

# EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTIONS

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**Abstract:** Gender mainstreaming, with its promise of gender transformation, equality and empowerment, has become a central pillar of development discourse, policy and practice. Yet, the implementation of these promises has largely been disappointing. Proposed ‘solutions’ have brought little new to the table. This article suggests that we need to rethink the link between policy and implementation, recognising that both are political processes and that while policies set agendas, both policies and their implementation are deeply influenced by societal factors. Drawing on critical development analysis and feminist writings, the article explores the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming in international development organisations in an increasingly complex, unequal and gendered world. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**Keywords:** gender mainstreaming; gender equality; empowerment; transformation; masculinism; neo-liberalism

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Gender mainstreaming (GM), with its promise of gender equality, empowerment and transformation, has become a central pillar of development discourse, policy and practice, particularly in international development organisations such as the UNDP, the World Bank and state-led development agencies. Yet, the implementation of GM in these institutions has largely been disappointing. Proposed ‘solutions’ have brought little new to the table. For the most part, they simply call for more of the same: more resources, stronger institutions, more accountability and greater commitment. Even the

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inclusion of men focuses on their role in HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence, and personal rather than gendered transformation. The uncritical, technocratic discourses of GM celebrate its potential for gender transformation while underestimating both resistance to GM and the instability of the concept itself. Clearly, new thinking and approaches are needed.

When policies fail to produce expected/promised results, the blame is often put on inadequate design. Yet, recent thinking suggests that policy is a political process more suited to setting agendas than to operationalising them and that policy implementation is deeply influenced by economic, political and cultural forces (Mosse, 2004; Li, 2007). This is particularly true of GM's transformative agenda, which challenges established gender hierarchies and practices. Drawing on feminist theory and critical development analysis, the article seeks to understand how societal forces undermine (or strengthen) GM policies and programmes, with particular attention to the possibilities and limitations for gender transformation. I limit my attention to international development institutions and draw from reports and publications on their GM policies and practices.

## **2 GENDER MAINSTREAMING: DISCOURSES OF EMPOWERMENT AND TRANSFORMATION**

In the 1990s, GM emerged as the operational wing of the development community's growing commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality. Initially rooted in the global social justice movements (Batliwala, 2007), in the 1980s, women's empowerment began to enter the discourse of mainstream development agencies as they sought to mitigate the harsher effects of neo-liberal policies (Bergeron, 2003; Elson, 2012). The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, with its call for women's empowerment and gender equality, provided an appealing discourse of hope and progress that gradually became a central pillar of mainstream development policies and programmes.

Scholars and practitioners contributed to these discussions as well. Caroline Moser (2005) placed gender and empowerment at the centre of development planning. While acknowledging the difficulties of measuring empowerment, Naila Kabeer nevertheless argued that at its core, empowerment would lead to both recognising and challenging social injustice and unequal power relations (Kabeer, 1999: 437; Kabeer, 2005: 13–16). Others raised questions about the role of power and the state (Rowlands, 1997; Parpart *et al.*, 2002), but the assumption that empowerment was a laudable and attainable goal remained largely intact.

Mainstream development agencies adopted the celebratory language of empowerment and gender equality, while largely ignoring the caveats about measurement and implementation.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) defined empowerment as 'about people—both women and men—taking control over their lives: setting their own agendas, gaining skills, building self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance' (CIDA, 1999: 8). The UNDP declared gender equality<sup>2</sup> and women's empowerment 'central to human development', boldly claiming that 'When development is not "en-gendered" it is

<sup>1</sup>As Anne Marie Goetz (1994) points out, bureaucracies, including those concerned with development, tend to incorporate information that agrees with their own views.

<sup>2</sup>Earlier concerns with gender equity, defined as 'the process of being fair to women and men', shifted to a focus on gender equality, seen as 'the equal valuing by society of both the similarities and differences between women and men, and the varying roles that they play' (CIDA, 1999: 7).

