

Chapter 1.

Introduction to the *Research Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming*¹

Introduction: Thirty years of gender mainstreaming – promises, limitations and the future of equality

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Abstract:

This introduction presents the objectives of this handbook: to offer a synthesis of existing research, to make the rich and dense scholarship on gender mainstreaming both visible and accessible to a broad audience, and to foster new debates and critical engagement for scholars. Gathering leading specialists from across regions and fields of study, and adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, the handbook embraces a broad and inclusive understanding of gender mainstreaming, acknowledging its dual nature as both a political strategy comprising a wealth of policy instruments with profound political ramifications and a conceptual tool essential for policy analysis and feminist scholarship. This introduction offers a critical and reflexive assessment of gender mainstreaming, interrogating its promises, limitations and transformations amid rising global challenges against gender+ equality, but also reaffirming its relevance in this context. It also details the choices that have guided the handbook's composition and presents its organization and structure.

Keywords: feminist scholarship; gender mainstreaming; gender+ equality; knowledge production; intersectional approaches.

[a] Celebrating an anniversary?

In 1995, the groundbreaking United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing saw the institutional emergence of gender mainstreaming as a pivotal strategy to integrate a gender perspective into all facets of policy elaboration, programming, and implementation. For three decades, in the ever-evolving landscape of policymaking, academia and societal discourse, gender mainstreaming constitutes a cornerstone when it comes to gender equality in practice. Recognising its paramount importance and celebrating the 30th anniversary of its inception, this handbook aims at navigating the complexities and nuances of gender mainstreaming, while reflecting on its theoretical and empirical implications.

Yet, is this anniversary truly one to be celebrated? Or are we, rather, marking this milestone while standing at a crossroads – or even at a grave? Given the mid-2020s political climate characterised by increased polarization of gender+ equality issues and growing radical right populist and conservative attacks against gender equality, as well as the mixed, sometimes even disappointing, results of gender mainstreaming in practice, one might question whether this is a moment of commemoration or reckoning. Has gender mainstreaming delivered on its promises? Has it lived up to the expectations set in Beijing? Or were those expectations unrealistic to begin with? And has it been co-opted, diluted, or even weaponized against the very objectives it was meant to advance?

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Rather than a mere celebration, this anniversary serves as an opportunity to take a step back and to take stock of what gender mainstreaming has brought – to gender scholarship, to both feminist and mainstream research, and to practitioners in different political and societal spheres and in different regions. It is a time to assess how it has evolved, how it has been implemented, and how it has been reshaped in different contexts. This is also the right moment to reflect on what has been achieved so far, but equally to identify the gaps that remain, the new challenges that have emerged, and the directions that future research should take. In doing so, this handbook takes a critical yet constructive approach: acknowledging the tensions and shortcomings of gender mainstreaming while reaffirming its relevance as an analytical, policy and political tool in the ongoing struggle for gender+ equality.

[a] Composing a handbook: a political endeavour

A handbook is first and foremost a collective endeavour. It brings together different voices and perspectives, and even if it is shaped by choices – conscious and deliberate ones –, at some point, it also takes on a life of its own, reflecting the vibrant and evolving environment of the literature it wants to present. This *Research Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming* is no exception. It aims to explore the state of the art in how scholars have engaged with gender mainstreaming while also making a statement: the act of assembling a handbook is inherently political. In the academic world, few gestures are as politically charged as defining what constitutes legitimate knowledge in a given field. This is even more critical at a time when scientific knowledge is being challenged, erased, or distorted. Some of the very terms foundational to gender mainstreaming – *gender* itself, but also *barriers*, *bias*, *discrimination*, *diversity*, *minorities*, *stereotypes*, or *systemic* – are increasingly contested or removed from political and institutional discourse in different parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we have curated this handbook.

Beyond offering a synthesis of existing research, this volume has been entrusted with a mission: to make the rich and dense scholarship on gender mainstreaming both visible and accessible to a broad audience, particularly the *malestream* of policymaking, research and societies. Simultaneously, it aims to foster new debates and critical engagement for scholars well-versed in the topic, striking a careful balance between accessibility and depth. Gathering leading specialists from across regions and fields of study, and adopting a multidisciplinary perspective, the handbook embraces a broad and inclusive understanding of gender mainstreaming, acknowledging its dual nature as both a political strategy comprising a wealth of policy instruments with profound political ramifications and a conceptual tool essential for policy analysis and feminist scholarship.

