Panel 3 – Gender matters: Gender mainstreaming in international organisations – best practices and impact on national policies and strategies

Elisabeth Prügl

I would like to sing an ode today to gender mainstreaming. The strategy has been much maligned in the 20+ years in which it has been implemented in international organizations and government agencies. But I think we are finally seeing the fruits of the persistent efforts of those who were not ready to give up on it.

As you well know, gender mainstreaming first appeared as an international mandate in the outcome document of the 1995 Beijing International Women's Conference. The Beijing Platform for Action formulated a strategic objective for governments to "integrate gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programmes and projects." In the following years, governments and international organizations tried to make sense of what exactly the mandate meant. There were important efforts of definition, including from the Council of Europe, and gradually governments and international organizations developed policies on gender mainstreaming. NGOs were critical about the speed of adoption, which from the perspective of activists sometimes amounted more to obstruction than adoption. Indeed, NGOs and civil society actors eyed the strategy with suspicion and rarely got active on behalf of gender mainstreaming. In contrast, there was excitement in the research community with scholars seeing in GM a potentially transformative strategy. If gender was indeed pervasive in the structures of society, the GM would not just achieve gender equality, but more broadly, a world that was more just and equitable. But others were skeptical. There was much debate over whether the state could be an ally for feminist efforts or whether it was patriarchal at its core and thus immune to reform, whether the strategy was subversive or whether it amounted to a taming of feminist politics.

In the first decade of the new millennium the scale increasingly seemed to tip towards those who found the state to be incurably patriarchal. Researchers observed that agencies wrote gender mainstreaming policies only to then not implement them in any serious fashion. Looking at the World Bank, Caroline Moser in 2005 coined the term "policy evaporation" to describe the way in which good policies seemed to flounder in the process of implementation due to a lack of staff capacity, hostile organizational cultures, resistance to gender equality or a lack of a sense of ownership (Moser and Moser 2005). But even when agencies implemented gender mainstreaming, scholars soon began to observe a ruthless tendency to instrumentalize gender equality for other purposes: it never seemed to be good enough as a goal in its own right and was systematically harnessed for other agendas. Gender equality soon became a solution for every problem ever put on the international agenda, a magic bullet to alleviate poverty, foster growth, enhance food security, reduce corruption, combat HIV/AIDS, end wars, prevent violent extremism, and create resilient societies. In its most pernicious version, gender

mainstreaming appeared complicit in perpetuating rather than combatting patriarchal institutions: rather than undermining militarism it helped militaries do war better, rather than destabilizing neoliberal capitalism it gave it a new lease on life. For some the problem was gendered bureaucracies engaging in standard operating procedures, turning radical demands into problems to be managed. But others diagnosed the strategy itself as profoundly defective: engaging with the state invariably led to cooptation. The strategy needed to be discarded.

In the face of this rather broad scholarly consensus, why do I want to sing today the praises of gender mainstreaming? I agree with the scholarly consensus: feminist ideas today have been broadly coopted into projects of government. But I disagree with the conclusion, i.e. that the state is an enemy for feminists. Instead, I would like to suggest a different conceptualization of the state: rather than thinking of the state and its institutions as monolithic actors, we should think of the state as a realm of contestation, as an arena for politics.

Thought about it in this way, the "cooptation" of feminism by the state becomes a double-edged sword. The effects of gender mainstreaming have been to create a widespread agreement that gender inequality is a problem and that it is the duty of the state to help overcome it. Clearly states and international organizations have not become feminists as a result, they are not carrying out the agendas of the feminist movement. Rather, the insertion of gender issues into spheres of government has made it possible for feminist voices to be heard. But to think that this would be the end of political struggles is to profoundly misunderstand the character of the state (including its national and international bureaucracies) as an arena for politics.

So, what are the reasons to be optimistic today? Where in the cooptation of feminism do I see hopeful openings for gender equality? I would like to suggest three tendencies, which make me optimistic, and insert one note of caution. The three tendencies refer to:

1. The continued expansion of GM;
2. The tendency of GM of create gender experts and gender expertise;
3. The possibility for feminist ideas to subvert the mainstream.

My note of caution refers to

4. Gender becoming a topic of international politics.

1. There are still significant differences in the degree to which international institutions have embraced gender mainstreaming. These differences largely derive from institutional mandates, and thus are linked to issue areas. GM was embraced early on in the "easy" fields, i.e. largely fields that were identified as "social" rather than "technical." Thus, the fields of education and health more easily embraced gender issues than the fields of trade and telecommunications.

