

Gender mainstreaming : The case of European Union policy making

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What strategies to bring about feminist Gender mainstreaming The case of European Union policy making by Målin Björk

Feminists have always searched of strategic ways to make politics work for increased equality between women and men. Sometimes the strategies have been softly persuasive, other times uncompromising, and oftentimes taking to the streets have been the only and principal political strategy to convince politicians to take political action for women's rights.

Gender equality mainstreaming, although a relatively new invention, has in a few years become one of the most predominant strategies, and a veritable buzz-word. Gender mainstreaming was first established at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, as a basic strategy to generate policies that could contribute to gender equality. What gender mainstreaming signify is that a gender perspective should be integrated into all policy domains, and at all stages of the policy making process, all the way from analysis, to actions, and in the evaluation.

A strategy that enables for a feminist perspective to enter into all policies ? On a theoretical level it all seemed so fine. Because as feminists we all now that sexism is not isolated to one sphere, but that gender inequalities are embedded in all of societies structures and policies. And in order to move towards a society where women and men are equal we need to acknowledge the omnipresence of sexist structures and behaviours. So how could we do anything else than welcome the launching of this strategy to integrate a gender perspective into all areas, from employment policies to economic policies, to environmental policies etc. ? And the political power people seemed to be convinced as well ! To such an extent, that the EU leaders, when negotiating the latest EU Treaty (the Amsterdam Treaty) inscribed the principle of gender mainstreaming as an obligation in all community policy making.

It has been almost seven years since the Beijing world conference, and five years since the Amsterdam Treaty was formulated, and it is about time to see what actually happened in reality.

Too good to be true ...

Ever since the Amsterdam Treaty was adopted, feminists have not wasted any time, but immediately started to remind policy makers about their commitments to gender mainstreaming. Analyses and recommendations are ambitiously drafted by feminists all over Europe, making suggestions and putting forward demands on how to ensure women's rights through integrating issues of equality between women and men on all EU policy agendas. However, what seemed utterly progressive on a theoretical

level has proven very difficult to actually turn into political practice. And in many cases gender mainstreaming has even become a barrier to make concrete decisions in favour of equality between women and men.

One of the major problems with gender mainstreaming when it was introduced, and still today, is its lack of definition. No one really had an idea of what it implied, and what the commitment actually required in every day politics. This has proven to be a somehow chronic problem of the gender mainstreaming strategy, and maybe it also explains why the heads of states and governments could so easily agree on the principle - because they all put a different meaning into the concept, or no meaning at all ?

Deception No 1 : Gender mainstreaming as an alibi not to take political action

One of the most problematic post-gender mainstreaming phenomenon is the absence of political action, while somehow at the same time giving the impression that action will be taken. The explanation is simple : instead of really raising women's rights issues in the political discussions, decision-makers have taken as a bad habit to loosely refer to "the principle of gender mainstreaming", saying that these issues will be taken into account later, and everywhere, thus arguing that gender equality objectives do not have to be included as priorities in themselves. This is how fighting the feminisation of poverty was erased as an issue on the EU agenda to combat poverty and social exclusion. This is also how gender equality issues were avoided when the European strategy to modernise social protection systems in Europe was agreed. And this despite the fact that it is thoroughly documented that social security systems in Europe are designed by and for men, which leaves women with little individual rights, and that this in turn is one of the main sources of socio-economic inequalities between women and men. Furthermore, this is how one-parent families (85% women) are made invisible in EU policy making, their situation apparently not a legitimate issue of discussion and political action.

Gender mainstreaming does not - on a theoretical level - dismiss specifications and the possibility to address women's rights, but it has obviously been used as a way of opting out from the discussion at too many occasions. One can argue, and I would to, that the main problem is of course a lack of political will. However, with a reference to gender mainstreaming the issue of lack of political will, does not even become a point of discussion, or a subject to raise. As the decision-makers don't hesitate to state again and again their good intentions to 'mainstream', they get away with it ; giving the impression of being concerned and of having political will.

Deception No 2 : An argument not to give resources to women's activities

Yes, the most feared effects of all have also been registered. Feminists were assured that the strategy of integrating gender equality issues into all policy areas would not result in an abandoning of specific programmes, funding, and political actions to strengthen women's rights. In practice, specific gender

equality bodies and programmes have been under constant attack since. At European level the Committee on Women's rights in the European Parliament was barely saved, and only after fierce protest from feminists.

The same discussions and threats were posed when it came to renew or not the European Action Programme for gender equality. The underlying argument being that specific programmes and gender equality generating bodies are less important, or even unnecessary, in light of the change of strategy.

Feminist know better. I - we - know that an abandoning of the specific funding programmes means no money for women's projects, and that a shutting down of specific strategic spaces where feminist policies are generated will result in women finding themselves dispersed and their efforts becoming more easily neutralised.

Deception No 3 : Gender mainstreaming as an argument to give money to men

As a part of, and accompanying the gender mainstreaming strategy, we have also seen the upsurge of gender equality work focusing on men, and especially men's gender roles. As a feminist it is hard to argue against the need to transform the oppressive gender. The problem is that in order to make male focused gender equality work 'attractive' to men, the strategy has been even further drained off feminist analysis - there is no longer talk about power relations, oppression, women's rights, and all these scary concepts. Instead a very soft version, emphasising men's importance, is promoted and this has been increasingly well received by the male dominated policy making bodies.

However, these initiatives risk being directly anti-feminist, when men can actually access funds to organise - as men - against women's interests on issues such as custody politics for example. System error : decentralising political decisions and technifying politics ? Another problematic feature of gender mainstreaming is the decentralisation of decisions that are in fact of very political character. If the political decision-makers for example content themselves with a reference to gender equality mainstreaming in the preamble of a decision on social protection, the decisions on what are the gender aspects of social protection systems are moved down (decentralised) to administrative and semi-political bodies. And in these institutions the decisions and debates are even less transparent than in political bodies. And how should we as feminist strategists appreciate the numerous new tools that are being promoted as means to actually and finally make reality of the strategy of gender mainstreaming ? I am thinking of so called gender impact assessments, the elaboration of gender indicators, models for ex-ante gender analyses, and gender budgeting for example.

Will these quite complicated policy tools, which often require a considerate amount of time and technical exercise, be the magic tools that will overcome lack of political will and generate political change ? Or will they keep us busy and divert our energies from going head on with our demands, and mobilise

support for essential political actions that we already can easily identify and have on our feminist agendas ?

I am not saying that these instruments are not useful, and should not be pursued. The issue at stake though is to make sure that we use our energy right and that we are not lured into a time and energy consuming process where in the end we still stand face to face with plain political resistance.

Giving more weight to transparent political struggles

Somehow both feminists and policymakers have been deceived by gender mainstreaming, but very differently. Policy makers were made believe that at last feminists and feminist demands for political action could be pursued without really challenging the system. Enthusiastic feminists were made believe that their analysis of the omnipresence of sexist structure and mechanisms had finally gained some acceptance among the political elite.

Although one could still argue for gender mainstreaming as a strategy that could be useful if pursued with increased political will and above all, concrete programmes for implementation, one must establish that this strategy does not replace politics.

Feminist reforms are not brought about through avoiding political debate in transparent places, but ensuring women's rights demand visibility to our political work, also in order to mobilise increased political support. This is why feminist must not forget about the range of possible strategies we possess - including taking to the streets !