This introduction details the choices that have guided the handbook's composition. It explains the logic behind its organization, the differentiation between chapters and spotlights, and the structure of its thematic sections. It also highlights the key contributions of each section, providing a roadmap for readers navigating this volume. Beyond mapping the contents of the book, this introduction discusses the nature and specificity of gender mainstreaming itself, setting the stage for the discussions that follow. It also reflects on the urgency and stakes of engaging with gender mainstreaming in a context where the very language of gender+ equality is increasingly contested.

[a] Gender mainstreaming as a total social fact

Why is gender mainstreaming so compelling? Why has it generated such a vast body of research across disciplines? And why has it been adopted so swiftly and widely by many institutions? The distinctiveness of this handbook lies in its focus – not on a single academic field, as handbooks typically do, but on a specific subject: gender mainstreaming, which functions both as a political strategy and a conceptual tool.

Unlike traditional academic fields that develop theories and concepts to analyse social phenomena, gender mainstreaming has, in many ways, reversed this dynamic: it has given rise to a scholarly domain of its own, complete with a specialized vocabulary, dedicated research programs, and even leading figures in the field. This unusual trajectory is part of what makes gender mainstreaming so fascinating. A key reason for its intellectual and political significance is that gender mainstreaming can be understood as what Marcel Mauss (1925) called a *total social fact* – a phenomenon that permeates

multiple spheres of society, shaping economic, legal, political, and ideological structures all at once and all of a sudden. Gender mainstreaming is political not only because it seeks to transform gender regimes, but also because it exposes the conflicts and resistances that surround gender equality – thereby also revealing the quality of our democracies. It provides a lens for analysing policy-making strategies, the evolution of equality policies, and the actors who mobilize around them. It intersects with institutions at all levels of governance, engages a broad range of stakeholders, and embodies competing visions of gender+ equality and power relations.

Since its earliest theoretical formulations, gender mainstreaming has generated evolving conceptual debates that illustrate its complexity and multidimensional nature. Scholars have grappled with its very definition, questioning what it means to integrate a gender perspective across all policy areas and all institutional levels. These debates have also revolved around the operationalization of gender mainstreaming – how a theoretical principle is translated into concrete policy instruments and governance mechanisms. More recently, attention has shifted to the impact of gender mainstreaming: to what extent has it succeeded in transforming gender hierarchies in gendered institutions? Has it effectively accounted for the diversity of women's experiences, or has it reproduced certain biases by privileging specific voices and perspectives over others? These questions highlight the dynamic and contested nature of gender mainstreaming, reinforcing its relevance as a total social fact.

Moreover, gender mainstreaming's significance extends across disciplines. While it is central to gender studies, it is also deeply embedded in political sciences, international relations, law, history, geography, medicine or sociology, among others. This multidisciplinary reach reflects its status as a total social fact – one that not only influences policy and governance but also shapes and is shaped by broader social structures and ideas.

Another aspect that makes gender mainstreaming such a rich subject of study is its duality: it has inspired research not only on its transformative potential but also on its failures and limitations when reduced to a performative tool, along with the resistances it provokes. Scholars have critically examined whether gender mainstreaming truly reconfigures power structures or merely subordinates gender equality objectives to pre-existing mainstream priorities. Research in this area has, in turn, contributed to theorizing the various forms of resistance that emerge even in contexts where political rhetoric appears supportive of gender mainstreaming. These findings offer crucial insights into the strategies feminist actors can deploy to navigate and overcome such obstacles.

Finally, the study of gender mainstreaming has been a testing ground for a wide range of theoretical perspectives on policy and institutional change. Scholars have drawn on feminist and discursive institutionalism, democratic theory, policy process analysis, knowledge-based approaches, cognitive frameworks, decoloniality, intersectionality and perspectives on policy instrumentation and tools to examine how gender mainstreaming unfolds – and why, in many cases, it fails to achieve its intended goals. This plurality of theoretical approaches underscores the complexity of gender mainstreaming, making it an enduring and dynamic field of study.

By situating gender mainstreaming as a total social fact, this handbook highlights not only its significance as a political strategy but also its broader implications for understanding power, resistance, and institutional transformation.

[a] The handbook and its Sections – A Panorama

This handbook builds on a series of editorial choices, and, through meticulous curation, it aspires to endorse an editorial vision. As a team of five editors with diverse backgrounds and expertise, we have been committed to ensuring that this diversity is reflected in the very structure and content of the volume. Our aim has been to create a resource that not only informs but also sparks critical reflection and meaningful dialogue.

