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## **Some reflections on gender mainstreaming and intersectionality**

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### **Introduction**

Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality are both approaches to forwarding gender equality. Gender mainstreaming is the strategy used to implement gender and development thinking. It is defined here as:

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an 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 benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is gender equality (ECOSOC 1997:2).

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) definition is used throughout the United Nations (UN) system and by its agencies, and is widely accepted by other multilateral and bilateral development organisations and NGOs. This definition is a compromise between a number of different perspectives and agendas. The result is inherent tensions and paradoxes that make gender mainstreaming simultaneously potentially transforming and potentially problematic. Nonetheless, mainstreaming remains widely accepted as the means to pursue gender equality. The first part of this paper is focused on gender mainstreaming.

Intersectionality is an approach to understanding the relationship between gender, race and other aspects of identity that are sources of systematic discrimination. The definition adopted here was:

An intersectional approach to analyzing the disempowerment of marginalized women attempts to capture the consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of subordination. It addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, class and the like ... racially subordinated women are often positioned in the space where racism or xenophobia, class and gender meet. They are consequently subject to injury by the heavy flow of traffic travelling along all these roads. (United Nations 2001).

Intersectionality is an approach to understanding the differences among women and among men and the ways that these differences interact to exacerbate marginalisation. It identifies subordination not solely as an issue of gender or race or class inequalities, but as a location where there are often simultaneous and compounding relationships of subordination. Intersectionality offers potential as a framework for contextual analysis that may improve development outcomes for women by ensuring that particular groups of women are not excluded in policy and practice. This is explored further in the second part of this paper.

### **Gender mainstreaming**

Gender mainstreaming was adopted by the UN as the key methodology for achieving gender equality following the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. This was endorsed by the Platform for Action (PFA) (United Nations 1995) and outlined

as the approach that government, UN and other actors should take in the implementation of the PFA.

Gender mainstreaming is a political process that alters the balance of power; it is inherently 'complex and resistance will come in many forms' (Schalkwyk et al. 1996:5). Power is challenged not only because mainstreaming promotes women as decision makers, but also because it supports women's collective action in redefining development agendas. Thus, gender mainstreaming has the potential to be transformative in nature, changing the dominant paradigms in which we work.

Jahan (1995:13) categorises mainstreaming approaches as 'integrationist' and 'agenda-setting' or 'transformative'. The integrationist approach involves broadening the dominant paradigm to fit women 'in' without directly challenging power structures. The agenda-setting approach emphasises the transformative power of gender mainstreaming whereby women start to affect and alter the direction of the mainstream, rather than be submerged by or integrated into it. It is generally accepted that mainstreaming will only truly address the logic of inequality when it enables transformation of structures and relations (Beveridge and Nott 2002:300)

The essence of gender mainstreaming thus makes it a challenge to implement. The task is formidable not only because of the inherently political nature of its transformative potential, but because of the challenge of scale in terms of range and the nature of change required (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002).

Realising the potential of gender mainstreaming requires significant and systematic change. Experience to date suggests that the move from policy to practice has been challenging. Across the UN system and in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labor Organisation (ILO), the World Bank, government aid providers such as AusAID and NGOs, gender and development (GAD) policy and strategies have varied in their impact, but all have fallen short of the articulated goal of gender equality (see Riley 2003). In most cases, implementation has also fallen well short of declared policy.

Key issues that emerge from an overview of experience to date include:

- the common reality of partial implementation — making it difficult to determine definitively if the problem lies in gender mainstreaming as a strategy, or in the inadequacy of its implementation to date;
- the challenge of integrating mainstreaming into existing workloads, given its scope;
- the need for, and limits to, conceptual clarity;
- the need for further work on what constitutes good gender mainstreaming practice and good gender equity outcomes;
- the importance of appropriate and practical analytical frameworks and tools;
- the key role of training, at all levels, so people 'see' gender; and
- the importance of specific individual responsibility and accountability at all levels.

