



# Gender Mainstreaming: Can it Work for Women's Rights?

Number 3, November 2004

spotlight

Gender mainstreaming was meant to deliver women their equality, or so says the Beijing *Platform for Action* which refers to the term over 35 times. It was the process we embraced and vociferously fought for in the many meetings, negotiations and documents leading up to Beijing. Yet ten years later, not only is the Beijing *Platform for Action* taken seriously by few, gender mainstreaming is being widely criticized as a confusing conceptual framework at best and a force that has totally undermined women's rights at worst.

AWID chose to put together this issue in order to stimulate debate on how gender mainstreaming is understood, its impact and what we need to do about it. At this moment in history there is a growing clamor in women's movements for us to rethink our strategies in order to put all women's rights back on national and global agendas. We therefore asked four dynamic AWID members, all engaged with gender mainstreaming (and its effects) on a daily basis but in very different ways and places, to write their honest opinions about what has gone wrong. We then shared their candid views amongst them and had them respond to what their colleagues wrote.

Mariama Williams, Everjoice Win, Gerd Johnsson-Latham and Joanne Sandler offer insightful analysis and share eerily similar opinions. They provide some concrete suggestions on how we might get beyond this quagmire too. They also put out provocative views that need consideration. We invite you therefore to add your opinion to this important debate by writing us at [awid@awid.org](mailto:awid@awid.org) to share with the membership. With the Beijing + 10 review upon us, we're overdue in taking back what gender mainstreaming was really meant to do.

Joanna Kerr  
Executive Director, AWID

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy which aims to bring about gender equality and advance women's rights by infusing gender analysis, gender-sensitive research, women's perspectives and gender equality goals into mainstream policies, projects and institutions. Instead of having segregated activities for women, or in addition to targeted interventions to promote women's empowerment, it brings the focus on women's issues and gender equality into all policy development, research, advocacy, legislation, resource allocation, planning, implementation and monitoring of programs and projects. Gender mainstreaming is intended to be transformative, changing the very definition and discourse of development to include gender equality as a means and an end. With gender fully integrated, therefore, "the stream" itself will change direction.

Gender mainstreaming has been espoused and promoted by the United Nations, the World Bank, and by many bilateral aid agencies, government departments, and human rights

and development organizations. Results have been mixed. Many gender equality advocates consider it the only strategy that will keep women's issues from being swept off to the margins. They see it as the only strategy that will lead to the integration of gender equality and women's rights objectives into the so-called "hard issues" of macroeconomics and poverty eradication. For others however, the promise of gender mainstreaming is long gone. In their experience, it has resulted in the disappearance of attention to women's specific needs and the gender-differentiated impacts of policies and programs.

Has gender mainstreaming worked in some institutions, sectors or regions? What is its potential? Where has it met pitfalls? Can it be used effectively to bring about meaningful institutional and policy changes that protect women's economic rights? There is no single, definitive answer to these questions, but much to learn from practical experiences and critical analyses.



## Mainstreaming Gender Perspectives into all Policies and Programs in the UN System

Mariama Williams, IGTN and DAWN

### The Vision and intentionality of gender mainstreaming

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 nationally, regionally and internationally. Gender mainstreaming must be a cornerstone of the process 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. We seemingly have lost touch with gender as a category of analysis that focuses on the relationship of power between women and men in terms of access to and ownership of resources and power dynamics. Gender mainstreaming, and the problems it now faces, is not simply an empirical phenomenon but an issue of deep value conflict, power politics, analytical tensions, contradictions and dilemmas bound up in different interpretations and expectations at the institutional, policymaking and operational levels.

Ultimately, some of these as yet unresolved tensions and the lack of clarity about objectives and goals have contributed to a return to a more instrumentalist focus on

gender/women as a means to an end. However, growth and/or successful project implementation should not be the main purpose of gender mainstreaming.

There are at least two major reasons contributing to this situation. First, there is under-investment in keeping abreast of on-going analytical and policy-oriented initiatives that aim at developing and strengthening categories critical to gender mainstreaming in areas such as feminist economics. The second reason is the persistent and growing gap between macroeconomics and gender mainstreaming. There is little interaction between macro level planning/ macro phenomena (i.e., fiscal policy, trade policy, financial liberalization and privatization) and gender mainstreaming at the policy analysis and applications levels in governmental, international and inter-governmental organizations. This results in a piecemeal approach to development and gender equality work.

