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Displacement and Empowerment: Reflections on the Council of Europe Approach to Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Equality

Abstract

This article measures one of the foundational texts of gender mainstreaming, namely, the final report of the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming (Council of Europe 1998) against theoretical concepts of displacement and empowerment. While the Council of Europe process approach is shown to be a fundamental “displacing” asset, there are important shortcomings, such as its consensualist premise, lack of space for oppositional politics, and general technocratic understanding of gender mainstreaming, hindering empowerment. The ambivalence of its articulation of the goal of gender equality is particularly problematic in view of the logic of the dual agenda in gender mainstreaming. More explicit power analyses are highly needed.

Introduction

This article revisits one of the foundational texts of gender mainstreaming, namely, the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming in

the final report of the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming (Council of Europe 1998). The article measures gender mainstreaming against theoretical concepts of displacement and empowerment as crucial components of transformative gender equality policies, building upon the work of Squires, Jahan, and Fraser. While the process approach in the Council of Europe report is shown to be a fundamental “displacing” asset, the article highlights important shortcomings in its articulation of gender mainstreaming, such as its presentation of gender mainstreaming as consensual and its lack of space for oppositional politics, and its general inclination toward a technocratic understanding of gender mainstreaming. These shortcomings hinder empowerment. Its articulation of the goal of gender equality, while presenting an interesting mix of equality and difference elements, remains too ambivalent to address gender dichotomies, which is detrimental to its displacing potential. The article analyzes the ambivalence of the goal as particularly problematic in view of the power processes involved in gender mainstreaming and in strategical framing processes that are necessarily part of it. The logic of the dual agenda of gender mainstreaming calls for a more explicit analysis of (enabling and constraining) power to contribute to the further development of this strategy.

Reflections on the Concept and Practice of the Council of Europe Approach to Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Equality

In trying to assess the theoretical and political merits of gender mainstreaming strategies, one of the main questions seems to be whether this strategy is mainly integrationist in its impact or potential, or whether there are reasons to label the strategy or some elements of it as transformative. The debate seems to concentrate on the praxis of gender mainstreaming, on whether or not gender mainstreaming can fulfill its revolutionary potential. This implies that most authors seem to agree that gender mainstreaming *is* potentially a “transformative strategy” (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2000; Mazey 2000; Verloo 2001; Woodward 2003). This in itself is remarkable, and to understand its remarkability, we can turn to theory.

Gender Theory: Theoretical Promises for Transformation

As Judith Squires notes in her excellent overview of gender and political theory, we can distinguish three analytically different feminist political strategies: the strategy of inclusion, based on the principle of equality; the strategy of reversal, based on the principle of difference; and the strategy of displacement, based on the principle of diversity (Squires 1999). In her analysis, *the strategy of inclusion*,

often defended by liberal feminists, aims at the inclusion of women in the world as it is, in a political form from which they are currently excluded. This exclusion of women is what is problematized. They usually aspire to impartiality, conceive of people as autonomous, and espouse an equality politics. This strategy seeks gender-neutrality. One could also say that it wants to extend dominant values to all, irrespective of gender. *The strategy of reversal* starts from the assumption of gender difference and hence espouses a difference politics. This strategy is often adopted from a radical or cultural feminist perspective to pursue a reconfiguration of current politics so that it becomes more open to gendered specificities. Here, men and male cultures and practices are problematized (Ferguson 1993). This strategy seeks recognition for a specific female gendered identity. It is typically argued here that politics ought to be reconstructed to manifest the distinctive perspective of non-hegemonic gender identities and cultures (usually female). *The strategy of displacement* aspires to move “beyond gender,” espouses a diversity politics, and is rooted in postmodern or post-structuralist feminism. It aims at destabilizing the apparent opposition between equality and difference, between the strategies of inclusion and reversal, and seeks to displace patriarchal gender hierarchies and to deconstruct discursive regimes that engender the subject. What is problematized is not (only) the exclusion of women, or men as a norm, but the gendered world in itself. The normative argument defending this position is rather that gendered identities are themselves a product of particular political discourses.

I agree with Squires that, while the three approaches are not mutually exclusive, but can be (and are) combined in practice, the strategy of inclusion is fundamentally an integrationist approach, whereas only the strategies of reversal and displacement might be transformative. Squires advocates that both equality and difference approaches as such might further entrench the underlying premises of the patriarchal order, perpetuate its logic, and thereby prolong its dominance. While the strategy of displacement is the most transformative strategy in theory, Squires points out that especially this strategy has a problematic connection to practice. “Those who view themselves as diversity theorists frequently do not engage in practical debates or political activism at all... For many, it is not clear that the diversity perspective alone generates a political programme at all” (p. 136). There seems to be a more general concern that a strategy of displacement provides no normative grounds for a strategy for political change.