“en-dangered” (UNDP, 2002: v; UNDP, 2003). The World Bank joined the trend, albeit with a focus on efficiency and growth (Chant, 2012; Razavi, 2012a, 2012b).

Gender mainstreaming soon emerged as the key mechanism for achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment. Defined by the United Nations (UN) as the integration of gender into ‘the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres’ (ECOSOC, 1997: chapt. IV), GM was based on the assumption that ‘the gender order of a society can be changed through deliberate and focused interventions at every level’ (de Waal, 2006: 210). The optimistic, policy-oriented, ‘can-do’ language of GM entered the development lexicon, becoming a central pillar of development agencies. The UNDP concluded that the ‘why’ of gender work had been supplanted by the ‘how’—which simply required GM to be ‘everyone’s responsibility, everyone’s job’ (UNDP, 2002: 6, 20).

The pressure on international development agencies to achieve measurable results encouraged a focus on technical solutions (Narayan, 2005; Alsop *et al.*, 2006). An impressive array of analytical tools, including checklists, Gender Impact Assessments, awareness-raising, training manuals, expert meetings and data collection reinforced the belief that GM could be both achieved and measured (de Waal, 2006). GM moved ‘beyond politics’, beyond resistance and became ‘something that just needs to be done’ (Verloo, 2005: 351–52). ‘The political project of gender and development had been reduced to a technical fix’ guaranteed to work when applied with rigour and care (Cornwall *et al.*, 2008b: 7–8; Cornwall *et al.*, 2008a). The possibility that profound and intractable resistances to GM might derail these plans, particularly its more transformative goals, received little attention.

### 3 THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Yet, the achievements of GM policies and projects have been disappointing, especially in mainstream development institutions. While there have been some success stories -- law reform in Botswana, more women in the South African and Rwandan parliaments, female participation in the Burundi peace process and skill building in some national gender machineries—they are ‘not the norm’ (Rao and Kelleher, 2005: 57). Indeed, many agree with Andrea Cornwall’s lament that “gender mainstreaming” has run adrift ... the heart of the “gender agenda”—transforming unequal and unjust power relations—seems to have fallen by the wayside’ (2007b: 69; 2008b). Some argue that despite an increasingly sophisticated stock of analytical tools and gender experts, GM’s transformative potential remains in question (Rees, 2005; Mukhopadhyay, 2007).

In order to understand this gap between promise and performance, we need to explore resistances to GM policy goals and implementation. Ironically, at the level of policy discourse, GM, gender equality and women’s empowerment appear to be unquestioned aims for international development agencies. GM is a widely publicised goal of the UN, particularly the UNDP. The UN sponsored Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) include a focus on women’s empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). While initially emphasising women’s economic advancement as ‘smart economics’ (Chant, 2012: 201–2), the World Bank’s (IDRB) recent flagship publication, the *World Development Report (WDR) 2012*, openly acknowledges ‘the intrinsic value of gender equality’, even if hopefully connected to economic growth (Razavi, 2012a: 193; IBRD, 2012). State-led development agencies have sponsored projects to mainstream women into educational, economic and political institutions (ADB, 2012).

Yet, the commitment to implementing GM has remained in question. Concerns about the gap between rhetoric and progress began to emerge in the late 1990s. Key UNDP gender experts lobbied for an evaluation of GM within the organisation and its programmes (Rosina Wiltshire, personal communication, 2008).<sup>3</sup> The first report uncovered numerous problems, many of them institutional: the gender staff's isolation from management and other sectoral units, a weak gender skill base, little accountability or follow-up, limited opportunities for sharing experience and organisational learning, a hierarchical organisational culture, and reluctance to recognise gender personnel as professional colleagues (Schalkwyk, 1998: 4–5). A second UNDP evaluation in 2006 revealed little change, reluctantly concluding that despite some 'islands of success', UNDP policies were still characterised by 'good starts and lost momentum, intermittent declarations and mixed signals' (UNDP, 2006: iii, vi).