Jahan's early (1995) study on women in development (WID) and GAD policy implementation in the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), UNDP and the World Bank identified a number of organisational-level weaknesses, including lack of accountability measures, lack of tracking of policy implementation and gaps between mandates and resources. Jahan stressed the importance of clear policy objectives to achieve

outcomes. In a similar vein, AusAID's GAD Review found that confusion between WID and GAD methodologies affected the 'enabling GAD environment' (AusAID 2001).

Some assessments see significant barriers to change as inherent in large organisations (Schalkwyk et al. 1996:33). Others see hierarchical organisational structures and workplace cultures as obstacles to policy implementation (see Longwe 1999; Goetz 1997; del Rosario 1995). But there are also a number of texts on 'how to' successfully gender mainstream organisational change (see Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999; Macdonald, Sprenger and Dubel 1997). Political will within organisations, as well as ability, affects the degree to which they assist in building the capacity of staff to implement a gender mainstreaming strategy.

The broader operating environment also influences organisational priorities. Donors often fund short-term development projects (for example, three years) with an emphasis on delivering concrete, measurable outcomes. Measurable change in terms of gender equity may take longer to manifest and outcomes are often less tangible and more difficult to quantify. Short-term, outcomes-driven development models can make mainstreaming gender less of a priority. Changes underway to lengthen time frames make possible the wider review of tools to better capture incremental change.

Deeper questions about the usefulness of mainstreaming as a strategy persist and influence commitment. Some feminist writers challenge the development mainstream per se and thus see gender mainstreaming as fundamentally flawed (see Porter and Judd 1999; Brownell 1999). Other recent critiques argue that GAD does not integrate 'other' voices into its theoretical framework, although some authors note that GAD does have the space and flexibility to include indigenous voices (Rathgeber 1995). Some point to the challenges of successfully involving men into GAD projects as indicative of the overall challenge of mainstreaming (Roche 1999; Chant and Gutmann 2000). Queries about the adequacy of tools and knowledge, or the value of 'good' gender mainstreaming rightly raise doubts and concerns, even among those who are very committed to gender equality. However, they also provide cover for limited commitment.

There is a paradox in the immense amount of information and training available for institutionalising gender mainstreaming, apparent institutional acceptance through policy directives, and the outcomes achieved. In-house multilateral, Northern NGO and national government audits and reviews all suggest policy outcomes are not as intended. The tendency to shelve difficult reports in turn limits their capacity to inform institutional change (Hunt 2000). Organisational learning is also mediated by the internal tendency towards caution when individuals and organisations worry that honest identification of areas for improvement will have negative ramifications. NGOs, commercial firms, bilateral and multilateral agencies continue to 'speak of gender mainstreaming', tick boxes and guess percentages of budgets allocated to women and men.

There is a spectrum of views on the experience with gender mainstreaming. At one end it can be argued that the challenges and learnings of recent years are an inevitable part of implementing a new strategy that is far-reaching in its vision and in the scale of change required. At the other end are arguments that gender mainstreaming is an inherently flawed approach to gender equity that threatens to 'disappear' women into the mainstream rather than empower them.

At the same time, as reviews confirm the challenge of implementing existing strategies, there are calls for gender mainstreaming to extend its scope. Although gender and development is founded on a recognition of difference, gender analysis is, in the main, focused on differences *between* genders and does not sufficiently account for the differences *among* women. Some argue that this failure to distinguish gender from

other aspects of identity such as class, religion, race, ethnicity, age, ability, caste, sexuality, and location slows the transformative potential of the mainstreaming approach (Kerr 2001). And it is problematic over the long term to pursue a strategy that locates the primary basis for poverty and exclusion in gender. Mainstreaming must eventually incorporate a broader agenda that accounts for other avenues that constitute and regulate difference (Beveridge and Nott 2002:311).