### Macro deficits of contemporary approaches to gender mainstreaming

It is undeniable that financial and trade considerations set the agenda and condition the environment in which gender mainstreaming takes place. These macro level events impact both the substantive content and the operational reach of gender mainstreaming and therefore contribute - in no small way - to the weaknesses of gender mainstreaming. For example, macroeconomic policy predetermines an over-emphasis on growth that reinforces an integrationist approach to gender mainstreaming, constantly shifting that process back into the WID stream instead of the more transformative GAD stream.

Globalization, trade liberalization and the emerging coherence between international financial and trade institutions greatly impinge on the policy space at the national level. But there is no policy interaction at the institutional level with regard to gender mainstreaming. In addition, current approaches to macro-economic targets tend to result in regressive income and asset distribution. This has direct implications for reinforcing not only a false choice between efficiency and equity, but also engenders commitment to a limiting anti-poverty framework, which in turn, muddies the water for gender equality objectives.

Within the context of the macro framework there is the sense that these are “hard areas” that have nothing to do with gender. Gender equality and gender mainstreaming are therefore relegated to “softer” areas that must work to complement and offset the necessary adjustment costs of macro planning decisions and outcomes. So, for example, it is perfectly acceptable to examine areas of food distribution between men and women but gender has no place in discussions about agricultural liberalization or tariff reductions. Yet both of these have significant implications for food security, self-sufficiency, and sustainable livelihoods. Likewise, the intellectual property framework is often seen as a “hard area” with no gender dimensions; yet women’s and men’s access to medicine, traditional knowledge, and technology transfers are impacted by intellectual property rights regimes.

Present approaches to macroeconomics have tended to enforce and reinforce a simplistic anti-poverty agenda that, though important and necessary, is not sufficient as a goal of gender mainstreaming. We have to move the discussion beyond poverty reduction to look at structural issues of inequality and economic injustices that reinforce old forms of poverty as well as create new forms of poverty and inequalities.

Gender equality must be reaffirmed as an end in itself and not simply a means to an end when convenient. This requires attention to structural policies and changes of paradigms including specific attention to institutional factors such as how the so-called “hard areas” and “soft areas” interrelate at the meta, meso, micro and macro levels of the economy.

### **Towards a transformative approach to gender mainstreaming**

This means coming to grips with the challenging issues of redistribution of power, both at the institutional level and also in national level policy making as well as in the global political economy. These issues point toward a need for a shift from the current drift back to integrationist approaches to gender, which simply try to fit women and gender concerns into existing strategies and priorities, towards a more transformative approach. Therefore, there is great scope for retuning models and rethinking the rules, priorities, goals and the distribution of resources.



### **Whither Gender Mainstreaming?**

**Joanne Sandler, UNIFEM**

Ah, the question of gender mainstreaming. Whether one is for or against, few would debate the following: a) There is conceptual confusion about what gender mainstreaming means and how it should be applied; and b) It only works when there is unswerving commitment of leadership, accountability mechanisms are in place, and the right gender expertise is available at the right time to align policies and practices with commitments to achieving gender equality.

If gender mainstreaming was applied and understood as a strategy to address gender inequality at a structural level and achieve fundamental transformation by eliminating gender biases and power imbalances between men and women, it would certainly merit further investment. But one must look long and hard to find examples of gender mainstreaming being implemented – or even conceptualized – in this way. Gender mainstreaming, as *practiced*, is more often used as a strategy for obscuring and under-valuing the significance of gender inequality.

Examples abound. The classic situation goes something like this. A plan is being formulated: it can be a Poverty Reduction Strategy, the budget for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, or a civil society strategy for influencing a World Conference. Five task forces are formed (e.g. poverty, water, health, etc.), but gender equality does not need a task force because it is mainstreamed. Budgets are assigned to each of the task forces, but gender equality doesn’t need a budget because it’s mainstreamed. Then a paper is written on the work of the task forces with chapters for each issue, but gender equality does not have a chapter because it is mainstreamed. And then there’s a high level meeting with the leaders of the five task forces present, but no one presents on gender equality because... you guessed it.

What is going on behind the scenes is even more ludicrous. Those concerned with gender equality and women’s rights do not have a task force so they form



a “working group.” The group now becomes *the mainstreamers*. They divide up to “influence” the task forces. They dutifully prepare background papers on the gender dimensions of each of the task force issues. They undertake “evidence-based advocacy.” They lobby. They have the double job of influencing the task forces at the same time that they are coordinating with their counterparts in the “working group.”

