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Gender Mainstreaming as a Tool for Women Empowerment

I. Sivakumar *

***Abstract:** Gender mainstreaming is the process of bringing a gender perspective into the mainstream activities of government at all levels including in policies, programmes and projects. Mainstreaming can reveal a need for changes in goals strategies and action to ensure that both women and men can influence, participate in and benefit from development process. By bringing women's issues into their mainstream policies, programme and projects, they hoped that earlier problems of marginalization would be overcome. Gender mainstreaming builds on the knowledge and lessons learnt from previous experience with gender equality policies. Gender mainstreaming on the other hand, takes equality issues out of the isolation of gender equality machineries and involves more and new actors in building a balanced society.*

***Keywords:** Marginalization, Equality, Policies, Rights & Social Transformation.*

Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is the public policies concept of assessing the different implications for women and men of any planned policy action, including legislations and programme, in all areas and levels. Mainstreaming essentially offers a pluralistic approach that values the diversity among both women and men. Gender mainstreaming calls for positive action at different levels and requires commitment, capacities and resources. At the policy level, to ensure that the issues of gender equality becomes a visible and central concern in policy and planning. At the organizational level, to ensure that space and opportunities for learning, growth and contributing to organizational goals and created equally for women and men at all levels.

In efforts to promote the advancement of women and gender equality over the past few decades the approaches or strategies adopted have changed significantly. Initial efforts were focused on separate targeted activities for women. While many of these efforts produced positive results, particularly for the limited numbers of women who could benefit directly. This approach did not tackle the structural constraints to gender equality. Efforts in the 1970s shifted instead to integrating attention to women into all activities rather than keeping women on the sidelines of development. However the gains made through the integration strategy were limited by the fact that most efforts were undertaken too late in processes when all important decisions on goals, strategies and resources had already been taken. Equally constraining was the fact that integration was often taken to mean only

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increasing women's participation in development agendas already decided upon by others without taking their contributions, knowledge, priorities and needs into consideration. The potential for bringing about the types of structural changes required for achieving gender equality was therefore reduced.

In the 1980s a new approach evolved, the mainstreaming strategy, which aimed to make the goal of gender equality central to all development activities. The term mainstreaming came from the objective to bring attention to gender equality into the mainstream of development activities. An important element in the mainstreaming strategy is the ambition to give attention to gender equality from initial stages of processes so that there is potential to influence goals, strategies and resource allocations and thus bring about real changes in policies, programmes and other activities and make a real difference to gender equality.

According to United Nation Economic and Social Council, 1997 "Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences as integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefits equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality."

Gender mainstreaming is a proper strategy to address subtle forms of disadvantage or discrimination which nowadays are much more common than outright discrimination, something that, of course, has to be banned right away. Technically, women and men are each other's equals in today's academic world: women are free to enter the fields of research and education that interest them and the law forbids discrimination. But despite this formal equality, the academic arena is still characterised by numerous patterns of segregation between the sexes that can be largely traced to gender mechanisms.

Gender, as distinguished from sex, does not refer to the biological differences between women and men, but to the different roles and characteristics that are attributed to them in society. These roles and images are not fixed; rather they are historically and culturally determined. Most academic systems and structures as they exist today are based on models that were constructed centuries ago in a time in which universities were exclusively populated by men. They often reflect assumptions about the roles and tasks women and men have to perform in society that are seriously out of date and hinder a full use of human potential.

A key problem with current approaches to gender mainstreaming is the loss of the primary imperative and the driving force underlying gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is not simply a point to get to; it is a process. It is a process for ensuring equity, equality, and gender justice in all of the critical areas of the lives of girls and boys, women and men. As such, it is a moral and ethical imperative as

well as fundamental to human rights in all its forms. It must therefore become ingrained to all of the institutions and operations of the vital organs of power and decision making that promote and work toward the development of just and prosperous societies of development, poverty eradication, environmental protection policies, good governance and democracy.

There is an urgent need to revisit the concepts and frameworks of gender mainstreaming. The researcher seemingly have lost touch with general a category of analysis that focuses on relationship of power between women and men in terms of access to and ownership of resources and power dynamic. Gender mainstreaming, and the problems it now faces, are not simply an empirical phenomenon but an issues of deep value conflict, power politics, analytical tensions, contradictions and dilemmas bound up in different interpretations and expectations at the institutional policymaking and optional levels.

Basic Principles of Mainstreaming

Responsibility for implementing the mainstreaming strategy is system-wide, and rests at the highest levels within agencies, according to Carolyn Hannan, Director of the UN Division for the advancement of women. Other principals include:

- Adequate accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress need to be established.
- The initial identification of issues and problems across all areas of activity should be such that gender differences and disparities can be diagnosed.
- Assumptions that issues or problems are neutral from a gender-equality perspective should never be made.
- Gender analysis should always be carried out.
- Clear political will and allocation of adequate resources for mainstreaming, including additional financial and human resources if necessary, are important for translation of the concept into practice.
- Gender mainstreaming requires that efforts be made to broaden women's equitable participation at all levels of decision-making.
- Mainstreaming does not replace the need for targeted, women-specific policies and programmes, and positive legislation; nor does it do away with the need for gender units or focal points.

General Issues and Trends

Although each situation must be considered on its own merits, there are broad issues or themes which apply in many contexts.

Gender is an issue because of the fundamental differences and inequalities between women and men. These differences and inequalities may manifest themselves in different ways in specific countries or sectors but there are some broad patterns that point to questions that should always be considered. The elements below could be taken as starting points to explore how and why gender differences and inequalities are relevant in a specific situation.