Other mainstream development institutions have experienced similar problems. Rao and Kelleher discovered deep-seated and entrenched resistance to gender transformation in many development organisations (Rao and Kelleher, 2005). A review of GM in nine international development agencies<sup>4</sup> discovered widespread, but generally unacknowledged, resistance within these organisations to gender equality programmes in the late 1990s (Aasen, 2006: 4–6). The African Development Bank's (ADB) study of 255 evaluations into GM policies and processes between the mid-1990s to 2010 reveals similar patterns (ADB, 2012). More specifically, a leading feminist economist has noted that the World Bank's much publicised slogan 'gender equality is smart economics' has failed 'to have any impact on most of the Bank's economists' (Elson, 2012: 182).

This widespread scepticism towards GM often affects the leadership of mainstream development institutions. The ADB evaluation discovered that the 'leadership [of major development agencies] has not consistently supported the implementation of gender mainstreaming policy' (ADB, 2012: 12). As we have seen, the UNDP evaluations reported subtle but effective opposition to GM at the most senior levels, leading to weak oversight and performance (Schalkwyk, 1998; UNDP, 2006). Research into GM policy and praxis in the South African UNDP office between 2002 and 2006 discovered committed junior staff, but aloof and disinterested senior management and little effective GM programming on the ground (Joseph, 2009). Indeed, in 1999, World Bank executives commissioned a report by two well-known gender experts to consider how to bring men into gender and development, but it was rejected at an early stage as 'too feminist' (Bedford, 2009: 55ff; Chant, 2012: 214).<sup>5</sup> The World Bank also put a predominantly male team of economists in charge of the *WDR 2012*, despite their questionable gender expertise or commitment to gender issues (Chant, 2012: 207; Elson, 2012).

Hostile institutional cultures and sceptical leadership have undermined the implementation of many GM programmes in major development institutions. The *WDR 2012* has been mired in problems. Perhaps to counter criticisms of its rather gender-insensitive handling of poverty reduction strategies and participatory poverty assessments (Schech and Vas Dev, 2007; Chant, 2012: 204), the World Bank invited a team of leading

<sup>3</sup>Rosina was a senior gender advisor in the UNDP during this period. She has worked in gender and development for over 30 years and is currently CARICOM's advocate for gender justice.

<sup>4</sup>The Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) produced an evaluation of UK's DFID, the European Commission, the ILO, NORAD, OECD/DAC, SIDA, UNDP and the World Bank (2002 and 2006) (Aasen, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Men began to enter development discussions in the early 1990s. While they were urged to play their part in the struggle for gender equality, the focus has largely been on men in HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence (Cornwall *et al.*, 2012: 2–6).

gender scholars to provide expert advice for the 2012 *WDR*. Yet, the first draft had already been completed before the first consultation, and its later presence on the web reflected none of the experts' copious suggestions. Repeated interventions produced only a few revisions to the final report, but the production team and its Advisory Board seemed unconcerned (Chant, 2012: 207). While applauding the 2012 *WDR*'s strong support for gender equality, feminist economists have raised a number of concerns, including little attention to the global crisis and the uncritical belief in globalisation as beneficial for women along with inadequate attention to gender relations, particularly the need to negotiate more equitable division of unpaid care work (Schech and Vas Dev, 2007; Razavi, 2012a, 2012b). A DFID sponsored meeting on women's political empowerment focused more on how to get women into politics than on potential resistances to that goal, including the masculinist<sup>6</sup> culture of most political institutions.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, GM's transformative potential in mainstream development agencies is not being realised. The question remains—what is (and needs) to be done?