This concern cannot be caused by the difficulties in attempting to change the whole “gendered world,” as the strategy of reversal also implies a need for fundamental change, which is not seen as a problem at the conceptual level. Major other concerns are connected to

underlying ideas about power and about gender. In a strategy of displacement, the underlying concept of power is rooted in a Foucauldian analysis that stresses the inseparability of constraining and enabling effects of power, but is not articulating the possibility of intentional action. As such, a Foucauldian power concept has proven to be very useful for analyzing power practices, but hard to translate to political strategies. Another part of this concern might be caused by the fact that displacement as a strategy implies that the goal and the strategy can not be fixed precisely (as can be with the strategies of inclusion and reversal), because it is based upon assumptions that gender and gender relations are pervading all identities, behavior, symbols, and institutions, and that the complex forms of the interrelations between these dimensions are continuously changing, a process wherein power and gender inequality get reinstalled constantly. Regardless of political positions taken, these multifaceted dynamics of gendered power imply a need for continuous change in the goal and the strategy. Hence a political goal toward abolishing gender inequality is inherently hard to be fixed (in a definition, for instance), and concepts of transformation as putting new standards for both men and women (Rees 1998) are insufficient. Strategies toward this goal should be flexible, adapting their approach toward gender inequality as a moving target.

As a strategy, gender mainstreaming is seen as transformative because it claims to address and redress the genderedness of systems and processes. Thinking of gender mainstreaming as a strategy of displacement shows why this is remarkable. If gender mainstreaming is indeed grounded in a strategy of displacement, implementation or translation-to-practice problems can be theoretically expected. Can gender mainstreaming include a flexible and operational goal that does not fall into the inclusion-reversal trap? Can it lead to a world “beyond” gender? This is one question addressed in this article. To turn to a second question, another conceptualization of what would be transformative opens a different perspective.

The often-quoted distinction between gender mainstreaming as integrationist or agenda-setting by Jahan does not run parallel to the three strategies described by Squires. What Jahan calls the agenda-setting approach to gender mainstreaming is based solely on “the participation of women as decision makers”: “Women participate in all development decisions and through this process bring about a fundamental change in the existing development paradigm” (Jahan 1995, 15). What she calls agenda-setting is the “recognition of a woman’s agenda,” which resonates with a strategy of reversal, not with a strategy of displacement. Her distinction has been taken on board by many in a wider interpretation (e.g., Lombardo 2003). In this interpretation, “agenda-setting” is

given the meaning of rethinking policy making from the outset, changing policy paradigms so that policies work toward gender equality. Such a wide interpretation of Jahan loses an essential part, though, the part where women's voices are steering the transformation. While it is clear that it is too simple to assume that the participation of women will lead directly to fundamental change in itself, as this would deny different political positions taken by women and hegemonic dynamics within feminism,¹ for an approach to be called "agenda-setting," some concept of voice seems to be needed. Here, Fraser's concept of "subaltern or non-hegemonic counterpublics" might be useful, because it offers a perspective on actors and struggle in the politics of implementation of gender mainstreaming (Fraser 1989; Fraser 1997). In Fraser's view, under conditions of inequality, deliberative processes will tend to serve dominant groups, and subordinated groups will not get the opportunity to properly think through and articulate their interests. In other words, transformation (of the hegemonic order) will not come about simply through participation of women, as this participation under conditions of inequality will be readily absorbed, and there is a chance to resist ongoing hegemonization only if there is space for subaltern counterpublics. To be transformative, gender mainstreaming should then be not only a strategy of displacement, but also a strategy of empowerment by organizing space for non-hegemonic actors to struggle about the (promotion of the) agenda of gender equality. This combination of organized space and feminist struggles could complement the necessity highlighted earlier of providing a "content" of the strategy of gender mainstreaming that adapts to the changing nature of gender inequality power dynamics. Maybe it could also escape overtly simplistic assumptions of intentional action that are incompatible with the power analysis underlying the displacement argument.

This article attempts to contribute to a conceptualization of displacement and empowerment as feminist political strategies in practice, building upon both Squires' and Fraser's work. I will first choose a precise location, one of the dominant conceptualizations of what gender mainstreaming is, namely the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming by the Council of Europe, as presented in the final report of the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming (1998).

Reflections on Gender Mainstreaming

The Report of the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming at the Council of Europe

More than one author has been confused by the distinction between the Council of Europe and the European Union or the European

Commission. The Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg, was created in 1949 as an organization committed to the promotion and protection of human rights. In 2005, it includes almost all (46) countries in West, Central, and Eastern Europe. It encompasses the European Court of Human Rights and various legal mechanisms.² Among the political mechanisms within the Council of Europe, the most important are the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the Committee of Ministers. The *Committee of Ministers*, composed of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the member states, adopts conventions and agreements, which are binding for the states that ratify them. The preparatory work for this committee is done by intergovernmental expert committees.