Sometimes they are very successful; they often succeed in getting a paragraph or two included. If they miss a particularly critical meeting however, their successes can be wiped out in a nanosecond. Women’s double and triple day, which has been well documented in the reproductive sphere, is being replicated in gender equality work. While the hunger or water task force focuses on strategies to address hunger or water, those working on gender equality run madly between everyone else’s task force at the same time as having their own.

Aruna Rao, David Kelleher and Rieky Stuart have written about the deep structures in organizations that inhibit or prohibit gender mainstreaming from being an effective strategy for transformation toward gender justice. We can have solid gender analysis, high quality gender training and a superb gender policy, yet when it comes to getting the work done – convening the task forces, assigning the budgets, distributing medicines for HIV or the food in a refugee camp – women and girls still have diminished access and influence as compared to men, resulting in greater threats to their lives, their security and their future potential.

Using gender mainstreaming as a lead strategy has had valuable spin-off effects, generating new tools precisely because those advocating for gender equality and women’s rights have come to understand that accountability and implementation of agreements are critical to making progress. Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB), for instance, is a promising area of work receiving increasing support and interest worldwide. GRB is being used as a transformative tool in Tanzania and Uganda to bring greater transparency, participation and

accountability to local and national level budget processes, and in Ecuador, as a mechanism for re-examining the budget with popular participation and re-allocating municipal resources in response to the results of the analysis. A greater interest in the gender-differentiated impacts of macroeconomic policies and improved capacity to gather and use sex-disaggregated data have also resulted from reliance on gender mainstreaming. These tools and analyses are raising awareness, generating evidence, and even resulting in significant policy changes. In almost every instance, however, women’s rights and gender equality advocates are at the forefront of developing, lobbying for the use of, and monitoring these tools. If support wanes for their work because of commitments to “gender mainstreaming,” how far will these tools take us?

Beyond asking whether gender mainstreaming is effective in bringing about institutional and policy change, there are three additional questions that merit further exploration: a) Is it an effective strategy compared to other options? b) Is it a strategy at all? and c) Even if the answers to (a) and (b) are positive, has gender mainstreaming now been saddled with so much baggage that we need to change the language?

What are the other options? The Beijing *Platform for Action* and countless gender equality policies point to two strategies for achieving gender equality: gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment (or a focus on women). My personal opinion is that we have done the issue of gender equality and women’s rights a disservice by presenting these as choices rather than inter-linked strategies. Nevertheless, of the two, empirical evidence indicates that ensuring women’s empowerment is often more effective at having a direct and transformative impact than the slow and confusing process of gender mainstreaming.

I am beginning to wonder, however, if part of the problem is that gender mainstreaming is not a strategy at all. If we understand it as a theory without much practical application, it is an interesting construct for academics, philosophers and others to ponder. If we stop

talking about it as a strategy, we can move on to more practical approaches.

Of one thing I am sure. The conceptual confusion around gender and gender mainstreaming is a disadvantage in work to promote and protect women's rights and gender equality. "Sex" vs. "gender" vs. "women" causes great exasperation. A male colleague in the UN – who has been in the organization for over 25 years – once asked me, in complete seriousness, "why can't we just talk about working for women anymore?"

We want to find approaches that work and to transfer knowledge about what works to other institutions. This requires serious reflection. Gender mainstreaming is not the problem, but it may also be that continuing reliance on it as a lead strategy is not the solution. In the run-up to the 10-year review of the Beijing *Platform for Action*, there is probably no more important conversation to have than one that helps us to develop new alternatives and more effective strategies toward making visionary commitments about women's human rights and gender equality a reality.



### Gender Mainstreaming: The Second-Best Option

Gerd Johnsson-Latham,

The Beijing *Platform for Action* (PfA), adopted at the United Nations 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in 1995, established gender mainstreaming as a strategy to address inequalities and unequal access to resources in areas of concern in the *Platform for Action*. Many considered this a remarkable achievement that could transform overall developments. The PfA stressed that *before* decisions are taken, gender analysis has to be done along with a visible policy on gender equality in all areas. The *before* part of this commitment, however, seems to have been forgotten. To my mind, this has put the whole strategy into jeopardy and reduced mainstreaming to an after-thought and an "add-on." And while in 1997 high hopes for mainstreaming as a way forward led to an

ECOSOC resolution, the text stressed something which - again - seems to have been forgotten in the discussions: that a prerequisite for gender mainstreaming is commitment from senior management as well as the provision of adequate financial and other resources.

