

## **Gender mainstreaming and policy building: from theory to practices**

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### **1. Introduction**

This presentation is a contribution to the debate about the promises and pitfalls of the gender mainstreaming strategy by examining the role played by one very specific category of actors involved in this process: the gender experts. Based on various personal working experiences in Belgian policy institutions and in the European Commission, my presentation aims at highlighting the central dimension of knowledge and scientific expertise in the design and implementation of GM. It argues that although gender experts were (and still

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this paper are personal and do not engage the responsibility of the European Commission.

are) key actors for conceiving and promoting GM as a new gender equality approach, their role is too often ignored when analysing the progress made in gender mainstreaming public policies. It is argued that a more in depth analysis of the interactions between gender expertise and policy building, between gender experts, politicians and civil servants could help identifying basic difficulties encountered in GM implementation.

During the last ten years, I was involved in several attempts to gender mainstreaming both Belgian and EU policy environments, policy objectives and institutional structures. What is of interest for the debate on GM, is the fact that in each case, I was playing a different role, I was a different kind of actor. In one case, I was an external gender expert invited to design a GM strategy, in another case I was acting as a representative of a politician responsible for implementing GM; in a third case I was acting as EC temporary staff responsible for monitoring GM within the institution and its policy. Of course, in all cases, the reason why I was appointed was my so-called gender expertise. It could then be argued that behind the diversity of positions that I occupied it was always the same me that was in action. This is of course true. But my experience shows that it is only partly true. My point here is to highlight the fact that according to each specific position occupied in the GM process, according to the kind of actor I was supposed to be, my relationship to knowledge, more exactly the way I was mobilising my knowledge on gender equality issues, was rather different. It is

my conviction that this differentiation of attitude, interest, confidence and importance given to knowledge is a crucial element for understanding why the very promising gender mainstreaming theory resulted so often in meaningless exercises.

## **2. Knowledge as a fundamental dimension of the gender mainstreaming strategy**

The knowledge dimension of the gender mainstreaming is very crucial.

The name itself refers to *gender* and *mainstreaming*, two conceptual terms that only a limited number of gender experts were, and still are, able to understand. The wide dissemination of these conceptual terms has provoked a lot of confusion and misunderstandings. Even today they are often used in a wrong way, especially the term gender which far too often is simply used to replace the word sex, as if this substitution was by itself meaningful. For people who are not familiar with the knowledge built up by feminists and gender researchers, the true meaning of the word gender is extremely difficult to grasp. To illustrate this I will refer to my experience as a gender equality adviser of the Belgian Deputy Prime-Minister, Minister of Employment and Gender Equality Policy. Although very socialist, this relatively young woman Minister (we had exactly the same age) only viewed the women's issue as a social issue: wage discrimination in the labour market; violence against women; access to birth control and abortion; poverty; were the issues that she considered as important and meaningful. In her view, the feminist movement was a kind of sect gathering middle class women spending their time discussing irrelevant topics. What the Minister called feminist blabla. When she had to address public speeches on equal

opportunities issue, the Minister was then speaking all the time of both genders, the female gender and the male gender, etc...

The name “gender mainstreaming” reveals that this strategy is the product of gender research and expertise. During the last 30 years, experts have played an important role in the design and implementation of gender equality policies at international, national contexts and even local levels. The increasing mobilisation of scientific advice and expertise for the design of policies is not specific to equality policy. It is a major characteristic of contemporary policy action but it is worthwhile noticing that it is also true for equality issues. In many European countries, and even more at European level, it is rather obvious that equal opportunities policies developed in the 70’s and later on were informed by efficient networks of women intellectuals (mostly lawyers, sociologists, etc) working in universities, in public administrations, etc; elaborating equality laws, developing positive actions, requesting for studies, etc. The development of feminist/women’s/gender studies increased considerably the knowledge base on gender equality as well as the capacity to analyse the production of inequalities and to enhance the need to engendering public policies.

Like other components of equality policies, for instance equal opportunities legislation or positive actions, gender mainstreaming is a product of the

knowledge built up “by, for and about women”. Indeed, I don’t think it is true to consider that “*GM is the equality policy strategy that has been criticised most by feminists and women’s organisations due its potentially controversial implementation*” (Stratigaki, 2004). I was involved in feminist organisations in the eighties, and I remember very well how positive actions and equality laws were criticised and disregarded as “*irrelevant reformist instruments set up by femocrats*”. 10 years later, it is more or less the same kind of arguments that was used against GM. When working as a researcher on gender issues at the beginning of the 90’s and advocating in feminist debates for gender mainstreaming public policies, I was told by activists that GM was typical of expert naïve wishful thinking, far away from the hard reality of patriarchy ! The suspicion towards “expertise” and “experts” has always been very strong within the feminist movement, the use of gender experts by policy-makers or decision-makers being viewed as a fatal compromising.

I am convinced that the knowledge dimension of GM has something to do with the negative way women’s organisations considered it from the very beginning. In Belgium, except gender experts and researchers involved in political advice, nearly nobody was supporting its adoption and implementation.

After having done a retrospective evaluation of 15 years of equal opportunities policy in Belgium, I personally advocated for GM.