## **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a concept that seeks to acknowledge the impact of multiple identities and discriminations on women's and men's experiences. Proponents argue that the differences among women as a class and men as a class are such that effectively pursuing gender equality necessitates development of more holistic models and analyses that integrate other dimensions of discrimination. This need not complicate the gender mainstreaming agenda, but, rather, make it more relevant and more inclusive of other factors that inform and mediate women's and men's experiences differently. But it does present the immediate challenge of how to learn from the experience of a decade of mainstreaming while engaging with intersectionality as an approach that may help overcome some of mainstreaming's weaknesses.

Critical to the development of ideas about intersectionality is Crenshaw's (1991) exploration of the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of colour, and argues that the experiences of women of colour are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism. Various other writers have explored the failings of gender analysis to comprehend racial and class divisions among women (Marchand and Parpart 1995; Mosse 1993).

Given this, the growing number of development organisations adopting a rights-based approach to development over a gender mainstreaming approach could be perceived as a more holistic and promising approach. Kerr (2001) argues that it is within this context that an intersectional analysis of identities such as race and gender can inform human rights approaches, particularly given perceived tensions between respect for diversity and recognition of the universality of (women's) human rights.

Nevertheless, intersectionality is still primarily used to frame the experience of Black women in the global North. These limits were acknowledged by the editors of the 2002 *Feminist Economics* special issue on gender, colour, caste and class, whose aim was 'to advance the limited, sometimes parochial, dialogue about the intersection of race and gender' (Brewer, Conrad and King 2002:9).

There is as yet limited discussion of intersectionality in terms of class/economic status and race and gender in the global South. If an intersectional approach is to be useful in the development field, it needs to be informed by the experiences and views of women in the South. We need to know how understanding the situation of an HIV-positive woman living in South Africa as an intersection between gender, race and HIV status would affect development work.

There has been some development of intersectionality thinking, models and implications through a series of recent international meetings. In the lead up to the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa, the UN Division on the Advancement of Women, in collaboration with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) held an Expert Group Meeting in Zagreb, Croatia, 2000. Its aim was to discuss how the gender-related dimensions of racial discrimination could be incorporated in the WCAR process.

Three expert papers were presented, including one by Crenshaw (2000), proposing an intersectional approach to gender and race discrimination. Building on her earlier work, Crenshaw argues that intersectional subordination is often invisible, with women who experience multiple forms of discrimination being inadequately addressed by either gender or race discrimination frameworks; the result is likely to be either over-inclusion or under-inclusion. Over-inclusion occurs when a problem is presented as gender subordination without consideration of the simultaneous racial or ethnic subordination (for example trafficking). Under-inclusion occurs when a subset of women experience a problem that is not seen as gendered, because it is not the experience of women from the dominant group (for example sterilisation).

Crenshaw seeks to capture both *dynamic* and *structural* causes of multiple forms of subordination. To explain this, she uses the metaphor of roads and traffic. The roads are the axes of power/subordination (such as patriarchy, racial hierarchy and class system) that *structure* the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities and classes in the social/economic world. The traffic on these axes/roads is made up of the specific acts and policies that create burden, or the *dynamic* aspects of disempowerment. Marginalised women are located 'in the cross roads' where two or more axes intersect. Here they are subject to a heavy flow of 'traffic' from two directions, increasing the risk of 'accidents'.

The interaction between different aspects of identity can effectively disempower and silence. For example, the obligation women have to their social or national group can be an obstacle to organising for material change in their lives. Indigenous women may feel constrained to speak out against violence perpetuated by Indigenous men because of concern about being interpreted as betraying the groups' interest (Crenshaw 2000:21). Such women are affected by the privileging of social, ethnic or national interests over their gender needs. Women who criticise practices deemed 'traditional' or 'cultural' can find themselves in a similar predicament. Practitioners, advocates and Western feminists who ignore such challenges and needs leave women of colour at the crossroads to dodge racism and sexism. One consequence can be race/nation resistance to feminism and feminist resistance to an anti-racism focus.

### **Ways forward?**

There may well be benefits in developing a more comprehensive gender mainstreaming tool that not only accounts for the differential impact of policy and programs on women and men, but also accounts for other modes of subordination. This could result in a gender mainstreaming strategy that is more relevant and more contextual, more attuned to the reality 'on the ground,' and thus more transformative and more effective in achieving development goals.