The CDEG, the *Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men*, is one of those intergovernmental expert committees (see Tavares da Silva 2002 for an overview of its work). The CDEG organizes its work through the expertise of its members, mostly civil servants working on gender equality in their respective countries, or through the installation of Groups of Specialists. Past years have seen Groups of Specialists on hot issues such as Parity Democracy, Positive Action, and the Right to Free Choice in Matters of Reproduction and Life Styles. In 1995, the CDEG installed a Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming. The terms of reference stated that the group was to carry out a survey of measures taken or implemented, to prepare a conceptual framework and methodology, and to present good practices.

Since the publication of the report of the Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming in 1998, the report has been translated into at least twelve languages (Bulgarian, Czech, German, Greek, Hungarian, French, Latvian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovenian, and Japanese). In 1998, the Committee of Ministers adopted a message to all Council of Europe Steering Committees encouraging them to use gender mainstreaming (Group of Specialists on Mainstreaming, p. 81). The Committee of Ministers further recommended “that the governments of member states disseminate widely the CDEG’s report on gender mainstreaming and encourage its use as a tool for implementing this strategy in the public and private sectors, and encourage decision-makers to take inspiration from the report in order to create an enabling environment and facilitate conditions for the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the public sector” (p. 2). The Committee of Ministers has not taken any concrete actions to follow up the adoption of those texts, other than forwarding them to the committees.

Given how little reaction there has been to the Message of the Committee of Ministers, the CDEG decided in 2000 to organize a workshop on gender mainstreaming for steering committees. This

workshop was attended by four committees.³ In 2002, one committee (CDCS) engaged in a pilot seminar on gender mainstreaming for a newly installed Group of Specialists on User Involvement in the Social Services. As an organizational link, a CDEG member was added to this group. This shows that gender mainstreaming can actually strengthen the position of equality units, giving them access to formerly closed mainstream parts of their organization (Verloof and Benschop 2002).

All in all, it would be hard to defend the activities on gender mainstreaming within the Council of Europe itself as impressive. The progress has been rather slow. The impact of the report has been wider, though. As the report is extensively quoted and used by all sorts of authors, the next section will analyze its conceptualization of gender mainstreaming.

The Conceptualization of Gender Mainstreaming in the Report of the Group of Specialists

What is the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming that is presented in the report? First of all, it offers a definition. The report defines gender mainstreaming as “the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making” (Council of Europe 1998, 15). This definition positions *gender mainstreaming as a process*, a process of changing policy routines. The report explains that three elements have been taken into account in the drafting of the definition. The first element is that the definition should refer to the goal that has to be achieved. In the definition this goal is referred to as gender equality. The report actually offers an extensive paragraph explaining what gender equality is, before starting to elaborate on what gender mainstreaming is. Summarized, it claims that gender mainstreaming involves a broader and more comprehensive definition of gender equality, giving value to differences and diversity. The second element deemed necessary in the definition is that it needs to mention political and technical implications of the process, the need for new ways of devising and approaching policies, and the need for shifts in organizational or institutional culture that will lead to changes in societal structures. Third, it is accentuated that a definition of gender mainstreaming should not be partial or limited when it comes to tools and techniques. Because of various contextual needs, it is said that the definition should be as open as possible in this respect.

Additionally, the definition points out *the objects and subjects of gender mainstreaming*. The object is all policies, it is said; the subjects

are the actors normally involved in policy making. This last statement is explained many times throughout the report, arguing that gender mainstreaming involves a shift in actors, passing matters related to gender equality from the hands of the specialists of the equality units to a greater number of people, including external actors (p. 18). Some points of attention are highlighted in this respect. One concerns gender expertise. Those new actors “might fail to identify gender interests or to implement good gender equality policies,...even lack a proper understanding of the mainstreaming strategy itself” (p. 18). As such ignorance might lead to a reproduction of the existing status quo, gender mainstreaming entails the education and training of the ordinary actors to put mainstreaming strategies into practice, it is said. Even if there is a connection made between lack of knowledge and lack of women in decision making, the accent is on the know-how of ordinary actors, on gender expertise rather than on political representation or a feminist attitude/perspective.

The report is vague when it comes to *the role of NGOs, interest groups, and pressure groups* (an interesting choice of words avoiding reference to the feminist movement). These groups are all seen as part of the “external actors” that can be engaged in gender mainstreaming, but their role is conceptualized as rather limited. The report gives these groups a role in supporting the strategy of gender mainstreaming, e.g., helping to create political will (p. 21), in being a source of knowledge, in influencing the political agenda, or in keeping gender mainstreaming high on the political agenda (p. 34). Even if there is some recognition of the importance of NGOs, interest groups, and pressure groups in improving the democratic quality of society, these groups are mentioned mainly as part of the universe of actors that “can” be involved whenever the report is becoming more prescriptive. There is no direct reference to the need to give voice to the feminist movement or to those suffering from gender inequality.