But we do find today that GM is gaining traction even in some of these technical fields. With regard to trade, for example, UNCTAD in the past couple of years has begun to track the gendered impacts of free trade agreement as well as invested in research developing macro-economic models that assign value to care labor. Another example is the International Telecommunications Union, which is now looking at gender issues in the context of regulating the internet.

2. Gender mainstreaming has generated a cadre of gender experts who advance the issue of gender equality in multiple ways. Our research at the Graduate Institute has shown that gender experts come in two forms: (a) gender mainstreaming experts and (b) what we call "gender-and" experts, i.e. experts in particular issue areas such as gender-and-development, gender-and-conflict, gender-and-health, etc. Gender mainstreaming experts function as advocates and support institutional processes; they are the Trojan horses of feminism in governmental and inter-governmental institutions. Gender-and experts typically have expertise on other issue areas which they combine with knowledge on gender. They can draw on the expanding consideration of gender issues in many social science fields. While about 40 percent of gender experts in our survey of international organizations had no academic training in gender studies and were largely self-taught, there seems to be a trend towards a professionalization of the field. Even those experts without academic training on gender indicated that they encountered gender issues mainstreamed into their academic studies. The combination of advocacy and technical expertise augurs well for moving gender issues forward within the institutions of the state.

3. Even as gender equality has been coopted for other purposes, there is evidence of potentially transformative openings. The World Bank is one example: Gender experts there have introduced a new understanding of what it means for a market to work for women and have identified unequal family laws as key market-making institutions. If women cannot own or inherit equally, cannot choose where to live, and have a legal obligation to obey their husbands, they are not able to participate equally in markets. Markets in such contexts are thus structured to perpetuate inequality. This framing attacks not just unequal laws, but also questions neoliberal economic models that presume markets are by definition gender blind. Such models have long informed World Bank policy support operations with overall disastrous impacts for women. Gender experts are thus helping to push the Bank beyond disembodied market models. This is precisely what transformative gender mainstreaming should look like.

4. The big question is of course whether gender mainstreaming has mattered for women "on the ground"? Have women's lives improved, has gender inequality been attenuated as a result of gender mainstreaming? The question is impossible to answer within a theory of change that assumes a linear logic from inputs to outputs, outcomes, and impacts. But, as I have argued, the struggle for gender equality is deeply political – it cannot be achieved through administrative interventions alone. Indeed, as argued earlier, the main accomplishment of gender mainstreaming may have been to bring the issue to the table. And gender equality today

clearly has moved onto the mainstream political agenda – sometimes in ways not intended by feminists and indeed not liked by feminists.

Gender today no longer is only an unconscious force that guides the practices of people and government. Gender has become a play ball of international politics. Conservative forces have mobilized globally to counteract feminist aspirations – from the extremists fighting in Syria to the right-wing movements opposing “le theorie de genre” in France. But gender also is used as a resource for argument by activists around the world, bolstered by international norms and resources. For example, the women, peace, and security agenda kicked off by Security Council Resolution 1325 has helped mainstream gender into processes of peace building. Even governments reluctant to embrace what they consider a “Western” agenda, have faced pressure from local feminists to respond to the agenda. Thus, the Indonesian government in 2014 adopted a new law (the National Action Plan for the Protection and Empowerment of Women and Children in Social Conflict), refusing to call it a National Action Plan under 1325. But for activists in Indonesia it is precisely that: the law requires the protection of women (and children) during conflict and the participation of women in peace building. It translates 1325 into the local context, giving activists the instrument they need to advance their agendas.

In conclusion: When activists demanded the implementation of gender mainstreaming at the international level 20 years ago, they knew that this was a demanding strategy. The experience of the last 20 years proves them right – gender mainstreaming has been a source of despair for feminists but also now proves to have been worth the investment. We have to change the idea, however, that GM will bring about feminist utopias. More realistically, GM brings into the arena of governance the interests of women as a social force. Its contribution is to make gender a topic to be argued about in the many forums of government and international politics. The outcomes of these arguments cannot be administratively preordained. It will need activists both inside and outside government to carry the torch for what is still a radical idea, i.e. the idea that gender informs all social life and therefore needs our permanent attention.