At the same time, the experience of gender mainstreaming in the last decade suggests that efforts to expand ways of understanding and analysing are likely to be constrained in their impact if the barriers and challenges experienced to date are not addressed. We may well need a more comprehensive, holistic, integrated and responsive understanding of discrimination if efforts to improve gender equality are to be more effective. How might this be pursued in ways that also acknowledge and address the practical barriers and challenges experienced to date? Some questions emerging from issues outlined in this paper are listed below, to focus and encourage discussion about practical ways to improve gender equality.

### **Conceptual and policy issues**

1. How effective has gender mainstreaming been as strategy to achieve gender equality in the Australian context?
2. At the level of policy, are there additional steps that would help in putting declared policies into practice? What is required for these to happen?
3. Does the tension between the potential of gender mainstreaming to transform power structures and ways of working, and to absorb and 'disappear' women's voices and interests need to be addressed for substantial progress to be made towards gender equality?
4. Is the primary objective of gender mainstreaming as it is currently practiced to make programming more successful or to increase gender equality? Can one be achieved without the other?
5. Does gender mainstreaming adequately account for diversity amongst women? In what ways, if any, would an intersectional approach be helpful in broadening the mainstreaming strategy?
6. What learnings from the experience of implementing gender mainstreaming need to inform development of frameworks that better account for the intersection between different sources of discrimination?
7. What might be fruitful ways to assist the development of intersectionality thinking in areas such as religion, HIV/AIDS status, ability, and sexual identity.

### **Practice and implementation issues**

8. What are the roles of various actors in narrowing the gap between policy and implementation? Are there areas where collaboration between stakeholders would help?
9. To the extent that there are structural constraints within institutions implementing gender mainstreaming, what practical steps can be taken to address them? What approaches have people found helpful in negotiating the mainstreaming of gender into programming with partner governments or counterpart organisations?
10. In your experience are gender-focused activities more susceptible to budgeting constraints? What are the implications of this in your experience? What other options are available to improve budget outcomes for women?
11. Can we, currently, adequately define and describe good (or promising) practice and approaches to gender and development?
12. How can promising practice best be identified, modelled, replicated and shared?
13. What is a good gender mainstreaming outcome? Are existing monitoring and measurement tools adequate? To what extent do they provide a basis for developing tools that capture the interaction of various forms of discrimination?
14. What (tools, information, approaches) would make a practical difference to the capacity of non-specialists (desk officers, project workers, contractors) to give effect to gender equality policies?
16. What are the practical challenges to and possibilities for mainstreaming gender in areas such as country strategy documents, institutional strengthening programs, sector-wide programming, thematic programming, training, performance assessment and appraisal, tender assessment and contracting?
17. Financial audits are a mandatory requirement in many areas of development activity. What are the disadvantages, benefits, costs and practical challenges

associated with introducing more specific, mandatory requirements regarding gender performance.

These are certainly not the only questions to be asked, but are offered as a way to start unpacking the challenges of gender mainstreaming as a strategy to achieve gender equality.

## Note

This article is a condensed version of the background paper distributed prior to the International Women's Development Agency think tank, Brisbane, 3–4 July 2003. A full version of this paper was printed as part of the Melbourne University Private School of Development Studies Working Paper Series. The background paper did not purport to be a comprehensive overview of gender mainstreaming and intersectionality. Rather, it provided a brief background on these approaches, policy directions and, in the case of mainstreaming, experiences with implementation, to enable some shared knowledge of trends, issues and ideas, and provide a basis for wider discussion and collaboration. Two other documents were also suggested as useful background: UN 2001, *Gender Mainstreaming: An Overview*, Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, New York; and Marsha Darling, 2002, 'Human rights for all: Understanding and applying "intersectionality" to confront globalization', AWID Forum, 3–6 October 2002, Guadalajara, Mexico.

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