

Gender Mainstreaming in an Insecure and Unequal World

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At the dawn of the 21st century, the international development community, spearheaded by the United Nations, concluded that development to date had not brought the promised reduction in poverty and inequality around the world. Member states agreed to support a set of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which promised to cut world poverty in half and to produce a more equitable, tolerant world by 2015. The third of the eight goals focused on promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, drawing on the growing commitment to gender mainstreaming articulated by the development community— an approach that promised to transform the gender order and to make “women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.”(ECOSOC 1997).

Yet despite this ambitious and lofty discourse, carefully crafted policies and generous commitments of money and institutional support, implementation of the third MDG has been disappointing, both in the scope of its aims and the achievements of its goals. This pattern of well-designed gender policies producing disappointing results is not new. Indeed, gender mainstreaming (GM) policies, trumpeted as the technical fix for operationalizing gender equality and women’s empowerment, have also only achieved disappointing results. Although some success stories can be identified— particularly the development of national machineries for women, some law reform, and increased participation of women in politics— the promise to change the gender balance in all economic, societal and political spheres is far from a reality around the world. Indeed, the third MDG’s promise that education will ensure greater access to quality employment and political participation for women at the highest levels has proven illusory in areas such as the Caribbean, where women greatly outnumber men in university education. Moreover, the dramatic rise in gender-based violence, in conflict zones but also in many homes, communities and work places around the world, demonstrates the limits of gender mainstreaming.

In an effort to address these undeniable shortcomings, development agencies and gender specialists have looked for answers in familiar places. The UNDP, for example, has funded two exhaustive evaluations of its gender mainstreaming programs. Both the 1996 and the 2006 evaluations identified lack of commitment by top management, insufficient training of the gender focal point experts and unreliable processes of monitoring and accountability as key elements impeding organizational commitment to GM. Numerous reports on gender mainstreaming have called for strengthened institutional commitment, developing the capacity of gender experts and improving monitoring and accountability. While a few agencies and scholars have raised the issue of deep-seated resistances to gender transformation, especially in institutions (Rao and Keller 2005), the “solutions” are depressingly familiar— more women’s activism, internal

negotiations, gender sensitive training, leadership for cultural change, greater financial support and stronger accountability.

Clearly, new ways of thinking and acting are going to be required to close the gap between gender mainstreaming policy goals and its praxis in both bilateral and multilateral, inter- and non-governmental assistance programming. For one, the rather triumphalist discourse of gender mainstreaming has presented gender transformation as a do-able, “technical” problem that can be overcome with sufficient determination and commitment. Potential resistances melt away in the optimism of this language, reinforced by neo-liberal assumptions promising that change can be effected through constructive engagement with rational state actors, supportive institutions and law-abiding citizens (Cornwall 2008, 159).

This very language of transformation and change has inspired two major approaches to gender mainstreaming: the strategy of inclusion, which aims to integrate women as equals into a world that excludes them; and the strategy of reversal/difference, which calls for greater acknowledgment, tolerance and inclusion for difference based on non-hegemonic gender identities and cultures. Neither seriously challenges the gendered status quo (Squires 2005). Indeed, Hilary Standing argues that gender transformation is a political process which should be left to the politicians. She wants to rescue gender mainstreaming from this impossible mission so it can foster realistic, doable progress in the lives of women and men (2007).

This call for a more limited, technical approach to GM is understandable given the fact that “despite decades of struggle, large parts of “the mainstream” in all our societies, including their androcentrism and male bias, remain stubbornly intact” (Woodford-Berger 2007, 131). Yet the argument that gender transformation should be left to politics ignores the daily struggles around gender, the everyday contestations over gendered assumptions and practices that are taking place in every corner of the world. They are also bleeding into institutions and structures, yet are often difficult to understand or control. The current epidemic of gender-based violence can raise despair (WHO 2002), but it also can be seen as a sign that we are in a period of potential change, where gender relations may either transform or harden into “traditional” patriarchal structures.

We are at a critical point, where policy and organizational practices can play a critical role in affecting change, especially around multilateral agencies and global coalitions. While gender mainstreaming policy and practice is limited by the social, economic and political contexts in which it plays out, the transformative approach to gender mainstreaming, which calls for problematizing “not (only) the exclusion of women, or men as the norm, but the gendered world in itself” (Verloo 2005, 346), holds much promise.

Well-crafted policies are not enough, but in a world where women and men are increasingly questioning their own certainties and through that, creating openness to risk that allows “another way of knowing and of living in the world” that expands “our capacity to imagine the human” (Butler 2004, 228), progressive policies, programs and politics can assist efforts to transform gendered assumptions and practices. These changes will of course be constrained by the complex, shifting nature of today’s multi-polar world, especially the increasing assertiveness of the emerging economies or BRIC s, which seems unconstrained by the exponential gender imbalance in the world’s two largest states: China and India. However, if gender mainstreaming can encourage new ways of thinking and performing gender, then its transformative goals should not be abandoned, as the promise of a new gender order may indeed be a possibility worth dreaming and fighting for around the MDGs’ elusive deadline of 2015.