#### 4 LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS IN ALL THE SAME PLACES

For the most part, mainstream development agencies have sought solutions within established institutional structures and practices. The UNDP and NIBR evaluations recommended similar 'solutions' (Aasen, 2006: 5). At an institutional level, the reports called for more gender training for senior management and gender focal points.<sup>8</sup> They also highlighted the need for improved accountability, with specific targets, strictly regulated from the top, more funding and better coordination with partner institutions (Aasen, 2006: 5–6; UNDP, 2006: 45–51). The ADB suggested similar solutions (ADB, 2012). At an organisational level, the reports lobbied for clearer goals, particularly for gender personnel, stronger leadership from senior management, improved accountability and incentive systems, and more attention to measuring results, regarded as a particular weakness of GM work. The reports also warned against the tendency for GM to evaporate at the organisational level and for gender projects to slip imperceptibly into a woman-only focus (Aasen, 2006: 5–10; UNDP, 2006). The ADB report suggested several options: the need to focus on activities that are already working well with gender (read women), such as education and health, incorporating a more fundamental analysis of gender power structures [women in development (WID) plus] and paying more attention to monitoring and evaluation reports. The potential difficulties facing the more ambitious WID plus suggestion were ignored (ADB, 2012: 14–15).

Reponses to these recommendations varied. The 1998 UNDP evaluation had little impact, but the second led to the establishment of the 2008–2011 Gender Equality Strategy and more financial support. Often tried development 'solutions'—capacity building through gender training, more gender tools, better planning and coordination, and greater commitment from staff, national counterparts and civil society—continued to provide 'answers' for weak implementation (UNDP, 2008). Yet, the NIBR report's discovery of widespread, often

<sup>6</sup>Masculinism refers to the qualities that are closely associated with power, although they can vary with different contexts (Hooper, 2001: 41).

<sup>7</sup>The meeting on 'Women's Political Empowerment: the state of evidence and future research' was sponsored by DFID and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (London, 11–12 September 2012).

<sup>8</sup>The gender focal points were responsible for gender activities, despite inadequate training, junior status and other responsibilities (Tiessen, 2007).

unacknowledged opposition to GM during the late 1990s provoked little discussion or interest (Aasen, 2006: 6). Neither did a UNDP gender equality strategy report's acknowledgement of a 'sometimes hostile organizational culture' within UNDP (2008: 25, 28, 40–41). Broader societal and organisational pressures affecting and even undermining GM, especially its transformative goals, were rarely discussed.

The inclusion of men and boys in development raised few questions about potential resistance to GM policies. The UN Division for the Advancement of Women's (DAW) Expert Group Meeting on 'The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality' (DAW, 2004) called for men and boys to support gender equality without considering possible resistance. A key background paper acknowledged the subtle but persistent masculine opposition to gender equality, yet left this hanging because it might undermine 'the practical steps required for achieving gender equality' (Lang, 2003: 9). A UNDP report admitted that it was easier to focus on 'more visible, less provocative activities like policies, guideline and data sets, rather than on more difficult, less visible processes to transform organizational culture and practice, as well as individual attitudes and behaviours' (UNDP, 2003: 9). Even a UNFPA report on the global rise in gender-based violence and the crises of masculinity recommended the same old band-aid solutions (UNFPA, 2005: 57–63, 85–92; UNRISD, 2005).

Many gender scholars and activists have produced similar well-worn 'solutions'. Rao and Kelleher highlighted the power of male bias and cultural practices to undermine GM, yet call for familiar 'solutions', such as strengthening women's activism, programmatic interventions and improved organisational processes (2005: 64–66). Moser and Moser (2005) look to culturally sensitive gender training, strengthening women's organisations, better laws, more accountability and more financial resources for challenging patriarchal practices—yet, all have been tried with limited success. The possibility that these well-travelled paths offer few answers is silenced by pressures to produce 'do-able', practical and measureable solutions. Yet, given GM's depressing track record, particularly in mainstream development institutions, rethinking and refocusing is clearly required.

## **5 RETHINKING/REFOCUSING GENDER MAINSTREAMING POLICY AND PRAXIS**

The fundamental reasons for the failures of GM have only begun to be discussed in mainstream development circles (Cornwall, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2008a). Meanwhile, GM policies continue to promise gender equality and fundamental change, while internal support and operational goals have been quietly scaled down (Verloo, 2005: 345–46; Standing, 2007); disinterested or even hostile institutional cultures and leadership continues to flourish; and gender is increasingly reduced to women and girls, with little attention to gender relations and structural inequality (Davids and van Driel, 2009; ADB, 2012; Chant and Sweetman, 2012). 'Good' policy remains the 'solution' of choice, yet provides few answers.

