

Research Article

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Practical and Theoretical Limitations of Inclusion of Gender Mainstreaming Strategy in Development Activities of Agencies

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Abstract

The paper examines some practical and theoretical constraints accompanying the inclusion of gender mainstreaming as a gendered strategy of equality in development by agencies. The paper employs the documentary method of research with reliance on the secondary sources of data collection. The thrust of the paper is that as a transformative strategy, gender mainstreaming transcends focus on women concerns only and embraces women and men equality matters. The incorporation of the concerns and experiences of both women and men into policy-making, planning and decision-making of organisations and governments as envisaged with the gender mainstreaming strategy holds the potential for huge success for development and society. Yet, the paper argues that the implementation of gender mainstreaming by agencies largely seems to lack proper coordination due to conceptual, institutional, operational, and political problems, making it difficult for the strategy to achieve the expected outcome. The paper recommends that reaching a consensus on the concept of mainstreaming and its approaches among stakeholders and a radical reorganisation of the institutional and political structures of organisations are central to achieving the gender equality goal of mainstreaming.

Keywords: Transformative, Discrimination, Inequality, Social justice, Women, Equality

1. Introduction

Women are crucial to development (Bradshaw, Castellino and Diop, 2013). But women are marginalised in the development arena. In politics, women are under-represented in appointment and elective positions. In the economy, their works are undervalued and unaccounted (Aliu, 2010). Besides, women access to power and resources are hindered by socially constructed gender relations that perpetuate their subordination to men in development (Aliu, 2010). However, the plight of women varies globally; with tremendous improvement in the conditions and positions of women in developed societies compared to women in developing countries.

The unequal power relation between women and men is fundamental to explaining the marginalisation of women in development. The Gender and Development approach is considered the proper perspective to promote equality. It focuses on the issue of power relations between women and men. UNO (2002) maintained that gender equality in all spheres of development is a basic human right and social justice issue. Besides, it is central to achieving sustainable development. Based on this understanding, governments and development agencies have made commitments to integrate gender perspectives into their policies and projects.

Gender mainstreaming is one of the several gendered strategies that have been adopted over the years to ensure equality in development. Gender mainstreaming is within the Gender and Development Approach. Feminists and development agents regard mainstreaming as the most important strategy with the potential for achieving gender equality. As a transformative strategy, it transcends focus on women concerns only and embraces both women and men equality matters. Therefore, gender mainstreaming is broader in scope when compared to strategies of the Women in Development (WID) approach of the 1970s. The WID strategies mainly concentrated on women and their inclusion into the development process. They established special projects and programmes that would make women active participants in development. Yet, the issue of gender inequality central to the exclusion of women in development was neglected.

The gender mainstreaming strategy incorporates the concerns and experiences of women and men into policy-making, planning and decision-making of organisations and governments. The goal of mainstreaming is gender equality (DFID, 2009; UNO, 2002; Davids, Van Driel and Parren, 2013). The Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth UN International Women Conference in 1995 established gender mainstreaming as a global equality strategy. The Conference identified education, poverty, economy, politics and human rights among others as critical areas requiring mainstreaming. There is a consensus among development actors and feminists that mainstreaming has made little progress in these areas.

Gender mainstreaming is complex and contested both in theory and practice (Walby, 2003: 2). In theory, the amalgam of concepts it embraces are nuanced and fluid in their meanings and applications. Therefore, conceptualising gender mainstreaming is difficult. Similarly, the goal and strategies to achieving gender mainstreaming remain unclear. In practice, it is overwhelmed by institutional, operational, cultural, political and procedural constraints. Consequently, the implementation of gender mainstreaming lacks proper coordination.

Besides, many agencies that have adopted mainstreaming have transferred the responsibility for integrating and implementing gender concerns from gender experts and units to everybody in the organisation. The aim is to deepen and make visible gender inequality concerns across organisational structure. However, this trend is contrary to the position of the global framework on mainstreaming. The Beijing Platform for Action did not encourage the replacement of gender experts and specialist gender units in the mainstreaming of gender equality (UNO, 2002: vii). Undeniably, specialist gender units possess the requisite expertise and competence that makes them accountable for gender equality outcomes.