The report distinguishes between three types of *techniques and tools* for gender mainstreaming. It states that often the gender problematic is not recognized as a problem, pointing at the importance of analytical tools such as statistics, research, checklists, or Gender Impact Assessments. Next to these analytical tools, educational techniques and tools such as training, awareness-raising, manuals, or experts are seen as needed. The last type mentioned is about consultation and participation “of the various partners concerned by a given policy issue.” This type of tools includes think tanks, hearings, expert meetings, databases, and the participation of both sexes in decision making.

Partly because of the avoidance of expressing a preference for any tools, and partly because of the wording used, the techniques and

tools mentioned position gender mainstreaming as technocratic. There seems to be no reference at all to the possibility of opposing political ideas on feminism or on gender equality. NGOs are hardly mentioned in connection to any of the tools, and then only as experts, lobbyists, and watchdogs, and the feminist movement is not mentioned at all. The expertise mentioned seems to be unrelated to normative (feminist) beliefs. Even if implicit, this is a choice to present the gender mainstreaming strategy as “beyond politics,” as something that just needs to be done. Unfortunately, politics does not disappear when ignored (Björk 2002). The presentation of gender mainstreaming as technocratic implies that as a strategy, it potentially excludes certain political actors, the most important one being the feminist movement. There is simply no conceptual space for feminist groups in the strategy as it is conceptualized. On the contrary, feminist academics in their role as “possessing gender expertise” have a comfortable position within the strategy, as long as they are willing to present their expertise as “objective.” Such a role in silencing the expression of feminist ideas is detrimental to feminist political debate. As Mara Kuhl has argued, gender mainstreaming will fundamentally and in many ways alter the interaction between the women’s movements and the state (Kuhl 2003). When some authors remark that the European Women’s Lobby has been “legitimized” within the EU policy-making process as a result of the gender mainstreaming activities (Mazey 2002), this could only be because the EWL presents itself as the (one and only) “expert” voice of the feminist community.

As gender equality is referred to in the definition of gender mainstreaming as the goal of this strategy, the further *definition of gender equality* can be seen as an integral part of the definition. As it is, this definition of gender equality reveals ambivalences. The wording of the goal, in the words that are accepted by the Council of Europe, calls for a diversity perspective, yet is not all that consistent in doing so. Gender is explained using Joan Scott’s definition that “gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986, 1067). The explanation of gender equality addresses the problem of male domination and a male norm in society, and states that “a history of discrimination and restraining roles is unconsciously written into everyday routines and policies” (p. 7). It shows many examples of a difference approach and finally cumulates in the statement: “The problem is gender hierarchy, not women. The quintessence is that the social construction of gender leaves room for difference and does not contain a notion of hierarchy placing men higher than women” (p. 8). While this wording of the goal manages to move beyond simplistic “equality” or “difference” approaches, it does not question the gender dichotomy as such, but seems to imply the possibility of

abolishing gender inequality without changing the social categories or identities of men and women. It decouples equality and difference, but is based solidly on the dichotomy of men and women. The dichotomy between masculine and feminine is not rejected as such.

The summary of the report in terms of the most important targets for gender equality reads: “It can be assumed that the achievement of the targets of human rights, democracy, economic independence and education in a context of shared responsibilities between women and men to resolve imbalances, lead to a society where both women and men experience well-being in public and private life” (p. 9). The accents on human rights and democracy, in this summary as well as in previous parts of the report, are the hallmarks of the Council of Europe approach to gender equality. These accents are not explained in detail.

An interesting feature of the description of gender equality as a goal in the report is that it is not defined as a blueprint, but as “something that must be constantly fought for, promoted and protected—like human rights of which it is an integral part” (p. 8). Consequently, not only gender mainstreaming as a strategy, but interestingly enough, also achieving gender equality is presented as a process, “as a continuous process that has to be constantly put into question, thought about and redefined” (p. 8). This process approach to the goal is not explained, but the reference to “struggle” points at a conceptualization of gender equality as a political goal.

In the Message of the Committee of Ministers to Steering Committees of the Council of Europe on Gender Mainstreaming, a very typical other element can be found. This message (Group of Specialists 1998, p. 81) states that gender mainstreaming is an important strategy “not only because it promotes gender equality and makes visible the gender dimension of each policy and activity, but also because it makes full use of all human resources and should lead to better informed and better targeted policy-making.” Here, one could say mainstream goals are “added” to gender equality, and this is presented as an additional argument to engage in gender mainstreaming.

Overall, next to elements of a strategy of inclusion and reversal, there are elements in the definition of gender mainstreaming that can be seen as connected to the strategy of displacement. Most importantly, these are the accent on a need to change the gendered system c.q. policy processes, and the conceptualization of gender equality as a goal that cannot be fixed but has to be struggled about. The goal as represented in the report, although calling for what is referred to as a broader and more comprehensive goal of gender equality, giving value to differences and diversity, fails to give a precise definition or an articulation that would allow “being struggled about.” This weakens

the transformative potential of the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming. Empowerment is not present, except in a very indirect form: there is hardly any voice given to the dominated, to “subaltern counterpublics” (Fraser 1989). The absence of empowerment elements further limits the transformative potential of this conceptualization of gender mainstreaming.

