but exacerbated by the fact that the strategy challenges the status quo. Most of the stumbling blocks for mainstreaming hinge on this issue.

First and foremost is the competition for scarce resources. Doing gender mainstreaming well is expensive in terms of every single resource. Political commitment, expertise, well-functioning policy networks of actors from within and outside government, dedicated staff, organizational restructuring and cultural change and time are all costly. It is therefore hardly coincidental that even the first literature on application of mainstreaming approaches and good practices underlined the role of resources in terms of committed leadership and funding.

A criticism that is almost universal in all countries including Anglo-Saxon countries is that ‘mainstreaming’ is not a self-evident concept (Woodward 2003). Even in English the term seems to ignore the critique of feminist activists that the ‘mainstream’ is a ‘manstream’. Thus mainstreaming could imply simply joining business as usual, when in fact, as has been argued above, the motive idea has been transformation and change in the mainstream. However, the translation problem becomes infinitely worse when crossing language boundaries. What was a vague term for international bureaucrats using English became incomprehensible in other languages. Alternative translations such as ‘equality of opportunities’ or ‘horizontal approaches’ missed the conceptual sophistication of the original ‘gender mainstreaming’

What the studies in practice have clearly proven is that to carry out a transformation of an organization or public policy in a ‘mainstreaming’ framework requires a significant training
effort. To this end numerous instruments have been developed. A further problem is that the very openness of term permits misuse.

Not only was the term ‘mainstreaming’ difficult to translate. ‘Gender’ itself, positing that differences between the sexes are socially constructed, is not anchored outside feminist and academic circles. Frequently practitioners fell back on the generally accepted terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and ‘sex’. What are the implications of letting ‘gender’ go as a concept in policy? One falls back on ascription alone, and loses the potentiality of shaping the relation between the sexes, as sex underlines biological difference without recognizing its socially constructed nature.

Some of the problem here can be ascribed to the different levels of discourse development in both countries and sectors. Trade unionists were accustomed to having women in the women’s division, and had difficulty moving beyond ‘sex’ and equal pay in their debates (Silvera, et. al 2003). As Amanda Sloat and the Enlargement Gender and Governance team note (2005), in the socialist transition countries, sexual equality was a non-issue. That the differences between men and women were important was not officially recognized. Hence going to gender is a very large step, let alone adapting policies which are based on assumed common understanding of the implications of the term.

A further issue around the terminology and its usage in practice is the issue of backlash. When a term has to be spelled out for users, the risk is that it can also be (side-wangled/ambushed) by the opposition. Much as Affirmative Action in the United States became a code word for African American interests, so too has mainstreaming in some circles become a code term for aggressive women wanting privileges. No one is fooled it seems. The attendance at mainstreaming conferences is almost invariably 90% female. Thus the very purpose, to bring men on board by use of terminology that does not explicitly refer to women seems to have been undermined by the vagueness of the term.

Mainstreaming as a transformative strategy demands letting the control of the tactic out of the hands of the experts and into the hands of normal practitioners. An immediate discovery in the initial years of promoting mainstreaming in government was that this was an extremely risky strategy. As noted above, the content and meaning of what gender mainstreaming implies in various settings was far from clear. Opponents to specific efforts for gender equality could hijack mainstreaming in a much more effective way than earlier equality efforts. They easily argued that mainstreaming was about letting everyone attempt to further gender equality in their work, and hence specific earmarked resources for gender equality or women’s issues would no longer be needed. This Machiavellian interpretation of the message came rather frequently from men. Another risk of handing over mainstreaming responsibility to a more general public was clearly and continually one of means. A single policy expert in a Women’s office could be much more effective (if perhaps in fewer areas) than the same means spread over 10 departments with each department having 1/10th of a staff position devoted to mainstreaming. From the start it was clear that transformation of the policy machinery would be a very resource intensive effort of cultural change, requiring means and a long term time frame. Miscomprehension either willingly or unconsciously undermined mainstreaming being taken seriously and leading to significant change.