The capacity of mainstreaming to ensure gender equality is positive (Davids, Van Driel and Parren, 2013). However, beset by constraints and challenges, it has made limited success in overturning the entrenched culture of marginalisation of women in development. While a lot of criticisms have been expressed in this regard, gender mainstreaming has undoubtedly highlighted the adverse impact of gender inequality on women. Also, its adoption has consistently put the marginalisation of women on the front burner of global gender and development discourse.

The paper seeks to discuss the theoretical basis for the adoption of gender mainstreaming by many agencies and the critiques relating to its theoretical and practical limitations. To address these issues, the paper is divided into five sections. Section one, which is the introduction is followed by section two which conceptualises gender mainstreaming. Section three reviews the approaches to gender mainstreaming. Meanwhile, section four of the paper critically reviews gender mainstreaming activities and trends in the discourse. In so doing, it highlights the theoretical basis for mainstreaming, the contestations, constraints and criticisms that have trailed and continued to limit the theory and practice of gender mainstreaming. Section five is the conclusion.

2. Conceptualising Gender Mainstreaming

The concept of gender mainstreaming is a contested one both in theory and in practice. It is a concept that is widely used but highly misunderstood. Basically, gender mainstreaming contains certain concepts that are nuanced and fluid in meaning and application. The deconstruction of these concepts broadens the understanding of the complex nature of gender mainstreaming. The two concepts of interest in this context are gender and gender equality.

The Council of Europe (2004:8) defines gender as:

A socially constructed definition of women and men. It is the social design of a biological sex, determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in society

and public and private life. It is a culture-specific definition of femininity and masculinity and therefore varies in time and space.

The definition by the Council of Europe highlights further the implications of the socially constructed relations. First, it engenders a power relation in the society. This gives men more access to resources and power and strengthens their domination over women in development. Second, it underscores the important role societal structures and institutions play in producing and reproducing the inequality arising from the social relation. Third, it underscores the import of time and space to the dynamic and complex nature of gender.

Gender equality is a problematic concept. Walby (2003: 2) reveals that the contestations surrounding gender equality revolves around how to reconcile the gender equality notions of 'sameness', 'difference' or 'transformation' with the practice and theory of embedding or abstracting 'women' and 'gender'. These gender equality notions form the basis of the equal treatment perspective, women's perspective and gender perspective identified by Mackay and Bilton (2003: 25) and Booth and Bennett (2002). The concern and approach of the three perspectives are different. The equal treatment perspective focuses on the equal treatment of women and men. There is the possibility for women to be subjected to discrimination with this perspective. The women's perspective views women as victims of marginalisation that deserved to be treated differently. Women are vulnerable to token gestures and manipulation from the male dominated system with this method. The gender perspective is concern with integrating gender experiences into development. This notion of equality represents the essence of mainstreaming.

Nonetheless, the goal of the three perspectives is the attainment of women concerns and gender equality in development. Therefore, it becomes necessary that the policies and programmes of these perspectives are harmonised to achieve the goal of equality. However, most development actors in practice promote these perspectives separately and in competition as if their goal is wholly different. This creates conceptual conflict and makes it difficult to get the perspectives to complement one another. Thus, development organisations seem confused on the appropriate concept of gender equality to adopt in the mainstreaming process. This leads to the problem of lack of clarity of goal which affects implementation of mainstreaming (Mackay and Bilton 2003:25).

Meanwhile, Derbyshire (2002) argues that gender equality is the recognition that men and women have the rights to participate in development and live fulfilled lives. It goes beyond equal numbers of men and women in all activities or treating all men and women the same way. It is the acceptance that men and women have different needs, concerns and aspirations and both have the rights to fulfil them unhindered and unrestricted by society. Equality between women and men is critical to empowering women and reducing poverty (Lawal, Ayoade and Taiwo, 2016).