- **Inequalities in Political Power**

Women are under-represented in political processes throughout the world. It is important to look at and understand gender differences in power within formal decision-making structures (such as governments, community councils, and policy-making institutions). Given the under-representation of women and the low visibility of women's perspectives, the fact that women often have different priorities, needs and interests than men is often not apparent. National, regional or sub-regional priorities, or even the specific needs and priorities of a community, are often defined without meaningful input from women.

- **Inequalities within Households**

Inequalities in negotiating and decision-making potential and access to resources have been documented within households. This has prompted questions about both research and policy which is based on the assumption that households function as units where each member benefits equally. The investigation of differences and inequalities at the household level is relevant to an understanding of a range of key issues, including the ability of women and men to respond to economic incentives, the design of effective strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention, and appropriate and equitable social security policies.

- **Differences in Legal Status and Entitlements**

Despite national constitutions and international instruments that proclaim equal rights for women and men, there are many instances in which equal rights to personal status, security, land, inheritance and employment opportunities are denied to women by law or practice. Addressing the resulting constraints for women is important as an end in itself, but it is also essential for formulating effective national strategies for increasing economic productivity and growth, reducing poverty and achieving sustainable resource management. Action to secure women's rights is not just a concern of a small group of women activists, but rather the responsibility of the international community as a whole.

- **Gender Division of Labour within the Economy**

In most countries, women and men are distributed differently across manufacturing sectors, between formal and informal sectors, within agriculture, and among occupations. Women are also more likely than men to be in low-paid jobs and "non-standard" work (part-time, temporary, home-based), and likely to have less access than men to productive assets such as education, skills, property and

credit. These patterns mean that economic trends and economic policies are likely to have different implications for women and men. For example, trade liberalization has had uneven impacts by sector, with consequences for both gender equality and economic growth that have only recently become the subject of investigation.

- **Inequalities in the Domestic/Unpaid Sector**

In many countries it is women who shoulder most of the responsibilities and tasks related to the care and nurturing of the family (including laundry, food preparation, and childcare, care of the sick and cleaning). In many countries in the South, women also make an important contribution to family food production and water and firewood provision. These tasks add to women's workload and are often an obstacle to engaging in political action or expanding economic activities. Recent research has sought to demonstrate the relationships between this "reproductive work" and the "productive" sector of the economy – in particular the dependence of all productive activities on the creation and maintenance of a healthy labour force through this work at the household level, and the way in which the reproductive sector can be affected by the consequences of economic policies related to trade, investment and public expenditure. There has been an important shift from focusing on how economic policies have affected welfare in a gender-specific manner, to illustrating how gender biases negatively affect the outcome of these same economic policies.

- **Violence Against Women**

Gender inequality is also manifested in gender-based violence, either by a woman's intimate partner (domestic violence), by an enemy army as a weapon of attempted 'ethnic cleansing' or in sexual exploitation through, for example, trafficking of women and girls.

- **Discriminatory Attitudes**

Gender inequalities are not only economic, but are also reflected in other ways that are difficult to measure and change. Ideas about appropriate behaviour, independence, and aptitudes are often grounded in gender stereotypes and vary for women and men. Ideas and practices tend to reflect and reinforce each other (the one providing the rationale for the other), which contributes to the complexity of achieving change.

Transformation by Mainstreaming

The failure to transform women's (and thus also men's) position has led policy makers and those in the equality field to question the impact of equal opportunities policies. They realised that society's structures and practices and the relationship between women and men needed a radical rethink to root out the deep-seated and often hidden causes of inequality. They named this tool, the gender mainstreaming approach.

Mainstreaming is not about adding a “woman’s component” or even a “gender equality component” into an existing activity. It goes beyond increasing women’s participation; it means bringing the experience, knowledge, and interests of women and men to bear on the development agenda. It may entail identifying the need for changes in that agenda. It may require changes in goals, strategies, and actions so that both women and men can influence, participate in, and benefit from development process. The goal of mainstreaming gender equality is thus the transformation of unequal social and institutional structures into equal and just structures for both men and women.

Gender Equality as the Goal – Gender Mainstreaming as the Strategy for New Millennium

The root cause of the problem lies in the social structures, institutions, values and beliefs which create and perpetuate the imbalance between women and men. The issue is not how to “add” women to various processes but to reshape these processes to create the space for women’s and men’s involvement. Gender mainstreaming starts with an analysis of the everyday life situation of women and men, it makes their differing needs and problems visible ensuring policies and practices are not based on incorrect assumptions and stereotypes. It also shows that women and men are not a homogenous group. In addition to their gender, their religion, ethnicity, education, disability, sexual orientation, class and so on also marks them, reinforcing or giving rise to further inequalities that need to be addressed under equal.

Gender equality is a goal that has been accepted by governments and international organizations. It is enshrined in international agreements and commitments. There are many ongoing discussions about what equality means in practice and how to achieve it.

It is clear that there are global patterns to inequality between women and men. For example, women tend to suffer violence at the hands of their intimate partners more often than men; women’s political participation and their representation in decision-making structures lag behind men; women and men have different economic opportunities; women are over-represented among the poor; and women and girls make up the majority of people trafficked and involved in the sex trade. These issues – and others – need to be addressed in efforts to promote gender equality.

Achieving greater equality between women and men will require changes at many levels, including changes in attitudes and relationships, changes in institutions and legal frameworks, changes in economic institutions and changes in political decision-making structures.

Gender mainstreaming recognises that initiatives specifically addressed to women, who often operate at the margins of society, although needed, are

insufficient on their own to bring major change. While many are innovative and benefit the women who participate directly, they do not affect in a sufficient way the services or resource distribution of main-stream policies and projects and so do little to reduce or end inequalities between women and men.

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