

GENDER MAINSTREAMING: STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

Mainstreaming a gender perspective in all types of activities (referred to as gender mainstreaming) is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a means to the goal of gender equality. Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities - policy development, research, advocacy/dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects. Development of an adequate understanding of mainstreaming requires clarity on the related concepts of gender and equality.

Equality between women and men (gender equality): refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration – recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a 'women's issue' but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development.

Gender: refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/ time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context. Other important criteria for socio-cultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age.

Mainstreaming was clearly established as the global strategy for promoting gender equality through the Platform for Action at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The need to ensure that attention to gender perspectives is an integral part of interventions in all areas of societal development was made clear in that document. For each of the strategic objectives identified in Beijing specific reference was made to the importance of the mainstreaming strategy. For example, in the chapter on Women in power and decision-making paragraph 189 specifically addresses mainstreaming: *"In addressing the inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels, Governments and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively."*

The strategy of mainstreaming is defined in the ECOSOC Agreed Conclusions, 1997/2, as *"...the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality."*

Mainstreaming is not about adding on a 'women's component', or even a 'gender equality component', to an existing activity. It involves more than increasing women's participation. Mainstreaming situates gender equality issues at the centre of policy decisions, medium-term plans,

programme budgets, and institutional structures and processes. Mainstreaming entails bringing the perceptions, experience, knowledge and interests of women as well as men to bear on policy-making, planning and decision-making. Mainstreaming can reveal a need for changes in goals, strategies and actions to ensure that both women and men can influence, participate in and benefit from development processes. It can require changes in organizations – structures, procedures and cultures – to create organizational environments which are conducive to the promotion of gender equality.

THE MAINSTREAMING MANDATE WITHIN THE UN was reinforced within the United Nations system in three important documents.

The ECOSOC Agreed Conclusions 1997/2

The Agreed Conclusions established some basic overall principles of mainstreaming:

- Responsibility for implementing the mainstreaming strategy is system wide, and rests at the highest levels within agencies, departments, funds, and commissions; and adequate accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress need to be established.
- The initial definitions of issues/problems across all areas of activity should be done in such a manner that gender differences and disparities can be diagnosed – assumptions that issues/problems are neutral from a gender equality perspective should never be made. Gender analysis should always be carried out, separately or as part of existing analyses.
- Clear political will and allocation of adequate resources for mainstreaming, including if necessary additional financial and human resources, are important for translation of the concept into reality.
- Gender mainstreaming requires that efforts are made to broaden women's equitable participation at all levels of decision-making.
- Mainstreaming does not replace the need for targeted, women-specific policies and programmes, and positive legislation; nor does it do away with the need for gender units or focal points.

The Secretary General's communication on gender mainstreaming, 13 October 1997

More concrete directives were provided with the Secretary-General's communication in October 1997, with the following guidance to heads of departments, programmes, funds and regional commissions:

- Analytical reports and recommendations on policy or operational issues within each area of responsibility should take gender differences and disparities fully into account.
- Specific strategies should be formulated for gender mainstreaming; priorities should be established.
- Systematic use of gender analysis, sex-disaggregation of data, and commissioning of sector-specific gender studies and surveys is required.
- Medium-term plans and budgets should be prepared in such a manner that gender perspectives and gender equality issues are explicit.

The Outcome Document from the General Assembly, 10 June 2000

The Special Session of the General Assembly to follow-up the first five years of implementation of the Platform for Action specifically requested the United Nations to ensure gender mainstreaming through:

- Allocation of sufficient resources and maintenance of gender units and focal points.
- Provision of training to all personnel at headquarters and in the field as well as appropriate follow-up.
- Promotion of full participation of women at all levels in decision-making in development activities and peace processes.