The most widely used definition of gender mainstreaming is the one given by the United Nations Economic and Social Council:

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 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 to achieve gender equality (UN ECOSCO, 1997:28).

Evidently, the theoretical basis underpinning the strategy as reflected in the definition above is the realisation that the infusion of gender relations concerns in all levels of development is essential to the socio-economic and political development of the society. It is the key to addressing gender inequality, injustice and discrimination in development. Mainstreaming makes visible gender concerns and thereby enhances women and men unhindered access to power and resources. It is a process that aims to complement and not substitute existing equality methods, gender experts and specialist gender units. The transformation of organisational and government policies and projects towards gender equality is at the heart of the strategy.

3. Gender Mainstreaming Approaches

Significantly, the tensions generated by the 'gender equality' and 'mainstream' strands are manifested in the approaches of mainstreaming (Walby 2003:3). The two gender mainstreaming approaches are the agenda setting approach and the integrationist approach. Agenda setting to Walby (2003:4) 'is the transformation and re-orientation of existing policy paradigms, changing decision making processes, prioritising gender equality objectives and re-thinking policy ends'. Jahan (1995: 13) and Porter and Sweetman (2005:3) describe agenda setting as a radical approach that envisions the overhaul of the development agenda to accommodate gender concerns and experiences. Agenda setting involves a gender analysis of the inequalities between women and men and an understanding of the dynamics between gender relations and race and class so that inequality can be properly contextualised.

The integrationist approach to mainstreaming ensures that gender equality needs are included into development programmes without them changing the existing development paradigms. Hence, women equality goals become incorporated into organisational projects but this does not alter the main concern of the projects (FES and CRTD-A, 2005: 11). Women as the focus of this approach are considered as critical to development and thus require special projects driven by development agencies to integrate them into development. However, development organisations as Elson (1991) contends are male biased. Besides, the impact of the approach is minimal. In the quest to get gender mainstreaming to be acceptable to organisations, the approach tend to ignore the unequal power relations between women and men and underestimates the importance of women in the economy of developing societies.

Mainstreaming approaches are crucial to ensuring the incorporation of gender equality objectives into public policies and projects. The failure to institutionalise mainstreaming is not unconnected to the cultures, structures, procedures and ideologies of organisations which are in opposition to the transformative agenda setting approach. Thus, development agents lack the autonomy to adopt the approach they desire. Porter (1999) maintains that feminists are caught in the dilemma of fulfilling their preferred desire for an agenda setting approach or going against the organisations preference for the integrationist approach that is deemed to be less radical. Feminists favourably disposed towards the agenda setting approach have in the face of low political commitment and strong resistance from the men dominated management of organisations implemented the politically acceptable integrationist approach.

Indeed, the preference among development organisations for the integrationist approach in which gender concerns are watered down and treated as women affairs rather than as the solution to change in power relations is an attempt to depoliticise the feminist content of the radical agenda setting approach. Consequently, 'engendering' development to address gender inequality concerns has led to a shift in policies and programmes away from women to women and men and back to men. This has reversed some of the gains achieved from targeted projects implemented under Women in Development (Baden and Goetz, 1997: 3 & 7). Hence, many feminists have come to perceive mainstreaming as a ploy to cause hitherto committed development activists to soften their uncompromising stance on the marginalisation of women (Makibakba, 1995:5).

Nevertheless, an overhaul of the existing organisational impediments is necessary for the success of the approaches to mainstreaming. Mainly, there is need for robust political support and adequate funding. Moreover, extensive experience and knowledge of gender analysis and relations is necessary. Similarly, collaboration among development agents that will facilitate exchange of resources, ideas, skills and information tools are required for successful mainstreaming. Evidently, gender mainstreaming is burdened by the lack or low presence of these requisites.