The Traveling of the Report outside the Council of Europe: The Process Definition, Gender Mainstreaming as a Toolbox

Since 1998, the approach of the Council of Europe report has traveled, and it has traveled well. What seems to have traveled best is the Council of Europe report’s definition of gender mainstreaming, which has traveled to European nation states, to NGOs, and to researchers.⁴ It has also informed the debate and development within and by the European Commission (Booth and Bennett 2002, 439). It is even not uncommon to see the definition of the Council of Europe being used as if it were a European Union concept (Thege and Welpé 2002). In general, in the literature on gender mainstreaming, many references can be found that juxtapose several definitions without any comments, as if multiplying definitions could multiply the chances of understanding (see for example the report of the Scottish Office on Mainstreaming Equality, 1998).

The most striking facts when comparing the use of the Council of Europe’s conceptualization of gender mainstreaming are, first, that there are no comments to or any changes in the definition found. It is usually quoted as is. Second, it is remarkable that the quotation is always limited to the wording of the definition of gender mainstreaming as a process. This is striking because the definition is not really understandable or complete in this one sentence. The definition tells what needs to be done and why, but it also includes a reference to content in the phrase “a gender equality perspective.” Within a Council of Europe setting, one can argue that it is more or less clear what is meant with this phrase, and within the report it is explained extensively, even if the conceptualization of “gender equality” in the report is not a short and catchy wording of the goal, but an attempt at a conceptualization that combines more accepted elements on equality of rights and on justice with references to differences in the lives and experiences of women and men, and elements of diversity theory.

One could question whether it is not precisely the content of this goal, framed in terms of not only economic independence, but particularly its reference to human rights and democracy, that has made it more difficult for this part to travel along with the process part. Going back to the report, we can see that this danger is recognized in

part. It is stressed that gender mainstreaming needs “a broader concept of gender equality,” stating explicitly that countries with a “more traditional” approach to gender equality (e.g., equal opportunities) will have to revise their concepts. No reference to this part of the report has been found. Maybe it is precisely because of its emptiness that the one-sentence definition has traveled so well. It means that the definition becomes a chameleon, changing color with every social and political context. Yet, when used without a conceptualization of this content, in policy contexts where other conceptualizations prevail, such as equal opportunities, the definition becomes amputated, and potentially becomes an empty vehicle going adrift. Perversion of the strategy becomes easier, as happened in a Dutch manual on gender mainstreaming that reads like a handbook on rational policy making, but does not give any idea or any presentation at all of a goal to achieve with gender mainstreaming (Verloo 2003).

A second part of the Council of Europe approach that has traveled well is the conceptualization of gender mainstreaming as a strategy that can include a wide variety of tools and techniques, without presenting any arguments in favor of one or the other. While it is easy to understand the strategical reasons behind this non-choice in a Group of Specialists with varying opinions and experiences, the implications are quite far-reaching. The resulting technocratic positioning of gender mainstreaming is a missed chance to link with the Council of Europe’s focus on democracy. Looking back, it is surprising that consultation and participation have not received a more preferential treatment, especially since the “Council’s flagship policies for women are shown to have centred since the mid 1980s on a ‘politics of presence’ frame and the (contested) concept of ‘parity democracy’” (Lovecy 2002, 271). Perhaps it is not accidental that this happened as a result of the work of a Group of Specialists that did not include feminist activists as members.

Especially in texts that are written for policy audiences, a phenomenon can be observed that was present at the level of the Council of Europe as well: the “adding” of other policy goals to strengthen the argument in favor of gender mainstreaming. This “adding” refers to all sorts of other goals, and hence is rather a parallel phenomenon than an influence by the Council of Europe approach. One example is presenting gender mainstreaming as an approach that is capable of advancing gender equality while at the same time increasing organizational effectiveness (Meyerson and Kolb 2000). Similarly, it is not uncommon to see gender mainstreaming presented as an approach that can jointly achieve gender equality and excellence in science (ETAN Report 2000). The Message of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe hence is no exception, but reveals a very common phenomenon.

Coming back to my initial question on the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming, the previous reflections show that some of the elements of the Council of Europe approach that have traveled well can be seen as a strategy of displacement. Especially the accent on a process approach is a crucial displacement accent. Gender mainstreaming as a process intervention in policy making can theoretically tackle ongoing reproductive gender bias. However, the conceptualization of the goal that could have contributed to giving content to a strategy of displacement is too ambivalent and does not address the gender dichotomy. While exactly this ambivalence might have contributed to its acceptance within the setting of the Council of Europe, neither this ambivalent goal, its call for a revision of more traditional approaches to gender equality, nor its call for a process approach to the goal have been included in the wider diffusion of the Council of Europe's conceptualization of gender mainstreaming. The split between process and goal has made perversion of the strategy easier. More importantly, the technocratic accent in the approach and the subsequent lack of space for counterpublic voices are detrimental to empowerment and hence limit even more the transformative potential of this particular approach to gender mainstreaming.