Finally, the tight coupling of ‘gender’ and ‘mainstreaming’ as originally launched blocks fitting in other kinds of inequalities in a simple way. Most early formulations focus on gender as a fundamental difference needing specific attention. It is easy to agree with Squires (2004)
that the mainstreaming approach offers an opening in the eternal Equality/Difference debate. What has been much less explored is the potential that the gender mainstreaming approach might offer for other forms of ascribed difference such as ethnicity and race. The longstanding critique that European Women’s Studies is shockingly ‘white’ (Braidotti, Wekker, hooks, Essed) is even more relevant for the texts and applications of gender mainstreaming. A notable exception has been the experience in local government in the UK (Beveridge, Nott, Stephen 2000; Mackay 2000) and especially in Northern Ireland, (Dougherty) where gender mainstreaming was integrated with equal opportunity policy that took up various axes of discrimination and anchored policy screening with various groups from civil society. However, it has only been recently that the intersections with other forms of inequality produced or exacerbated by policy have become an issue in other countries. This is probably the greatest challenge for the future of mainstreaming, how to capture the multi-dimensionality of gender.

Weighing advantages and disadvantages

Do the disadvantages of mainstreaming outweigh the advantages for those working for gender equality? The very process of implementing gender mainstreaming creates a cadre of bureaucrats who may have a self-interest in seeing that their turf is maintained. This would argue that mainstreaming could have a long life ahead. Unfortunately, there are many indications recently that indicate that the disadvantages may be becoming more problematic. Some of the issues are not specific to gender mainstreaming but true for every policy. For example, ministers and political champions come and go. Party color has made a great difference for the situation in the Netherlands, for the developments in the UK, and for the structure of equal opportunity in Belgium. More importantly, however, are reconfigurations that occur on the international level. As we have seen above, the efforts in mainstreaming are deeply dependent on the role of international organizations. As we are primarily dealing with European cases, the developments in the European Union in recent years are particularly relevant for whether it is too late for mainstreaming.

RECONFIGURATIONS OF EUROPE

A number of changes in Europe have meant that the environment for gender mainstreaming is very different than ten years ago. First and foremost is the Enlargement process of the new 10 member states. In the EU of 15 there is already substantial diversity in approaches to gender mainstreaming. For the new EU members, adapting the Acquis on gender equality has been a difficult process, which according to many (Sloat 2004; EGG 2005; Bretherton 2001; Beveridge 2004) is still far from complete, let alone taking on as broad a concept as gender mainstreaming in a context where sexual inequality is a non-issue.

A second major change is the new legal basis for gender equality but also for other forms of equality or non-discrimination (in the proposed constitution and in the Treaty of Amsterdam-Article 13 and the associated Racial Equality Directive and Employment Equality Directives)

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which are now passed into law. This has required a restructuring of the staff and location of equality issues in the European institutions. A particularly challenging development has been the launch of the ‘For diversity, against discrimination’ campaign in a 2001-2006 action program (European Commission 2004). The face of this campaign, launched in June 2003, and its implications are worthy of an extended analysis by gender specialists. For many gender activists, couching gender equality in ‘discrimination’ clothes seems like a backwards step, which undermines all the positive effort reflected in the discussion around gender mainstreaming as transforming gender relationships.

The reconfiguration has also affected the actors in civil society who are now grouped in stronger interest organizations and in the Social Platform and meet regularly across issues such as gender, sexuality, race, poverty, disability, and age (Social Platform 2003). This could imply competition, but could also serve to create a critical mass and higher levels of professionalism. A particularly important new theme is provided by the political challenges of migration and multi-cultures. Issues around racism and migration have traditionally been of low priority for the European institutions. If the legal basis for considering gender equality was weak, the basis for considering non-citizens and the social issues of racism and xenophobia were non-existent. Further the member states showed little inclination to cede this issue to the EU level. This has changed radically in the last few years (EU interview 1 2005). The new treaty basis on discrimination provides legal grounds to pursue ethnic discrimination. Further, public events in many member states (murder of Theo Van Gogh and Pim Fortuyn in Holland, rise of the Far Right in Belgium, headscarves in France and Germany, legalization of labor immigrants in Spain, rise of anti-Semitic events) spur member states to look for answers. They reportedly also pressure for a common European solution to these issues.

From the vantage point of gender equality, there are issues for concern. In the drafting of the directives on racial equality there was an attitude that ‘gender’ is already adequately addressed. The European Women’s Lobby was forced to fight to obtain coverage equivalent to the racial equality directive and inclusion in the service directive. The lack of civil society trans-issue alliances has meant that there has been resentment and competition rather than the necessary consensus behind the new legal environment, where gender often seems to be forgotten. An investigation of texts circulated in the ‘For Diversity, against Discrimination campaign’ during the first years of applying Article 13 indicates that rather than seeing gender as an issue that permeates all equality identities, it is sometimes left out entirely. A quantitative investigation of this would surely be revealing. A top officer in the new unit responsible for ‘diversity’ contacted for an interview in our ongoing project stated categorically that she ‘didn’t do gender’ (EU interview contact November 2004) and an informant in the Commission noted that there was considerable rivalry between the former gender equality unit and the new responsibilities around racial and other equality issues during the transition to the new Commission in the summer of 2004.