However, some recent scholarship on development policy and gender offers new possibilities for thinking about and doing GM. Chant and Sweetman remind us that the focus on women and girls as a development 'solution' is a classic WID perspective, which deliberately moves away from considering gender relations and structural equality (2012: 517; ADB, 2012: 37). The current focus on women and girl power in mainstream development agencies suggests that gender equality can be achieved by women and girls alone. Women and girls are represented as change agents who do not need to cooperate with men or reformulate

established gender relations (Chant, 2012; Chant and Sweetman, 2012). This assumption allows development agencies to frame gender equality as a problem for women and girls, enabling a focus on men as developmental ‘problems’ associated with HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence (Cornwall *et al.*, 2012), unrelated to the broader goals of GM.

When women and girls are seen as the solution and men as a problem, all kinds of structural inequalities and their gendered implications can be ignored. Indeed, mainstream development agencies pay little attention to the fact that men (and some women) still dominate economic, political and cultural institutions around the world. Poverty is presented as the key development problem, not the global elite or their neo-liberal ‘solutions’, despite the fact that in 2007, 98 per cent of the top executives of the top global corporations were men (Connell, 2010: 172). While the global elite is no longer entirely White or from the global North, it continues to be largely male and to produce a set of characteristics, which may vary with context, but are generally associated with the hegemonic masculine practices of rule that legitimate access to power and resources in particular contexts (Connell, 2005). Of course, not all men benefit directly from these gendered, classed and often racialised hierarchies, but even subordinate and marginalised males generally gain some privilege by virtue of being male (Connell, 2005; Cornwall *et al.*, 2012). While the current economic crisis, with its high youth unemployment and growing number of female breadwinners, is throwing up challenges to these assumptions (Razavi, 2012b), masculinist notions of leadership and power continue to be widely held (Hutchings, 2008), if increasingly contested.

The narrow focus on women and girls also obscures the fact that many women (and girls) gain from associating with powerful men and often adopt the beliefs and practices of the masculine elite as well as the gendered practices that produce that hierarchy. This complicates the notion that women and men are separate, contained categories, who automatically identify with their sex. Thus, the binary construction of gender as two distinct, opposing groups so prevalent in development discourse disregards important complexities, particularly the fluidity of gender identities, the gendered character of structural inequality and the need to address gendered practices and relations that undermine gender equality and maintain gendered (as well as classed, racialised, ethnic and other) privileges in an increasingly unequal global world (Lind, 2010; Cornwall *et al.*, 2012).

The assumption that policy can solve gender inequality and other developmental problems has also come under fire. The weak implementation of GM policies has often been blamed on poorly written policies, but recent scholarship questions the optimistic belief in the unproblematic link between ‘good’ policy and ‘good’ practice so common in development agencies and bureaucracies (Quarles van Ufford *et al.*, 2003). Mosse has pointed out that policy is a political process, designed to mobilise and maintain political support, to facilitate coalitions and alliances and to legitimise rather than orient practice (2004: 648–49). Thus, policies emerge out of political struggles over what can be said, what needs to be done and what kind of citizens are required to achieve particular policy goals. The notion of governmentality is useful here, as it highlights the role of policy and policy makers in larger projects of citizenship and nation building, and explains governance as a set of discourses, programmes and policies designed to produce compliant and supportive populations (Watts, 2003: 26; Mosse, 2004: 643; Li, 2007).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Li is referring to the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, which explains governance as a set of discourses, programmes and policies designed to produce compliant and supportive populations, which, she argues, tells us more about the ‘project of rule’ than ‘how’ rule is accomplished (Li, 1999; 2007).