4. Gender Mainstreaming Activities: Trends, Constraints and Criticisms

Gender mainstreaming activities are promoted by governments, the United Nations and development organisations. Most of these organisations have adopted gender equality concerns as part of their policies and projects. Jahan (1995) sums up mainstreaming activities into institutional and operational mainstreaming. A review of these activities is important so as to appreciate the task

that mainstreaming of gender entails and the constraints and criticisms it continues to grapple with.

Porter and Sweetman (2005:4) regards institutional activities as factors and forces that shape the inside workings of development organisations. It includes the policies, structures, and procedures of the organisations. Undeniably, the internal dynamics and structures of development organisations do undermine the process of institutionalising gender concerns. Goetz and Sandler (2007:11) and Standing (2007:103) affirm that the gender equality goal of mainstreaming has been lost due to bureaucratic resistance, political and management bottlenecks in organisations which impede the activities of feminists. Consequently, Miller (1998) argues that the goal of mainstreaming gets distorted and diluted in the course of integration into organisational policy. Besides, political interest and value on gender matters diminishes as such issues pass through the structures and hierarchy of development organisations (Pearson, 1999). Interestingly, organisations do commit much resources and energy to the procedures of incorporating mainstreaming into their internal performance. Sometimes they do this at the expense of their operational activities. However, these constraints impede their commitments and eventually undermine the goal of gender equality.

The focus of the operational activities is on how to change the programmes of work in which the organisations are involved. A review of the operational activities of gender mainstreaming reveals that development practitioners are confronted with enormous challenges. In the absence of strong political commitment on the part of organisations coupled with lack of gender research, analysis and training; mainstreaming programmes and projects are designed and imposed on the people without due consultation. This breeds resentment and makes acceptance of the programmes difficult. Moreover, there is contestation about the ownership of the process. Gender mainstreaming is driven by multilateral agencies from the global North. The beneficiaries who are mostly people from the global south view it as an imported strategy and treat it with suspicion (Faisal, 2011; Moser and Moser, 2005; Mehra and Gupta, 2006; Porter and Sweetman, 2005; Wendoh and Wallace, 2005; Davids, Van Driel and Parren, 2013).

Furthermore, gender relations, race, class and ethnicity are mutual reinforcing factors that explain poverty of women in developing countries (Cornwall, 2001; Desai, 2005; Porter and Sweetman, 2005:4). However, the challenge for mainstreaming is that most activities aimed at redressing the inequality problem in developing countries are based on the notion that gender inequality is the only cause of poverty among women. Consequently, projects designed on this basis fail to make the desired impact because they neglected the multifaceted dimensions to the cause of poverty. Besides, operational mainstreaming does not have the effective mechanism for supervising and assessing the effect and achievement of projects on beneficiaries.

Essentially, the practice among many agencies that have adopted mainstreaming is that the responsibility for integrating gender concerns rather than being restricted to specialist gender units becomes that of everybody. Thus, development policies and projects at every level of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation manifest gender concerns and experiences. This makes everybody to be responsible and accountable for gender outcomes. This is in tune with Walby (2003:2) assertion that some people view gender mainstreaming as mainly a political process of 'gender democratisation' in which everyone has to be a partaker.

However, the Beijing Platform for Action which established gender mainstreaming as a global strategy of development did not envisage the replacement of specialist gender units. In fact, it called for a dual strategy in the promotion of gender equality. The United Nations (2002: vii) states that mainstreaming does not in any way imply the preclusion or exclusion of gender specialists and specialist gender units. Similarly, organisations and countries that have adopted gender mainstreaming do so with the knowledge that they would not replace other equality strategies and gender units. But evidence among development agencies shows a huge gap between policy commitments and implementation.

Therefore, the debate is rife among feminists and development agents on the insistence of many agencies to exclude gender experts and specialist gender units in the mainstreaming of gender concerns. Some development practitioners argue that since the primary responsibility of gender experts and specialist gender units is the promotion of gender equality concerns, mainstreaming benefits from their expertise when they are given responsibilities in its

implementation (Mackey and Bilton, 2003: 27; True, 2006: 5). However, Hanna-Andersson (1995) argues for a catalytic role that does not hinder the diffusion of gender equality responsibility to nongender specific units from gender specialists and units.