So ten years after Beijing, where do we stand, and what success stories of gender mainstreaming, if any, can be brought forward? Has gender mainstreaming been helpful or not in reaching the overall goals of the PfA and to combat female subordination, etc.?

The evidence does not appear to be positive. Quite a few studies and evaluations of the effects of the strategy have been presented. In 2002, for example, a Swedish International Development Agency study was published indicating that so far, it had not been pursued on a regular basis and achievements were still scattered. The same year, Norway organized a donor meeting, providing proof that while gender often implied high rhetorics, it was seldom followed by adequate funding and high level commitment or an understanding of the transformatory implications of the process. Overall, experiences with gender mainstreaming suggest the following problems:

a) *The concept itself is unclear and misunderstood:*

Gender mainstreaming is still difficult for the development community because "gender" is still not understood as a construction of roles but primarily as attention to biological women. Furthermore, "mainstreaming" has – at best – been a reminder of the need to add "women's interests" to "refine" already established settings.

b) *Mainstreaming has been reduced to a technique:*

Because gender mainstreaming seldom contains the necessary funding, staffing or commitment, it is often reduced to a question of technique and "tool-kits". And far too often the technique is criticized for any failures in gender mainstreaming, whereas the real problems are lack of commitment and resources and a true acceptance of the equal worth of women and men.

c) *Mainstreaming as a pretext for saving overall resources:*

Often agencies *claim* to have applied gender mainstreaming and use this to justify the lack of staff, resources, and program planning allocated to specifically address gender and women's issues, thus falsely "mainstreaming" gender to invisibility. Thus,

gender work today may actually be less equipped in terms of staff and resources than it was in 1995. What we need today is a yardstick or some kind of minimum criteria for what should be labeled as gender mainstreamed.

*d) Gender mainstreaming has not been transformative:*

Gender mainstreaming, as it is applied today, basically accepts the *status quo* and development “business as usual” – and then adds gender. Much more far-reaching methods for transforming the agenda are required to put gender into the driver’s seat of development, and reorganize and redefine the structure and focus of current work.

Current efforts appear to be insufficient and possibly not heading into the right direction. Mainstreaming often means that gender experts “run after already running trains” to at least get a minimum of attention to gender (or women) into processes such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, etc. This is unsustainable, and reminiscent of poor overburdened Sisyphus in Greek mythology, who had to start over again every morning, pushing a boulder up a mountain.

While gender mainstreaming might still be a useful strategy if adequate funding and high-level commitment were assured, it seems necessary to also explore new ways of more effectively reaching the targets of human development and gender equality. Gender mainstreaming may be a “second-best option,” which at this difficult time in global politics, when the gender agenda has been threatened by fundamentalisms from all sides, requires more far-reaching venues of thought to not only ensure some thoughts on gender but to promote transformation and change. To this end, we may need to go “upstream” in the process and challenge current understandings and focuses in terms of what development, poverty, deprivation and human security are all about.

Thus, to my mind, much more attention should be given to male hegemonic structures, male dominance and male privileges, which when threatened are defended by force (including

violence at all levels) both within families and societies, often at the expense of the well-being of women and children – and many men. Thus, we need to move from attention primarily to “women’s interests” and “women’s needs” – to rather investigate and expose features which actually dominate analysis, strategies and allocation of current resources: men’s interests and men’s needs – which leads to the fact that most development undertakings today are “men’s projects,” whether we speak about poverty reduction (in PRSPs which lack attention to unpaid work), health, HIV (which often omits focus on the Cairo agenda), security (which avoids attention to violence against women – even as it is the single biggest threat to human security today and though male violence is a major obstacle to development and estimated to the equivalent of some 3% of the GDP in the U.S. and possibly 8% in countries in Latin America).

We do not need to expend a lot of effort on reformulating the vision put forth at Beijing. The important thing is to develop strategies and concepts that would facilitate change and achievements in attaining the goals of Beijing, not limited to techniques but which go to the heart of equal rights and worth of all humans, and enable us to break down and replace current structures of power and privileges, instead promoting gender equality and sustainable human development.