However, governmentality tells us more about ‘the project of rule’ than how rule is accomplished. While policy may aim to create certain kinds of citizens and behaviour, its implementation is affected by the assumptions, practices, conflicts and compromises that drive the politics of everyday life, both in society and within organisations (Li, 2007). The assumption that policy defines praxis thus ignores the complexities of a process that is ‘often fragile, contested, and built on compromise.... One where “hegemony is not imposed but has to be worked out”’ (Lewis and Mosse, 2006: 4).

This caution is particularly relevant for GM policies and programmes that call for change in often hostile or indifferent environments. For example, government sponsored laws to protect women have often been ignored, subverted or weakly enforced by officials as well as the local populace when they challenge local gendered assumptions (IBRD, 2012: 160). In Trinidad and Tobago, a proposed national gender policy calling for sexual and reproductive rights soon foundered under fire from religious leaders and hostile citizens, including many in government (Mohammed, 2011). Young men and women caught up in the current economic crisis are raising questions about established power structures and seeking alternative practices (Razavi, 2012a). These examples support Daly’s call for focusing ‘more on problematising the relationship between gender mainstreaming and society/societal change’ because gender inequality has its roots in society, and societal resistance can stymie even enlightened policies (2005: 447).

## **6 UNDERSTANDING RESISTANCE TO GENDER MAINSTREAMING**

New ways of understanding the impediments to GM are clearly necessary. Diane Perrons warns, in order ‘for gender mainstreaming to become genuinely transformative and retain feminist aspirations, an understanding of the processes leading to gender inequality [in all its variations] is crucial’ (Perrons, 2005: 405). The critical thinking explored earlier offers some assistance.

I begin by discussing the paradox that the policy discourse of GM, gender equality and women’s empowerment has become widely acceptable and unproblematic, yet is constantly being subverted. GM policy discourse has become separated from practice, particularly in mainstream development institutions (ADB, 2012). Gender has become a synonym for women and girls, and GM a promise of inclusion rather than transformation. As Mosse (2004) and Li (2007) point out, this paradox is best understood by examining the gendered assumptions and practices that dominate these institutions, their leaders and the social, political and economic contexts in which they operate.

For the most part, mainstream development organisations accept and support neo-liberal values associated with global capitalism and global democracy (Bedford, 2009; Marchand and Sisson-Runyon, 2012). As discussed earlier, these values generally associate leadership and power in the global economy with certain hegemonic masculine traits. While increasingly contested in our multi-polar world and unequal world, the assumption that males (and a few women) who follow local gendered power rules are the ‘natural’ leaders of society continues to be widely held (Connell, 2010; Cornwall *et al.*, 2012). The persistent lack of interest in gender questions among World Bank economists, as well as the cavalier treatment of feminist suggestions for the 2012 WDR and the rejection of a study on men and development, leaves little doubt about the World Bank’s dominant gendered culture (Chant, 2012). While some differences no doubt exist within the Bank’s diverse workforce, worldwide gender-based violence (WHO, 2002) reminds us that geographical diversity is no guarantee of tolerance.

Clearly, the transformative goals of GM and gender equality disturb the gendered assumptions that have framed Bank policy and practice.

The widespread support for neo-liberal global solutions to development problems helps to explain why mainstream development agencies have paid so little attention to the unequal privileges associated with gendered structures of power. Hence, their preference for equating women and girls with gender and for seeing them as change agents rather than address the impact of toxic gender relations on inequality around the world (including the 'developed' North). Men and masculine privilege are left off the hook, as are cultural, economic and political institutions. Development agencies prefer to focus on men as problems, leaving the male elite (and their female allies) out of the picture. For example, the MDGs promise that education would guarantee women's empowerment has been troubled by the Caribbean experience where female dominance in education has not overcome difficulties with employment and job security. Yet, this problem has aroused little interest in gendered hierarchies in the workplace, while fuelling alarm about male underachievement (Johnson, 2005: 61). The focus on men as development problems that can be fixed also sidesteps discussions about the structural consequences of the intersection between gendered practices and cross-cutting identities based on class, race, ethnicity and sexuality.