One of the defining features of this handbook is its commitment to inclusivity, and one of its central aim has been to broaden the scope of scholarly engagement by foregrounding diverse perspectives, particularly from the Global South. We recognize that academic debates around gender mainstreaming have long been shaped by voices and frameworks grounded in the Global North, often overlooking the deep engagement of scholars, activists, and institutions in other parts of the world.

While we actively sought to amplify voices often sidelined in mainstream academic discourse, we are aware that the volume does not fully reflect the global diversity we aspired to. Structural constraints in academic publishing, unequal access to resources, and our own positionality have contributed to persisting gaps, especially in relation to African perspectives. Rather than claiming to have resolved these imbalances, we aim to be transparent about them, and to present this volume as a step – however incomplete – towards a more inclusive and pluralistic conversation on gender+ equality and governance.

At the same time, this handbook does not shy away from the tensions and critiques surrounding gender mainstreaming. Acknowledging its limitations and the debates it has sparked, we have dedicated an entire section to exploring these complexities. Rather than presenting a one-dimensional view, we embrace critical dialogue, reflexivity, and constructive debate, opening space for new research directions and transformative action.

Another hallmark of this handbook is its innovative structure, designed to accommodate diverse learning preferences and information needs. Each chapter provides in-depth analyses and insights. Alongside these chapters, “spotlights” offer concise, focused discussions, encapsulating key issues and emerging trends. Both chapters and spotlights are based on the most up-to-date literature in the field, as well as practical illustrations. This dual approach ensures that the handbook is both comprehensive and accessible.

[b] Section 1. Theoretical and Historical Perspectives

This opening section explores the conceptual foundations, historical trajectories, and theoretical and methodological debates surrounding gender mainstreaming. It aims at setting the scene and providing essential landmarks in the content, nature and definition of gender mainstreaming.

Together, the four chapters and three spotlights show how gender mainstreaming has become a central – though contested – approach to addressing gender inequalities in global, national, and subnational governance. The section begins by interrogating the dynamic relationship between gender mainstreaming and feminist theory, examining how practice has responded to theoretical innovation and how theory has been reshaped through mainstreaming’s institutionalisation. Contributors trace the roots of gender mainstreaming to earlier feminist practices within state organisations, highlighting how struggles to overcome resistance have shaped the concept’s definition and longevity. Reflexive analyses examine how gender mainstreaming has enriched feminist research while also exposing its limitations and the compromises that have accompanied its institutional uptake. The section also interrogates the relationship between gender mainstreaming and the state, exploring whether the former can provoke meaningful institutional change or whether it remains a largely symbolic tool, constrained by limited resources and competing priorities.

The spotlights complement these chapters by revisiting the historical significance of the Beijing Platform for Action, analysing the rapid global diffusion of gender mainstreaming across sectors and levels of governance, and reflecting on the risks of gender mainstreaming’s transformation into a mere buzzword. Together, these contributions offer a nuanced understanding of gender mainstreaming as both a powerful driver of feminist agendas and a concept whose promises and pitfalls must be critically assessed, especially in relation to contemporary challenges and attacks.

[b] Section 2. Actors and Tools

This section pursues two complementary objectives. The first involves offering readers the main insights provided by current research on gender mainstreaming within the context of feminist governance processes. This entails deep reflection on the articulation of gender mainstreaming with different types of actors, ranging from civil society organizations and social movements (primarily the feminist movement) to various branches of government (judicial and legislative powers), through the realm of public opinion, and also the role played by bureaucracies and specifically femocrats or insiders in its development.

The second objective takes us into a more technical but equally important terrain for analyzing the trajectories, origins, and outcomes of gender mainstreaming processes. In this section, therefore, we

seek to situate readers in the role played by various tools for the design, implementation, and evaluation of gender mainstreaming. Among these tools, we highlight the functions fulfilled by gender budgeting actions and expert training and advisory services with a gender perspective to promote and strengthen gender mainstreaming throughout public administration. In general terms, we recognize that gender mainstreaming processes entail complexities that encompass both technical and politics aspects of public policies.

This section also addresses the exploration of actions and processes of innovation, examining the extent to which gender mainstreaming contributes to new democratic participative mechanisms, budgetary transparency, or the strengthening of the public sphere and the transformation of the state and society.

In this regard, while this section has outlined a governance dimension that includes political and movement networks and another, more technical dimension, more strictly tied to technical components of the policy process, it should be emphasized that these dimensions do not exist in isolation from one another. On the contrary, each chapter establishes cross-references that help weave reflections between the political and the technical. In this sense, the spotlights also contribute to expanding this fabric by offering examples that show how these elements are constantly intertwined. In addition, throughout the chapters comparative case analyses are also presented, covering national contexts that include countries from various continents.