## Gender Equality: Mainstreamed into Oblivion?

Everjoice Win, ActionAid

### Locating myself

Before I began to work with the international NGO ActionAid, I was part of the autonomous women’s movement in Zimbabwe, the Africa region and internationally. The *autonomous* aspect is important as it distinguishes that movement



from parts of the movement that are located within mainstream development NGOs, the broad civil society movement or various bureaucracies. I entered this movement in the late 1980s when it was working towards the empowerment of women and the realization of women's rights. We challenged power relations between women and men, and between rich and poor; we saw as one of our goals the changing of those power relations at every level. We used gender analysis and the Gender and Development frameworks developed by feminists (yes, it is important to underline that they were developed by *feminists*). Our activities included educating women/girls about their rights, economic development activities, research, and using the media. Some parts of the movement worked with women directly, while others worked with men, others with decision makers, and some with mixed groups.

In the mid-1990s, particularly as we moved towards the Beijing conference of 1995, a new "movement" emerged, that is the "gender movement" with its "gender-speak" and "gender mainstreaming." This gender work, which has become the rule rather than the exception, is quite distinct from my days in the autonomous women's movement.

### How I understand gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming has a double meaning: it is a *strategy* and a *process of agenda setting and change* at different levels within organizations and institutions.<sup>1</sup> It is both a technical and a political process, which requires shifts in organizational cultures and ways of thinking, as well as in the goals, structures and resource allocations of organizations. It requires as well as implies changes at different levels within institutions and organizations, paying attention to equality between women and men in agenda setting, policy-making, planning, budgeting, implementation, evaluation and in all decision-making procedures.

Gender mainstreaming is *not an objective or an end in itself*. It is a means to achieve gender equality. The required end remains equality, human rights and justice, as well as fundamental change in power relations between women and men.

Unfortunately, gender mainstreaming is too often seen as an end in itself. In practice, the *transformatory* aspects of mainstreaming have been sidelined. Many institutions that have adopted gender mainstreaming

approach it from a very technical perspective. Mainstream institutions, such as the World Bank and state institutions, have added "gender mainstreaming" to their rhetoric but have not changed their practices or their policies.

Making gender a "cross-cutting issue" tends to diminish the focus on the real issues. In some instances, *gender has been mainstreamed into oblivion*. In many development organizations, gender departments or programmes have been whittled down and in some cases completely abolished. Since the Beijing Conference of 1995, women's organizations and gender equality departments in larger institutions such as governments and development agencies have struggled to survive. Resources have been slashed, with the argument that their presence and expertise were no longer required given the efforts of gender mainstreaming. Pressed for indicators of change or progress, the stock answer is that gender is now cross-cutting and mainstreamed therefore it can no longer be "measured".

Linked to the above trends are the prevailing misconceptions about gender. Many development organizations now argue that using a "gender approach" implies a need to focus on men and bring them in as beneficiaries. Many women's rights organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to access resources if their programmes do not include men. During the period 2000-2002, CIDA in Zimbabwe specifically turned down funding proposals on the basis that men were excluded.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, disproportionately large amounts of resources are going to projects such as work with men and boys around HIV/AIDS and men's marches against violence. The lack of conceptual clarity of gender as an analytical concept – rather than a strategy – lies behind some of these trends.

What started out as a positive attempt to build on the successes and challenges of the last 20 years in advancing women's rights has, like the concept of gender, been distorted to mean something else. Based on the understanding that separate projects/programmes for marginalized groups tended to be marginal and to make little impact, mainstreaming was seen as a strategy to widen the gains. The choice to mainstream was also based on the understanding that gender issues are everywhere and in everything – they are not found in one or a few arenas.

Mainstreaming is about ensuring that gender equality goals are embedded at every level and in

all parts of an institution – rather than ghettoized. It's also about making sure resources are mobilized to move what is often a huge agenda. Most importantly, gender mainstreaming is not the same as “integration” or adding on gender – something that many of us are already familiar with from the old days of Women in Development – the “add women and stir” approach.

Today, gender mainstreaming threatens the realization of the goal of gender equality. Many development organizations have abolished gender desks/programmes and specific funding. Gender experts are only invited to “add gender” to existing frameworks, thus mainstreaming is not about challenging the existing analysis of situations, nor is there an assumption that there is something wrong with the mainstream in the first place. Gender mainstreaming is often stated as an end in itself. Gender has become so mainstreamed that it is no longer visible. After we have mainstreamed gender, it is no longer clear what our programmes or policies should look like. Was the idea to mainstream gender so much so that it is no longer visible at the end of the stream?

In my work in ActionAid, I have strategically chosen to use the terms “gender and women's rights” to indicate what this work is about - women's empowerment, women's equal enjoyment of their rights, and a change in power relations.

## endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ireen Dubel, “Challenges for Gender Mainstreaming: The Experiences of Hivos,” 2002.

<sup>2</sup> I was the Director for Women in Politics Support Unit and our proposal was specifically turned down because, as the CIDA staff put it, “we don't understand why you are focusing only on women Members of Parliament. Male MPs also need to be empowered”. A few other women's NGOs had similar experiences.

## Mariama Responded...

In thinking about the reflections on gender mainstreaming by my other colleagues, I come to the conclusion that gender mainstreaming as a strategy with specific sets of tactics and tools can be used effectively to bring about meaningful institutional policy changes in women's economic rights. Arguably, it has very real, even structural limitations, but nonetheless it can still be a vehicle for shaping and operationalizing national and international commitments to women's economic rights and improving women's access to social and economic resources. In its current form, it is the common practical and operational framework for the cohering and actualization of overall agendas which can impact all the various dimensions of governmental apparatus for impacting the daily lives of women and men: social policy, economic policy, trade policy and industrial policy.

To me the latent and still possible potentials of gender mainstreaming are fourfold: 1) the possibility of conscientizing citizens, technocrats and economic decision-makers about the critical dimensions of women's and men's lives; 2) the possibility of devising local, national, regional and international approaches to dealing with the problem of gender discrimination and inequality; 3) the possibility of enlivening interlocking policy approaches for more targeted, long-lasting and sustainable impacts of taxation, budgeting, lending, borrowing and interest rate policies on the caring, entrepreneurial, and labor market activities of men and women as they carry out their multiple roles and functions in society. Ultimately, gender mainstreaming can also be a powerful tool for grounding the cultural, economic and social rights of girls, boys, women and men and as such can provide the solid foundation for advancing the economic empowerment of women.

But the sad reality is that these wonderful potentialities of gender mainstreaming have been severely attenuated, distorted and thwarted. Instead, gender mainstreaming has succumbed to the pitfalls of a technocratic fix



and has lost its philosophical and moral underpinnings in most cases. In far too many cases, “gender” has been misused and abused by those who refuse to recognize and take action on women’s subordination and the various forms of social and economic injustices in the economy and society. These gender equality subversives, who tend to have strong influence in any of the phases of gender mainstreaming, have tended to devote their energy to sidelining the issue of women’s oppression and systematic inequalities. This is often done in the name of protecting men’s interest, as if gender mainstreaming is intent on leaving men at an institutional or structural disadvantage.

Unfortunately, this kind of rearguard action is more pervasive than we would like to think, even in rich countries. Even more importantly some of its architects and orchestrators are women. These men and their female collaborators will persist in denying that there is a problem of women’s subordination and pervasive gender discrimination that is unfavorable to women. Or, even if they acknowledge the problem, they refuse to accept that it is serious or to see where, why and how it persists and how present attitudes, behavior and policy may be generating new dimensions to the age-old problem. Though they would deny it vociferously, the underlying compass that regulates such behaviors and actions, as noted by Gerd Johnsson-Latham, is that there is “no true acceptance of the equal worth of women and men.”

Gender injustice—the pervasive and differential treatment of men and women that results in unfavorable burden sharing, maldistribution of resources and imbalances in rights and entitlements to one gender at the disadvantage of the other gender—is endemic to all present cultures. Undeniably, for the better part of most of the last millennium, it is women who have been at the short end of the stick. Some cultures and societies have managed to eliminate or reduce the most obvious and negative aspects, while others try to neutralize it through laws and rhetoric such that we think the problem only exists in other people’s culture or religions. But the fundamental design, the hardware, is still there in our cultural practices, sayings and religious beliefs and dogmas. And, they undergird all that we say and do, no matter how much we try to anesthetize it. What is the natural, automatic reaction in time of crises: underemployment, war, etc.? There can be no other explanation for the persistence and tenacity of such an obvious affront to human evolution and technology.

In such an environment, gender mainstreaming was bound to meet a halfhearted, lukewarm reception and its implementation at best undertaken on an instrumental level. There is a pervasive problem of lack of real commitment and accountability to the prime directive: gender equality and gender justice. Certainly in some areas more resources have been leveraged for programs that benefit women. But in the critical areas of conscientization and embedding deeply into the psyche of policy-makers as well as into the structural design of policies success has been elusive. The reality is that gender mainstreaming initiatives, mechanisms and instruments have been under-funded and under-resourced.