The diffusion of responsibility for gender equality to everybody to the proponents will broaden the integration of gender concerns and make visible gender inequality in development. Moreover, it could be a relief to gender experts and units given their small nature and funding problem which might make the task of addressing gender inequality at all levels of the organisation a complex one. Understandably, the non-involvement of specialist gender units and experts in mainstreaming of gender concerns is not mainly due to the strong resistance from organisations. Hannan (2004: 6) contends that despite their wide knowledge of gender outcomes, gender specialists and units sometimes lack detailed records about each sectors and departments essential to the implementation of mainstreaming.

Meanwhile, the peculiar nature of specialist gender units is important in the argument. They have trained expertises that are knowledgeable and accountable for gender outcomes. The institutional and operational activities of mainstreaming are complex and highly tasking. It requires the involvement of those with the requisite knowledge, competence and dedication. Feminists in support of the maintenance of gender specialist units in mainstreaming argue on the basis that they provide opportunities for the requisite learning and training to develop the expertise in gender data analysis and methods (Staudt, 2003; True, 2006). Evidently, gender focal points and non-gender specialists entrusted with the responsibility of diffusing gender outcomes in place of specialist gender units in many organisations do not have the grounded knowledge and expertise needed for a successful mainstreaming.

The issue of responsibility and accountability is important in gender mainstreaming. Feminists and development workers contend that when gender mainstreaming is left in the hand of every one, the implication is that it becomes no one's responsibility. Moreover, scarce resources and efforts dedicated to women and gender units are wastefully used to supply score cards and checklists to teach non-gender experts. Besides, shifting the responsibility for gender mainstreaming to everybody has only led to the neglect of gender concerns in the planning, implementation and budgeting activities of organisations (Sandler, 2004; Goetz and Sandler, 2006). Similarly, the replacement of specialist gender units by agencies who have adopted mainstreaming creates a vacuum in terms of the effective handling of gender responsibility, programmes and outcomes they were responsible for prior to mainstreaming.

Moreover, an appraisal of the practice of mainstreaming among governments and global development organisations and agencies show that most organisations that adopted mainstreaming do so with the hope that it will be complemented by specialist gender units. In the study of 14 international development agencies consisting of bilateral and multilateral organisations, Moser and Moser (2005:14) demonstrate that all the organisations identified with the dual strategy of mainstreaming gender equality into all policies and projects alongside targeted actions for gender equality. Equally, most supported a combined approach in which all staff share the responsibility for gender mainstreaming, but are supported by gender specialists and units.

However, a close study of trends among countries and organisations confirms the contrary. Mehra and Gupta (2006: 5) and Verloo (2001) gave example of how the attempt by the Dutch government to mainstream gender in public policy lead to the closure and disappearance of gender equality policies and gender units from local governments. The development seriously undermined the goal of gender equality. In highlighting the Oxfam experience, Porter, Smyth and Sweetman (1999: 8) observe that specialist units are effective focal points for innovative work on gender equity. However, they argue that it 'can become a ghetto, where individuals are isolated and their work marginalised'. Apparently, the norm in many organisations is that specialist gender units are not empowered to function effectively. They are usually understaffed, not well funded and allocated small offices. They seem to exist in these organisations mostly to satisfy the formality of being a gender unit.

Furthermore, True (2006:6) reveals that the number of gender specialists units in global governance organisations particularly in security and trade are very few. For example, the United Nations Department of Peace Keeping Operations got its first gender advisor in 2004; four years

after Security Council Resolution 1325 on Gender, Peace and Security was adopted. The number of advisor and the length of delay are indeed instructive. The Department's 2005 progress report on gender mainstreaming is illuminating in this regard. The report states that 'the notions that gender advisors are catalysts in gender mainstreaming efforts and that gender mainstreaming is the responsibility of all staff have also failed to be universally accepted'(UN DPKO, 2005: 3). It also highlights the lack of impact of the mainstreaming strategy due to the non involvement of specialist gender units.