Indeed, mainstream development institutions generally assume that neo-liberal institutions, leaders and practices are best placed to improve the lives of the poor and vulnerable (particularly women). This worldview silences discussions about global capitalism's impact on increasing global inequality and the role of global elites in this process (Chant, 2012). It also shuts down discussions about the current economic crisis and the comparison between an increasingly prosperous global elite and a beleaguered majority, hence the lack of support in mainstream development agencies for open discussions of gendered structural inequality and the part gender plays in allocating power and resources (Chant, 2012; Cornwall *et al.*, 2012).

The broader societal pressures to maintain the gendered status quo are very powerful as well and often undermine efforts to transform gender relations and gendered structural inequalities. These pressures are very powerful and often go unseen. They play an important role in what can be said through policy and what policies are implemented. Yet, they are rarely discussed, permitting mainstream development agencies to promote the entry of women and girls into economic and political realms that are biased against them. They legitimate development projects that 'advance' women while ignoring the gendered assumptions, relations and structures that limit their opportunities and maintain unequal care work burdens. This failure also facilitates the creation of laws to protect women without attention to the deeply felt beliefs and practices that undermine that goal.

## **7 THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING**

The failure of mainstream development organisations to properly identify and operationalise GM makes for depressing reading. Some development scholars and practitioners have even concluded that GM should give up its transformative language, scale back to limited and do-able reforms, and leave GM's transformative goals to politics (Standing, 2007: 110). This argument is understandable given that 'despite decades of struggle, large parts of "the mainstream" in all our societies, including their androcentrism and male bias, remain stubbornly intact' (Woodford-Berger, 2007: 131). Yet, leaving gender transformation to the formal (and informal) political processes ignores the daily struggles around gender that take place in every corner of the world, and the fragile, complex and multi-levelled nature of social

change. As Judith Butler points out, transforming gender requires staying on the edge of what we know, questioning our own certainties and through that, creating openness to risk that permits ‘another way of knowing and living in the world’ ... that expands ‘our capacity to imagine the human’ (Butler, 2004: 228).

While mainstream international development organisations are difficult to turn around, deeply embedded in global power structures and largely unconscious of their gender biases (despite the triumphant language of GM), transformation can occur in many places. Gender-sensitive women and men working in mainstream organisations can bring new ideas about women, work and power to the institution (Evans, 2011). Findings that demonstrate ongoing challenges to gender equality have the potential to unseat comfortable assumptions about gender equality. A few gender-sensitive leaders can shake up complacent employees, raise uncomfortable questions and steer programmes in a more transformative direction (Razavi, 2012b).

Cornwall, Edstrom and Greig argue that information about the complexities of gender and the consequences of gendered power structures can highlight the need for change. If the political and economic consequences of gender for structural inequalities are highlighted, then the need for gender transformation will become more apparent. They call for ‘a reappraisal of fundamental structural power relations’ rather than the current emphasis on changing men’s behaviour and attitudes (Cornwall *et al.*, 2012: 15). They also believe more nuanced understandings of gender within mainstream development agencies can spur new thinking and greater understanding of both what gender is (as opposed to sex) and the consequences of gendered assumptions on human relations and material opportunities. Thus, they place rethinking gender at the centre of their suggestions for change (Cornwall *et al.*, 2012: 15–16).

Cornwall, Edstrom and Greig are particularly emphatic about the need to ‘return to the deeper structures of gendered oppression’ rather than the current focus on personal change of individuals (Cornwall *et al.*, 2012: 16). They believe that publicity about the political, economic and social consequences of gendered assumptions and practices holds the possibility for changing attitudes and practices within key development agencies. They also argue that the current crises of masculinity thrown up by economic decline and political upheaval offer opportunities to ‘highlight the political economy in the context of the bankruptcy of neo-liberalism’ (Cornwall *et al.*, 2012: 16).

While clearly important, these proposals challenge assumptions that are deeply embedded in people’s consciousness, reinforced by powerful social institutions and regarded as normal by most people (both women and men). They will require education and protracted, strategic political bargaining. Because they challenge existing power structures and their leaders, including many who work in mainstream development institutions, this approach cannot be a short-term strategy—it will require long-term struggles to change attitudes as well as structures.