There is therefore much work that needs to be done at these different levels. The question can be raised: is it worth it to continue to expend much energy, or any energy, on gender mainstreaming? Should we not just move on to new frameworks, concepts and programs? I believe these are valid questions. But I am also sure that unless we are seriously able to change hearts and minds, whatever success we may achieve in new frameworks will be ephemeral. Even these new frameworks, however attractive and rewarding they may appear now, will ultimately come up against the same stumbling blocks that met gender mainstreaming. The work of conscientization and embedding gender equality and gender justice concerns into all aspects of social and economic life that influence the policy-making stream will need to continue.

### Joanne Responded...

It seems that there is a great deal of agreement in the four submissions. There is consensus that: a) Work on gender mainstreaming has been reduced to a technique or an end in itself, thereby losing its connection to the purposes it originally sought to achieve (e.g., as a means or strategy to highlight, through analysis, the power and privilege differentials between men and women and support improved strategies toward transformation that leads to social justice); and b) There is a rampant conceptual confusion about gender mainstreaming, leading to its use as a means of making women’s rights and gender equality invisible.

I agree with all of these points raised by my colleagues, but none of us have really articulated a way forward. We are all expressing the need for

approaches and strategies that address structural inequality and transformation of existing power relationships. Gender mainstreaming was supposed to do that, but this is not happening in practice. I agree with Gerd Johnsson-Latham that we do not need to expend effort reformulating the vision put forth at Beijing. But we certainly need proven approaches that transform the rhetoric of gender equality and women's rights into reality.

We need to recognize that change toward transforming gender power relations is happening haphazardly and irregularly in different places and at different times. Wangari Maathai just became the first African woman Nobel Peace Prize Winner. Women voted in Afghanistan. These, and countless other actions taken every day by courageous men and women whose stories never reach the public domain, are all important steps. I think of Nita Barrow, the convenor of the NGO Forum for the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Conference on Women in Nairobi, who talked about how effective leaders did not always necessarily have a master plan... they just knew what the three most important next steps were.

My dream is that we have a riveting, water-tight, compelling set of approaches that illuminate an irrevocable path toward gender equality, and that everyone would see the wisdom of this and join in. I'll settle, however, for three key steps forward.

My initial thoughts:

*a) Generate greater support for women's human rights:* We have CEDAW, we have regional women's rights conventions in Latin America and Africa. We need to generate greater attention, support, accountability and capacity to redress discrimination and stigma in women's lives.

*b) End impunity for distorting gender mainstreaming:* After at least 10 years of intensive training and development of countless gender equality policies, there need to be systems of accountability in place at all levels.

*c) Build strong and sustainable organizations and networks advocating for women's*

*rights:* We would not have come this far if it weren't for so many women (and some men) who struggled to build an agenda for gender equality and women's rights. We need to be supporting and attracting new generations of women and men with new ideas and new issues to keep this work moving forward.

### Gerd Responded...

Firstly, the concept of gender mainstreaming is problematic, not only because of the mainstreaming part (the strategy), but also because of an additional problem in terms of misunderstandings regarding the meaning of "gender" (the starting point/concept). Replacing "mainstreaming", therefore, may still leave us with the problem raised here by Everjoyce Win (and notably shared by NGOs that I have spoken with in Sweden): "gender" tends to be misinterpreted and project proposals which focus on women can be rejected if men are not also included as beneficiaries. Apparently, there is still a gigantic task ahead in terms of explaining that gender means considering conditions for both women and men, and then giving particular attention to women to make up for centuries of gender inequalities in almost all areas.

Secondly, "mainstreaming" requires that somebody actually mainstreams. Indicating ownership and responsibility for mainstreaming is vital in every process. In addition, it appears crucial to establish a minimum requirement for what should be labelled "mainstreamed." We also need means for accountability and control, in terms of gender budgeting and gender auditing, for example.

Thirdly, it should be acknowledged that gender mainstreaming was not the only strategy adopted at the Beijing conference in 1995. Mainstreaming was highlighted along with the "empowerment of women." The concept of empowerment is actually much clearer and much less likely to be misunderstood. Thus it appears worthwhile to pick up "the empowerment of women" again and bring it back to the forefront. We still have much work to do to understand how the empowerment of women can be realised, both

for women as different collectives and for women individually (e.g. through legislation, education, allocation of funds, establishing new posts for gender equality work within governments and elsewhere, etc.) Work is also needed to understand how existing primarily male or patriarchal power structures are connected to male privileges – and at the other side of the coin, the costs and disadvantages for women. Similarly, we need to develop our knowledge about how power and privileges are decisive for decision-making, agenda-setting, access to resources and control over means of violence to punish opponents (including women) and over rewards to co-opt adversaries (and marginalise feminists).