[b] Section 3. Policy Perspectives

The section 'Policy perspectives' engages with how gender inequalities are addressed by (not) implementing gender mainstreaming in different policies. A major premise of gender mainstreaming is that not a single policy decision (be it legislation, policy programmes, budgets etc) is gender neutral. All decisions have gendered effects. In certain policy fields like social policy, research, or public security which entails addressing gender-based violence, gender aspects are obvious and often well-covered in research. In others, such as space policy, climate change or agrifood systems, gender mainstreaming triggered new research that showed the often overlooked gender aspects. As the chapters in this section demonstrate, the original premise of mainstreaming gender in all policies has fully taken root and certainly represents one of the greatest progresses since Beijing - even if implementation continues to be lacking.

Overall, the section presents a variety of policy fields and developments regarding mainstreaming gender within them. The chapters attend to core debates for each policy, how they changed over time, and the current state-of-the art. They also engage with the role of policy-makers, be it gender experts or – in line with the original idea – the ones usually in charge of policy- and decision-making, and the challenges they face. Each chapter includes illustrative empirical cases to provide in-depth insights, while spotlights engage with policy fields where addressing gender aspects is still only emerging and thus an innovation.

[b] Section 4. Institutional Perspectives: from the International to the Local

This section seeks to understand the extent to which gender mainstreaming has been – and, indeed, can be – institutionalized, or fully integrated in the culture, operations and processes of an institution. There is a practical, but also normative, element to this question. Which institutions have taken on responsibility for gender mainstreaming, as part of their core business, and what would it take for institutions to accept full responsibility for gender mainstreaming?

The section considers this question from the perspective of various institutions, beginning at the international level with an examination of UN Women's gender mainstreaming mandate within the UN System. The section then considers the regional level by exploring regional organizations – such as the African Union, the Pacific Community, the European Union, and the Organization of American States – within which there is significant variation in the adoption of gender mainstreaming practices and cultures. Chapters dedicated to each of these regional institutions outline the translation of gender mainstreaming norms from the international to the regional, and the challenges and opportunities

apparent in that translation process. How do regional organizations aggregate the differing stances, objectives and motivations of their states and agree on gender mainstreaming practices? Alternatively, how does disagreement on gender mainstreaming impact these organisations' commitment to international norms of gender equality? This question allows the section to then focus on specific countries, and the role of individual states in either supporting, or derailing, gender mainstreaming efforts. Contrasting the approach taken on gender mainstreaming in specific European countries and the United States helps us to understand when states are likely to embrace gender mainstreaming in principle and then allocate resources to its implementation across service delivery and government outputs.

[b] Section 5: Limitations, Critiques and Ways Forward

This section interrogates whether gender mainstreaming remains a relevant and effective strategy for tackling contemporary gendered and intersecting inequalities. This section brings together a range of critical perspectives that examine how gender mainstreaming has evolved, where it falls short, and what might be needed to make it more 'useful' and transformative in the future. Across the contributions, authors use intersectional, decolonial, and feminist approaches to reflect on the concept's weaknesses and strengths.

In particular, Section 5 is structured around three interrelated thematic concerns: limitations, resilience, and potential. First, it exposes the conceptual and structural limitations of gender mainstreaming as it has developed since its adoption into policy frameworks in the 1990s – from its depoliticization to its inadequacies in accommodating intersectionality. Second, it addresses its resilience and adaptability in the face of democratic backsliding, rise of populism, authoritarianism, and anti-gender mobilisation. Third, it confronts the potential and future possibilities for gender mainstreaming, asking what kinds of epistemological, strategic, and institutional shifts are required for it to remain relevant.

Authors contributing both chapters and spotlights in Section 5 engage with these three aspects in diverse ways and through different case-studies – from the UK and Hungary to Sweden, Iran and the Pacific. They do not merely critique gender mainstreaming as a failed or obsolete strategy. Rather, they invite a rethinking of its foundational premises and its embeddedness within neoliberal, colonial, and technocratic logics. They urge scholars and practitioners alike to consider whether gender mainstreaming can move from a symbolic or procedural exercise into a genuinely participatory, intersectional, and counter-hegemonic policy tool. Ultimately, Section 5 invites readers to question not only whether gender mainstreaming remains 'useful' - but for whom, under what conditions, and to what end.