Thus, achieving GM’s transformative goals will require new ideas, language and practices. The transformational work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can provide important lessons, not least of which is the potential of subtle, sometimes even covert strategies for change. For example, stories collected about women peace activists have challenged the assumption that men make/define both war and peace.<sup>10</sup> Resistance can also take the form of silent acts and everyday performances, such as wearing a veil to oppose colonial rule or participation in political rallies usually solely for males (Butler, 2004; Sullivan, 1998: 228). Agency also comes in many forms. Kabeer’s (1999) definition provides a benchmark, yet

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<sup>10</sup>From *1000 Peace Women across the Globe*, Scalo Books: Zurich.

for many, agency is partial and incomplete, a process rather than a full understanding. This *agency of intention*, where people seek change, but often in constrained circumstances and partial understandings, is also essential for change (Ortner, 2001; Parpart, 2010).

This more complicated notion of agency reminds us that gender transformation requires flexibility, patience and determination. It also benefits from supportive change agents, who understand the constraints on GM policies and the need for safe spaces in which to explore and practice new ways of thinking, being and acting. Drawing on his work with environmental NGOs in Zimbabwe, Mike Kesby points out that marginalised people and groups need ‘an arena within which to “rehearse for reality”’ (2005: 2039). Reality is often difficult to see and can be uncomfortable to acknowledge. Moreover, it is always ‘partial, situated and subject to future challenge and transformation’, requiring repetition and practice if it is ‘to be stabilised within a new grid of powers’ (Kesby, 2005: 2052). Thus, Kesby brings consciousness raising and spatiality together with Butler’s notions of performativity, to provide new insights into the processes of transformation (2005: 2053–2054). Catherine Ali (2012), building on Kesby’s approach, discovered that experienced change agents in Trinidad were able to help clients see the consequences of their destructive behaviour and to provide safe spaces for practicing new, more productive ways of living that ultimately could be translated into change in the larger world.

This story of individual and small group transformation can also apply to larger groups and even mainstream development organisations. Change is possible, but it has to be understood as an ongoing struggle rather than a battle to be won or lost. As we have seen, mainstream development organisations have demonstrated the limits of change by policy prescription. Gendered practices and power relations are embedded in social, political and economic contexts and have to be addressed in those settings. There is no one shot solution to gender transformation nor are solutions readily apparent. Individual change can seem like small drips in the bucket of life, incapable of addressing broader issues of societal and institutional change. Yet, we never know when individual consciousness may spawn more fundamental change. Small challenges to the gender order offer possibilities for genuine transformation.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Gender mainstreaming has become another development buzz word, promising to integrate gender equality and women’s empowerment into institutions, programmes and policies, and even more ambitiously, to transform the global gender order. These promises have been presented as reasonable, reachable goals that simply require the right mix of technical solutions/drivers, the will to put them to work and the necessary accountability to ensure implementation. However, implementation has proven extremely difficult, particularly for international development agencies. Yet, the focus on finding the ‘right’ policies and technical tools has remained the default position for GM, including its more transformative agendas. The possibility that deeply held resistances might subtly (and not so subtly) undermine this quest has rarely been addressed, much less seen as a reason to abandon this grand and ambitious project.

As we have seen, while some argue for scaling down GM’s more transformative goals, the critical development scholarship discussed earlier suggests a different approach. These scholars urge mainstream development institutions to move beyond WID in order to understand the more fluid, complex nature of gendered practices. They emphasise the critical role of societal forces in both opposition to and support for gender equality, both within

mainstream development organisations and broader society. They highlight the need for more research into and publicity about the impact of gendered hierarchies and gendered structural inequality on people around the world. This ambitious agenda will require innovative leadership, openness to a changing world and the ability to learn from others. It will also require practical short-term strategies along with more protracted, subtle efforts towards gender transformation. While daunting, these approaches do hold out the possibility for creating a fairer, more equitable gendered world.

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