Reflections on Gender Equality

Studying Gender Equality as an Empty Signifier

This section will take a closer look at gender equality because of two phenomena that were described in the previous section. One is that the success of the Council of Europe's one-sentence definition could be related to its emptiness in terms of defining gender equality. Another is the "adding of other goals" to strengthen the argument in favor of gender mainstreaming. Two major studies (Behning and Pascual 2001; Rubery and Fagan 2000) that present an overview of gender mainstreaming practices in European countries show that the goal is often "reduced" to a mere "inclusion of women," or to just paying attention to some specificities of women's positions. They illustrate the need to study gender equality as an empty signifier, analyzing what gender equality means in policy practices rather than assuming consensus about it.⁵

Ute Behning and Serrano Pascual (2001) present studies on the impact of the concept of gender mainstreaming in national practices on employment, covering twelve Western European countries. As a concept, gender mainstreaming varies widely, they show, ranging from being understood as affirmative action, equal treatment, equal participation, or reform of government. Most importantly, they conclude

that most policies presented as gender mainstreaming are just a continuation of previous policies. The main problem is a narrow representation of gender equality where women are the subject of change, and where the goal is to fit women into the status quo rather than transforming the status quo. This would rather fit with the strategy of inclusion. Additionally, they find that institutional actors fail to include actors from the women's movement in gender mainstreaming. These studies illustrate an easy perversion of the strategy in the absence of attention for the goal of gender mainstreaming. The assumption of consensus about the goal in a reality of political differences means that almost everything can be fitted into the "stretch" concept of gender mainstreaming. Moreover, a vague goal does not facilitate ownership by pressure groups, and it does not induce debates about it; as such, it opens no space for other conceptualizations of gender equality, or for political struggle.

Another major study in the field of employment, by Jill Rubery and Colette Fagan (2000), reports on gender impact assessments in Europe. A gender impact assessment identifies positive or negative outcomes of proposed policies in terms of gender equality. Gender impact assessments are meant to inform decision makers in an early stage so as to be able to re-orient or mitigate policies if necessary. Rubery and Fagan stress that most gender impact assessments are not located in a broader and more explicit theoretical understanding of how gender equality is (re)produced in society. As a result, gender impact assessments merely make gender visible, by producing statistics for instance, but they fail to provide an analysis of such statistics in terms of their link to producing gender inequality, and therefore they are not really gender-sensitive, let alone -transformative. Moreover, Rubery and Fagan see a lack of attention for the intersection of gender inequality with other structural inequalities.

Rubery and Fagan's call for a more theoretical understanding of gender equality probably has to be understood as a call for a diversity perspective, and as such as more firmly positioning gender mainstreaming as a strategy of displacement. It could also be understood to mean that it is possible to define gender equality once and for all, if only theory were used to inform this definition. They seem to see the solution for these problems in more theory, not in more politics. As they are analyzing the development of a technocratic instrument, this is to be expected, but it implies that they cannot criticize gender impact assessment for its technocratic character, nor analyze its problems in these terms. Regardless of the necessity of theory, and even if theory is always implicitly political, there certainly are also highly explicit political differences in understanding the mechanisms of gender inequality. These political differences reflect differences in

social, cultural, economical, and political position, opinion, and voice. Such political differences within feminism cannot be washed away with theory. To think that theory can or should provide the truth is contradictory to a strategy of empowerment. The absence of attention for the diversity of the political ideas about gender equality has a depoliticizing effect. Subsequently, this also excludes the women's movement from the process of gender mainstreaming.

Adding Other Goals: Strategic Framing

Some studies that focus on assessing the success of gender mainstreaming practices at the level of the European Union point to a similar phenomenon of "adding other goals," as happened in the Message to the Committee of Ministers to Steering Committees of the Council of Europe on Gender Mainstreaming. In Hafner-Burton and Pollack's analysis (2000) of five areas (structural funds, employment and social affairs, development, competition and science, research and development), the accent is on explaining cross-sectional variety within the European Commission in the start and the implementation of gender mainstreaming. They show how important it has been that political opportunities in Europe have widened and increased over the course of the last decade, for instance as a result of the entrance of the Nordic countries. They also show how important lobbying and modernization have been, for instance the lobbying of WISE (the European organization for women's studies) in the case of gender mainstreaming in science, research, and development. In assessing the success of gender mainstreaming, they refer to classical power mechanisms that are at the heart of social movement theory: political opportunities and mobilizing.