Specialist gender agencies and units are crucial to the success of gender mainstreaming. Moreover, Moser and Moser (2005: 16) contend that success in mainstreaming is highly dependent on the commitments and skills of gender specialists and units. They argue that if gender mainstreaming is the responsibility of all staff, gender concerns can be 'diluted and disappear' completely due to non-commitment. Corroborating this position, True (2006: 6) suggests that cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of local women by UN peace keepers in Bosnia highlight the need for specialist gender units. The subsequent increase in the number of gender units for the UN Peace Keeping operations seems to confirm the position.

Surely, gender mainstreaming, specific gender equality measures and specialist gender units are targeted towards women equality concerns. These different strategies are important to the realisation of the gender equality goal. The mainstreaming strategy should complement and not substitute them, especially in the wake of the tensions surrounding the concept of gender equality (see Council of Europe 1998: 9). Building on the above analysis, Hannan (2004:9) declares that many countries and agencies have realised the intricate relationship between the success of mainstreaming and the existence of specialist gender units. Therefore, the role of specialist gender units now includes supporting the management to implement mainstreaming. The emerging development is that the role of specialist gender units has been expanded to include catalysing, advising, training and supporting the efforts of non-gender specialists responsible for the promotion of gender equality. Similarly, they now allow existing equality measures and policies to coexist with and complement mainstreaming.

Despite the many constraints and criticisms, gender mainstreaming does have some achievements. In some developing countries like Rwanda and South Africa gender concerns are manifested in areas like education, poverty eradication and political representation with some measure of success. Besides, Faisal (2011) and March et al, (1999) posit that feminists and women organisations have in mainstreaming the global platform on which to confront gender inequality and discrimination in society. Mainstreaming has also widened transnational collaboration and alliances among feminists and women organisations. Nonetheless, the failure of mainstreaming to address the cause of the marginalisation of women in all spheres of development remains a major albatross.

5. Conclusion

Gender mainstreaming as a global equality strategy of development ensures that women and men have equal opportunity and prospect to power and resources. The mainstreaming of gender in public and organisational policies and projects helps to make visible and address the unequal power relations between women and men. Eventually, the potentials and talents of both women and men are harnessed for sustainable development. However, mainstreaming has been counterproductive in theory and practice. Both institutional and operational mainstreaming activities are constrained by the problems of conceptual confusion, low political commitments, bureaucratic and structural resistance, lack of gender analysis and training, inadequate funding, lack of effective monitoring and evaluation of projects and the replacement of gender equality policies, experts and specialists gender units in mainstreaming.

Consequently, the implications of the constraints on the theory and practice of gender mainstreaming have been far-reaching. The goal of gender equality critical to mainstreaming seems elusive. Many years after the Beijing Platform of Action, the marginalisation of women in all spheres of development is rampant. Gender concerns are being neglected in the planning, budgeting and monitoring processes of organisations. These organisations now complain of gender fatigue and mainstreaming has been reduced to ticking the box process. Equally, mainstreaming activities are

poorly implemented due to lack of accountability. Moreover, mainstreaming seems to have been hijacked by NGOS and professional women resulting in the exclusion of the rural women who on the account of their poverty and marginalisation should be the main target of the strategy.

Significantly, feminists and development agents are critical and disillusioned with the lack of progress. Kerr (2004: 1) condemns mainstreaming as a 'force that has totally undermined women's rights'. Sandler (2004: 3) denounces it as a 'strategy that has obscured and under-valued the significance of gender inequality'. The fact that mainstreaming appears to be losing the support of its main advocates calls for urgent measures to turn around its fortune. Undoubtedly, reaching a consensus on the concept of mainstreaming and its approaches, a radical reorganisation of the institutional and political structures of organisations, inclusion of gender experts and specialist gender units in the process and reassessment of the implementation of the strategy are fundamental to achieving the gender equality goal of mainstreaming.

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