

Overview of examples from member states about national policies for gender mainstreaming

Dr Alba Alonso

University of Santiago de Compostela

Gender mainstreaming has shown significant capacity to shape how gender equality policies are designed, implemented, and evaluated across Europe. It is nowadays a well-recognized strategy that has brought to the fore the necessity to adopt a holistic perspective when tackling gender inequalities. Nevertheless, it has also raised significant skepticism as regards its lack of transformative capacity and its tendency to get evaporated in the policy-making process.

Due to this, the assessment of gender mainstreaming success needs for a refined definition of the strategy that captures its practice at different stages of development, and identifies when and why it 'evaporates'. Here, I will refer to four different phases: the mandate –when the strategy is adopted-; the tools and methods –when instruments are developed to facilitate its implementation-; the outcomes –when gender mainstreaming affects the measures and routines of the different policy sectors-; and finally, the impact in society.

Most studies have recognized the success with regard to the first stage. All European countries have passed laws, plans, and/or programs that include a general mandate on the need to foster gender equality as a transversal goal, and to assess all public policies from a gender perspective. Similarly, the equality architecture has been transformed not only to include gender mainstreaming as part of its core tasks but also to include a myriad of bodies specifically targeted at fostering this strategy. This includes the creation, amongst others, of gender equality units, interdepartmental commissions or advisory and consultative structures.

Similarly, the development of tools and methods is also significant across Europe. Although gender mainstreaming is often depicted as a strategy 'à la carte' with a variety of country-specific approaches, recent comparative studies acknowledge that some tools have been widely introduced. Sex-disaggregated statistics, gender

training, public consultations, and research on gender issues, for instance, represent an integral part of gender mainstreaming toolkits. Conversely, more complex instruments such as gender impact assessment and gender budgeting are much less generalized.

Despite this progress, the impact of gender mainstreaming on policy outcomes and organizational routines remains rather limited. Even though some policy sectors – such as education and employment- show some significant developments, the strategy is not an integral part of the policy-making process in the different countries –albeit with significant variations-. The adoption and introduction of its main tools are therefore necessary but not sufficient conditions for an effective implementation. The strategy is subject to resistances both in the form of lack of action and of active opposition.

What are the elements that could increase its effectiveness in bringing policy change? A growing body of literature engages with the practice of the different tools and methods, and highlights, amongst others, the importance of the following factors:

- Leadership and commitment: gender equality can only evolve from an issue-specific goal into a transversal goal if the leaders of a given institution actively support it in a daily basis.
- Legislative framework: a strong legislative framework regulating gender mainstreaming methods fosters their implementation in all areas and by different governments, and provides with a set of goals and measures to be implemented in the different policy sectors (gender parity, reconciliation between work and family life, elimination of gender stereotypes etc.), also in times of backlash.
- Toolkit: gender mainstreaming tools and methods are more effective if conceived collectively and not as isolated projects. For instance, the successful implementation of gender impact assessment is only viable if gender training, gender knowledge, and sex-disaggregated statistics are in place.
- Tailor-made instruments: tools and methods should be adapted to the particular institutional and political context to increase their effectiveness and minimize resistances.

- Resources: gender mainstreaming implementation is only successful and sustainable if financial and human resources are available.
- Monitoring, evaluation, and accountability: the strategy needs for an ongoing and transparent evaluation of each instrument to unveil its level of implementation as well as the impact it has both on the policy routines and on the policy outcomes.

The presence of these facilitating conditions has proven to be beneficial to bridge the gap in between the second and the third stage development of gender mainstreaming. Hence, tools and methods that are adequately supported, designed, and resourced, are much more likely to bring actual policy change.