Structurally, social movements have changed in this context due to pressures from the EU institutions and pressures from within. They are more established and professional, frequently funded by the EU itself and increasingly organized on a trans-national basis (Greenwood 2003, Cullen 2004). They are also both forced and also voluntarily approaching social equality issues in a trans-issue framework at the level of EU lobbying. However it is still...

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6 Community Action Program to Combat Discrimination 2001-2006 COM (1999) 567 final. The program aims to evaluate the extent of discrimination in the Union and the effectiveness of measures against it, build capacity of actors at national and European level, and to promote the values of anti-discrimination to practitioners and opinion-formers. Most visible have been awareness raising campaigns.
early to talk about a common vocabulary. Again, mainstreaming is at risk as it crosses ‘issue-identity group’ boundaries. If gender mainstreaming was ill-understood by women’s movement activists, what will be the case when it is picked up by other groups? There exists the paradoxical situation of a lack of common vocabulary for equality and wide-spread borrowing using new meanings. The openness and vagueness of mainstreaming could then be its death knell. A further very important issue is the lack of civic society organization on deep transnational level on equality issues to provide the impetus to pursue a mainstreaming strategy with a more diverse content for gender.

WHAT CHANCE MAINSTREAMING IN THIS RECONFIGURED LANDSCAPE?

While gender mainstreaming seems to be found everywhere, is widely understood and has had implications for government practice at all levels in many European countries, no one would argue that utopia has been reached, and that a gender reflex is a normal part of policy making today in Europe. There is certainly a way to go, and in many settings there has been little progress beyond recognition of the term. Nonetheless, social activists see Gender Mainstreaming as a success, and want to copy it. Legal scholar Jo Shaw (2004) has written an extremely thoughtful report for the European Network Against Racism that reviews the EU experience with gender mainstreaming, and maps out what it would mean for other equality issues. Meanwhile, thanks to changes in the policy environment, the gender mainstreaming project must now work in a very different setting. To what extent can the experiences of mainstreaming, in the present stretched condition be utilized to deal with the still less defined grab bag issues of ‘diversity’ and discrimination? There are three areas for concern that should be kept in mind for future investigation:

First, the weaknesses present in resources and understanding in the application of gender mainstreaming can be expected to be multiplied in diversity land. Mainstreaming suffers from under-resourcing, an initial lack of clarity and of instruments, and resistance. It is now well-known that when some policy makers hear the word ‘mainstreaming’ they see feminist women, and thus there is also an established resistance. Attempting to widen the clientele using the mainstreaming strategy thus runs a high risk of seeing the weaknesses multiplied, and ultimately resulting in the derailing or failure of the entire enterprise. The Gender Mainstreaming exercise was preceded by several decades of concerted action on the part of the Women’s Movement and in many member states, also of significant policy activity from the 1970’s forward. For the Article 13 issues of discrimination, the point of departure is varied. Simply taking the case of racial discrimination and contrasting it with gender and sexuality, it is clear that the foundation in civil society groups against racism and connections with groups representing various ethnic and cultural formations is much weaker, and still not transnationally organized. It is not clear that mainstreaming or policy integration is always going to be the best way forward for the groups concerned.

Second, the logic of diversity and discrimination is quite different than the approach advocated in gender mainstreaming. Discrimination calls for social justice to redress individual malaise rather than pro-active attempts to change the relative position of groups. Thus, a major, and perhaps not only theoretical issue, is that of the transition towards diversity and anti-discrimination as terms. There is some evidence that these terms have their origins in an Anglo-American approach, and are certainly not carried by continental European actors. Myra Marx Ferree has a subtle analysis of the difference in political culture in the US and Europe that argues that the US approach of judicial contention makes little sense in the state-society relations that characterize continental Europe. Ferree writes primarily about the
German case, but it is clearly worthy of further investigation in terms of policy diffusion. In
the US both Affirmative Action and Diversity are primarily associated with people of color,
although women have profited from their provisions. However, one of the pluses of gender
mainstreaming is the avoidance of a victim approach and the basis in a theoretically founded
understanding of the roots of gender inequality. The diversity approach generally lacks that,
although Dutch scholars have provided some new directions (Essed and DeGraaf 2002). The
anti-discrimination approach does not attack the values that underlie discriminatory action. A
policy may be non-discriminatory, but still not promote gender or other equality (Bell 2005).
Gender mainstreaming in that respect is the stronger approach and is based on collective
relationships rather than individual grievances.