In the context of this article, the most interesting part of their analysis is their use of the concept of strategic framing, another power mechanism conceptualized in social movement theory. Strategic framing is a dynamic concept that enables us to see how different actors adapt existing policy frames to pursue their prospective goals. Strategic framing is defined as attempting to construct a fit between existing frames, or networks of meaning, and the frames of a change agent. Hafner-Burton and Pollack show that gender mainstreaming is "sold" as an effective means to the ends pursued by the European Commission, rather than as an overt challenge to those ends. They argue that the gender mainstreaming efforts, because of this strategic framing, might turn into an integrationist approach, integrating women and gender issues into specific regular policies rather than rethinking the fundamental aims of the European Union from a gender perspective. Especially since the European Union is one of the most successful implementers of gender mainstreaming so far, this threatens the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming, they say.

Mary Braithwaite's work on gender mainstreaming in the structural funds (1999) corroborates these findings. She finds that because of the absence of precise objectives on reducing gender inequalities, gender is easily located within and has been subjected to other goals, such as employment creation, economic growth, or poverty reduction. This is not to say that these are abject goals, just to stress that they are not synonymous with gender equality. Braithwaite concludes that gender equity suffers from the dominance of efficiency and effectiveness in gender mainstreaming practices in the structural funds.

Strategical Framing and Power

The studies presented point out that "success," in the sense of starting a process of gender mainstreaming, seems to be connected to the "stretching" of the goal of gender equality, to strategical framing, and they also show that the actual goal of gender mainstreaming is not articulated clearly. In the last section of this article, I will therefore take a closer look at framing processes, at the politics of framing. What happens in processes of strategical framing? Why would it be that integration rather than transformation is the inevitable result of strategical framing processes?

Strategical framing refers to a process of linking a feminist goal, such as gender equality, to some major goal of an organization that should engage or is engaging in gender mainstreaming, thereby securing the allegiance of these organizations to gender mainstreaming. In technical terms, this means that until now strategical framing in gender mainstreaming practices has usually involved framing bridging or frame extension⁶(Benford and Snow 2000). The strategies chosen do not challenge the other, mainstream goals of policy makers, but provide for a link by "stretching" the gender equality goal. This means that the dual agenda that is mostly present in gender mainstreaming (of the feminist goal and some other goal) is presented as the possibility of a win-win situation. In such conceptualizations, power seems to evaporate; it is put between brackets. Gender mainstreaming is presented as a harmonious process, certainly in the Council of Europe report. The state is also mostly conceptualized as "friendly," probably connected to the fact that Sweden and the Netherlands have been among its pioneers, countries that to some extent have been "friendly" states in the past. Yet, if gender inequality is about power and privileges, then gender mainstreaming should be about abolishing privileges, and if gender mainstreaming is about eliminating gender bias in policy making, then the state should be problematized. Why then is a process of abolishing privileges and gender bias conceptualized as harmony? The answer provided in the studies discussed earlier is that it helps in organizing acceptance of gender mainstreaming, by making it less

threatening. The consequence of this avoidance of struggle is the exclusion of opposing voices, including radical feminist voices.

The “Beyond Armchair Feminism” volume of *Organization* (2000) is one of the few studies analyzing the bad results of such a dual agenda: the disappearance of a gender focus altogether. Coleman and Rippin (2000) conclude, after having tried such a process of harmonious change, that there needs to be more challenge and less agreement in such change processes, even if trust is a crucial component. The presentation of harmony, used to help smooth the process of change, is counterproductive in the end. In Hearn’s (2000) reflection on the project, not only organizations are gendered (in the Acker 1990 definition), but also models of organizational or societal change are gendered, as well as embodying other forms of social division and domination. Following this analysis, change processes and hence gender mainstreaming processes and activities should be conceptualized as necessarily riddled with power, subject to mechanisms of power, and best understood in terms of power.

Looking at processes of strategical framing as connected to power relations through a Foucauldian lens shows the logic of the dual agenda as a mix of enabling and constraining processes. The main enabling part is the opening generated by the bridging of frames. Yet, in this logic that juxtaposes two sets of goals, some options are repressed. Exposing the “organization” goal as not neutral, but already gendered, or positioning the “feminist” goal as an organization goal in its own right, will be difficult. As organizations tend to have a self-image of gender neutrality, the gender bias in their existing goals will not easily be recognized. And as both goals will hardly ever be backed by equal power resources, the feminist goal will be watered down much more, or much more easily than the organization goal. Moreover, in the process of convincing organizations or people to start a process of gender mainstreaming, there will already be a tendency to select more “acceptable” feminist goals. Also, the feminists or femocrats involved in these efforts will necessarily have some kind of acceptance by the (gender-biased) organization, leading to further selection and exclusion of radical or marginalized voices.