To conclude: while gender mainstreaming and empowerment are means and strategies, we should not forget that the overall goal is gender equality. Gender equality can be interpreted to have the same meaning as the emerging concept of gender justice. So at this stage, in the pursuit of gender equality and gender justice, we need to focus on effective methods of change and put more efforts on the following: the empowerment of women to achieve gender justice.

### Everjoice Responded...

We all seem to agree that gender mainstreaming has been, in a nutshell, “so much promise, so little delivery.” With the right conceptual clarity, in the right hands and with serious commitment, gender mainstreaming can and does work. To this one must add – *with the right political foundation*. Gender mainstreaming is simply a tool. Any tool in the right hands will achieve positive results. With the right political underpinnings it can work wonders. But put a good tool in the wrong hands, it becomes a weapon with which massive damage can be done.

A key missing piece in the analysis we have done thus far is recognizing that gender discourse and tools have been systematically wrenched from the hands of feminists. There have also been serious efforts by many to distance “gender” and all it entails from feminism. So it is not uncommon to hear the refrain, “We don’t want to be feminists. We want to do good gender work.” What exactly does that mean...I ask rhetorically? This is the biggest challenge that underlies attempts to reclaim gender and gender mainstreaming. So while I do agree with Aruna Rao *et al.* that so many positive

things have been achieved because of gender mainstreaming, for some of us, the pollution of the struggle by gender apologist language and strategies makes reclamation an unattractive option.

### Analyzing the mainstream itself:

Indeed we must also question what the state of the mainstream itself is. Is it what we want? Where is the stream going? Do we want to go there? Can it be turned around to where we want? That is the big challenge. The mainstream in terms of development approaches, anti-poverty, or even human rights is not exactly the kind of stream many a feminist wants to find herself floating in. So before we even talk of “streaming” anything in there, we need a sharper understanding of what lies beneath (to quote that famous film). This has been one of the challenges for women’s rights activists and feminists, particularly those working in that mainstream itself. Trying to understand the ideological mindsets, and the power dynamics at stake, is in itself a major task. With its seemingly non-threatening and non-political approaches, “gender” tends to be very much welcomed into the mainstream – with smiles and open arms. But no sooner is this veneer of welcome displayed than the activist finds herself wondering therefore why the stream keeps shifting and running in different directions at every turn! A good example of this is the current excitement around gender in HIV & AIDS. The simple question to be asked then is if things are so clear, and gender can be easily dealt with, why has so little changed for women and girls? Again our feminist activism tells us, the power issues and ideological battles are what is never openly declared. Therefore gender mainstreaming, which is often presented as a non-political act, flounders as it hits the rocks of patriarchy and power.

I agree with Joanne’s colleague...*let’s just go back to working for women!*

Compiled by:  
*Alison Symington*  
Research  
Assistance from  
*Juhi Verma*  
Design by:  
*Lina Gomez*



# About the Contributors

**Gerd Johnsson-Latham** is the Deputy Director of the Department for Global Co-operation, Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Since 1992, she has focused on Gender and Development, seeking to integrate or mainstream gender into all areas of development co-operation.

**Everjoice J. Win** is currently the International Gender Co-ordinator for Action Aid International, where she is responsible for gender mainstreaming within the organization and work on women's rights globally. She is a feminist from Zimbabwe and has worked with the Women's Action Group, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) and the Commission on Gender Equality of South Africa.

**Joanne Sandler** is the Deputy Executive Director for Programmes of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). She has worked with international organizations and women's groups worldwide for the past 25 years, with a focus on organizational development, strategic planning and economic justice.

**Mariama Williams** is an international economics consultant and an Adjunct Associate at the Center of Concern, Washington, D.C. She is the Research Adviser for the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN), Co-research Coordinator, Political Economy of Globalisation (Trade) — Development Alternative with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and a Director of the Institute for Law and Economics (ILE-Jamaica).



The Association for Women's Rights in Development is an international membership organization connecting, informing and mobilizing people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. A dynamic network of women and men, AWID members are researchers, academics, students, educators, activists, business people, policy-makers, development practitioners, funders and others, half of whom are located in the global South and Eastern Europe.