As Jo Shaw writes

(a remaining obstacle to the adoption of a broad-based equality and diversity
mainstreaming approach across the grounds identified in Article 13 EC is the continued
adherence in that context to the language of (direct and indirect) discrimination...a
broader based approach is needed  to deal with social issues such as racism and
xenophobia as much as it is needed to deal with inequality on grounds of gender (Shaw
2004: 24)

She continues that gender has succeeded (perhaps in part through the transformative nature of
mainstreaming) to achieve this broader based approach, while the other grounds for
discrimination continue to use the language of discrimination and complaint.
Evidence of the speed of the transition is on the Website of DG Employment consulted 11
April 2005. The index now lists Gender Discrimination rather than Equality, while the site
itself is still called Gender Equality. We see here how quickly the discourse can move. This
process has been strikingly described by insider Stratigaki in her work on the reconstruction
of equality and work from split parental-work to part time work (2005) and on the
transformation of the direction of Gender Equality initiatives in the Commission over a 15
year period.

Finally, civil society’s carrying power in trans-issue groups may be quite weak. Experience with
mainstreaming is that it is important that there is a powerful policy network supporting the
effort both within government and without. In the network analysis carried out by Wiercx and
Woodward (2004), there is a clear disjuncture between groups working on sexuality issues
and gender issues, and little basis for common cause at either the European or the Flemish
level. Thus far there is relatively little research about the extent to which civil society identity
interest groups are willing to create cross-issue alliances, and the research in Brussels also
indicates that within the same policy landscape groups have little knowledge of each other,
even if they have sympathy for each other’s causes. It is frequently noted that the academic
literature on ‘racism’ seldom refers to gender, while gender theory has taken attempted to take
race and ethnicity seriously (Maynard 1994). The same is so in social practice in much of
Europe. Few may be as frank as the following informant, but the quotation opens a very
important issue, the different Article 13 groups are not always natural nor knowledgeable
partners.

This respondent underlines a position of the women’s groups

-we are for rights of all minorities, but we think it is  wrong to couple the rights of
women to all minority groups because we are NOT a minority group, women are half
of the society, and you can find women in the minority groups...We have always been
ideologically opposed to  the reduction of women’s rights, and that does not have
anything to do with our respect for minority groups. Not exactly a good strategy—before one was active for women’s rights and had naturally and correctly attention for other minority groups. And now, now suddenly they are running everything together again. But that is not coherent, that asks for another approach, another expertise, and other means, as well as other networks for implementation and other partners in civil society (van Roemberg and Spee 2004:p. 55)

A worthy hypothesis for further study is that if there is so little overlap between women’s activists and sexuality movement, the policy overlap with race/diversity issues will be even less. Umbrella NGO’s themselves admit that they cannot watchdog all the issues of mainstreaming (Woodward and Wiercx 2004).

A note for optimism is the fact that reviews of implementation of mainstreaming in both Ireland and the UK indicate an openness for cross-sectional approaches (Braithwaite 2005). Also feminist theory, which was an important inspiration for gender mainstreaming, may provide new openings to continue with gender mainstreaming while including diversity. theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1997; Essed 1996; Lutz 2002; Sterk 2004) offer a theoretical base for the idea of potential in trans-issue mobilization. These authors all explore the idea of diversity with a power perspective, what Lutz names a matrix of domination. Utilizing inspiration from both identity theory and theories of racism, sexism and class, intersectionality offers a potential opening for continuing equality policy where gender does not disappear but remains in a prominent place as one of the most important axes of domination

In general respondents in our study and the van Roemberg and Spee study find it a good thing that the diversity principle or diversity thinking is getting a face, but it should not push out gender thinking. Flemish and European social activists are concerned about the future, as the protests about the change in accents in the Lisbon strategy indicates. Nonetheless, interviews with top activists indicate potential within the challenges of the new legal setting. People saw the combination of gender equality tools with new equality aims as a win-win situation. The main concern was that what has been gained for gender equality would not be lost in the new situation. It seems evident that if new actors can learn from the lessons of Gender Mainstreaming thus far, it will not be ‘Too Late’ for mainstreaming.

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