The logic of the dual agenda therefore leads first to an opening for a feminist agenda, and then to a narrowing down of the feminist focus and feminist voices, to eventually losing the focus on gender and gender equality altogether. This logic functions through mechanisms of power. Both goals are not equally powerful, as they have unequal support and resources within the regular organizations that are the relevant context of gender mainstreaming. Especially when gender mainstreaming is conceptualized in a technocratic way, less external pressure or mobilization of feminist groups is to be expected.

Moreover, this inequality of support and resources hinders a clear articulation of a feminist goal, or the expression of particular feminist goals that are seen as more radical, while such radical goals would be needed in view of the watering-down mechanisms. Mainstream liberal feminism hence has an advantage, while a goal that is articulated as a need to displace gender will meet resistance. Finally, within feminism there are hegemonic processes as well that are not recognized and that lead to the exclusion of certain feminist voices.

As strategical framing has also enabling elements, what is needed is not to stop practices of strategical framing, but to have deeper analyses of how power is at work in such processes in practice, using the knowledge generated to change the enabling-constraining balance.

Conclusions

The transformative potential of gender mainstreaming is understood in this article as including displacement as well as empowerment. Can gender mainstreaming be a strategy that addresses the gendered world, gender hierarchies, and discursive regimes that engender the subject? Does it create space for subaltern counterpublics? This article shows first of all that there are fundamental theoretical problems with operationalizing strategies of displacement and empowerment, most importantly problems related to its understanding of power as enabling and constraining, and its understanding of gender inequality as multilayered power dynamics. This calls for a strategy that is conceptualized as a process of changing processes and as ongoing (feminist) political struggles.

Addressing the questions with a focus on the Council of Europe conceptualization of gender mainstreaming and its common use shows that, while the process elements and the accent on change in this report have a positive impact of the transformative potential of the strategy of gender mainstreaming, the crucial part of the definition, namely the goal, is too ambivalent, and its critical call too often neglected, to have a positive function toward transformation. Even more importantly, the strategy as conceptualized strengthens technocratic tendencies and consequently fails to contribute to empowering mechanisms.

Gender mainstreaming as conceptualized by the Council of Europe as a process intervention can theoretically tackle ongoing reproductive gender bias in policy making, but it has problems in its presentation of gender mainstreaming as consensual, and it has problems in the articulation of its goal and in the choice of its tools. What is needed is to see the presentation of harmony as a strategical choice while analyzing the process of gender mainstreaming as involving political dynamics and struggle within the strategy. For this, an elaboration of how a gender equality goal could co-evolve with changing

gender inequality dynamics while being open for feminist political debate is still lacking. Equally important would be to further develop a concept of gender equality that is rooted in displacement but allows for practical and operational positions, and to further extend methods to prevent the emptying of feminist expertise from normative beliefs, and to include feminist voices, including marginalized voices, in gender mainstreaming. Only when these conditions are met can the strategy of gender mainstreaming work as a strategy of displacement, and as a strategy of empowerment.

NOTES

Thanks to Sylvia Walby and the participants of the ESRC seminars for creating a truly inspiring context to develop the ideas generated in this paper. Myra Marx Ferree deserves thanks for very precise comments on an earlier text on the “logic of the dual agenda.”

1. For a conceptualization of this problematic, see Meike Schmidt-Gleim and Mieke Verloo, “One More Feminist Manifesto of the Political,” working paper, IWM 2003 (<http://www.univie.ac.at/iwm/p-iwmwp.htm>).

2. Such as the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the European Social Charter (1961), the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture (1987), the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (1992), and the European Convention on Nationality (1997). For more information, see PILI handbook 2001, p. 149.

3. The Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Legal Aspects of Territorial Asylum, Refugees, and Stateless Persons (CAHAR); the Committee for the Development of Sport (CDDS); the European Committee for Social Cohesion (CDCS); and the European Health Committee (CDSP).

4. Examples of national states are Irish Government in NDP, Norwegian State Secretary in speech 23–24 September 2002, Finnish Ombudsman for Equality on 7 June 2003, the National Bureau on Gender Equality of Iceland, the Coordination Office for Austrian Employment Pacts, Swedish Government, Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. Regional state entities using the definition include the Scottish Executive. Examples of NGOs are Spanish Fundacion Mujeres on its 2003 website, the European Women Lawyers Association, Royal Town Planning Institute. Examples of researchers are R. Fitzgerald in an external study for EC, Centre for Gender Equality Iceland, Gender-Institut Sachsen-Anhalt on website, announcement workshop Madison 2000, NYU School of Law, Danish National Research and Documentation Centre on Gender Equality, Cardiff University, Central European University, and others.

5. See also www.mageeq.net for a methodology on comparing policy frames on gender inequality.

6. Frame bridging is linking to existing beliefs, frame amplification is highlighting some values or beliefs, frame extension would be extending a frame to hitherto unconnected issues, and frame transformation is defining issues contrary to what is usual in a certain setting (Benford and Snow 2000).

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