Sisyphus' Sisters: Can Gender Mainstreaming Escape the Genderedness of Organizations?
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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2006

To cite this Article Benschop, Yvonne and Verloo, Mieke(2006)'Sisyphus’ Sisters: Can Gender Mainstreaming Escape the Genderedness of Organizations?’.Journal of Gender Studies,15:1,19 — 33

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09589230500486884
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589230500486884

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Sisyphus’ Sisters: Can Gender Mainstreaming Escape the Genderedness of Organizations?

YVONNE BENSCHOP & MIEKE VERLOO

ABSTRACT Currently, gender mainstreaming is presented as bringing new élan to gender equality policies. Gender mainstreaming is a gender equality strategy that aims to transform organizational processes and practices by eliminating gender biases in existing routines, involving the regular actors in this transformation process. In this article, we question the aspirations of gender mainstreaming. Can gender mainstreaming escape the genderedness of organizations; can it genuinely effect change, or does it inevitably become compromised? Our analysis of a case project within Human Resource Management in the Ministry of the Flemish Community in Belgium shows that gender mainstreaming does indeed bring about changes, but that it does not break down the genderedness of organizations substantially. While gender mainstreaming invokes an image of cooperation between equal parties that pursue a dual agenda of business needs and feminist goals, our analysis shows that crucial power differences between those parties determine the outcome. The complex social dynamics of gender mainstreaming entail compromises in the context of these power differences, which seriously hinder the transformative and innovative potential of gender mainstreaming.

KEYWORDS: Gender mainstreaming, equality policy, personnel management, participatory research, Belgium

Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is a gender equality strategy that aims to transform organizational processes and practices by eliminating gender biases in existing routines, involving the regular actors in this transformation process (Council of Europe, 1998). Gender mainstreaming originates in development policies, and was endorsed at the 1995 Beijing conference on women. Gender mainstreaming is regarded as an opportunity to counter the gender bias in regular policies, and to avoid the continuous reproduction of male norms in policy making. It addresses the genderedness of organizations: the material and discursive constructions of masculinity and femininity that shape and are shaped by organizational systems, work practices, norms and identities. As such, gender
mainstreaming fits in a long standing history of feminist interventions in the gender order of society (see for instance Cockburn, 1989; Curry, 1996; Dickens, 1994; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Walby, 2005).

Gender mainstreaming is often presented as something that brings new élan to the stale domain of gender equality policies. Its main asset would be its ability to be really innovative and transformative (Mazey, 2000; Rees, 1998). Alternatively, it is seen as a complementary strategy designed to overcome the shortcomings of equal opportunity policies (Council of Europe, 1998). At present, there is an abundance of propaganda about gender mainstreaming, written by advocates of this new strategy. The literature offers mainly policy texts, guidebooks and opinion articles that provide prescriptive models, while academic analyses and reflections are still pending. All this rhetoric on progress impedes serious reflection.

In this paper, we present a critical discussion of gender mainstreaming and its aspirations. Can gender mainstreaming escape the genderedness of organizations or is gender mainstreaming as ineffective as Sisyphus’ labor was? First, we discuss the theoretical literature on gender mainstreaming that portrays it as a relatively new feminist intervention strategy. Second, we confront the aims of gender mainstreaming with a case project on the integration of gender in Human Resource Management (HRM). This case serves to illustrate and clarify the benefits and pitfalls of gender mainstreaming and the (im)possibilities of sustainable gender transformations.

Gender Mainstreaming as a Feminist Intervention Strategy

The history of equality policies and feminist interventions is riddled with problematic constructs and ongoing theoretical debates that are fragmented by paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries (Walby, 2005). Different strands of literature and different contexts generate different conceptualizations of goals (equal opportunities or gender equality), different problem diagnoses (unequal treatment or lack of access to resources) and different interventions (legislation or organizational change). In this paper, we consider the constructs and debates relevant for the evaluation of gender mainstreaming, discussing insights from feminist organization studies and from the gender mainstreaming literature.

As we are concerned with understanding the impact of gender mainstreaming in the context of organizations, we first look at the critical literature on feminist interventions in organizations. Two important issues emerge from this literature. Firstly, considerable attention has been given to the understanding of policy implementation problems. Webb (1997) gives a critical overview of such problems with the implementation of EO legislation noting how policies were not backed by political will, how the people responsible for implementation held weak institutional positions, and how support from senior management and resources were lacking. As a result, the intended goals were not met and overt discrimination persisted. Similar results can be found in the scarce reflections on gender mainstreaming in organizations where the lack of instruments to shape and implement this policy is addressed. Furthermore, it has been noted that organizations are reluctant to put gender equality high on their agendas and that the existing equality infrastructure is often too weak to influence that agenda (McBride-Stetson & Mazur, 1995).
Implementation continues to be a problem, as Ely and Meyerson’s (2000) critical analysis and skeptical evaluation of feminist interventions involving organizational cooperation illustrates. They note how a business rationale provides a legitimate, alternative language when gender language is controversial. They show how the framing of interventions in terms of contributions to the dual agenda of business success and gender equality constitutes the risk of losing gender and of leaving the status quo of unequal gender relations unchanged. Hence, the implementation of a gender equality agenda is obstructed as a result of such processes. Analogously, Hearn (2004) addresses the paradoxes involved in the pursuit of the dual agenda. According to Hearn, the conceptualization of gender as an organizational issue evokes organizational tendencies towards de-gendering and neutralizing. He concludes that resistance to gender and to gender equity language is itself a gendered process. This leads us to the conclusion that feminist interventions in organizations face discursive challenges especially when they rely on organizational cooperation.

The second issue concerns a critique of the underlying model of equal opportunity in feminist interventions in work and organizations. Kirton and Greene (2004) review the literature and conclude that the major problem with both liberal (equal treatment) and radical (equal outcome) EO models is that they fail to challenge the status quo. As Cockburn (1989), so eloquently puts it: ‘It seeks to give disadvantaged groups a boost up the ladder, while leaving the structure of that ladder and the disadvantage it entails just as before’ (p. 217). Equal opportunity policies are often accused of incorporating a notion of disadvantage (Bacchi, 1996; Gardiner, 1997; Rees, 1998). The framing of women’s positions in terms of disadvantage means that positions held by men are the norm that women should strive to achieve, which reinforces gendered power processes. Severe criticism has been voiced concerning the notion of disadvantage for this reason. However, Liff (1999) rebuts this critique as far as the more radical and structural model of equal opportunities is concerned, because this model does avoid a male ideal worker, at least in theory. Cockburn (1989) states that the ‘short agenda’ which entails treating the symptoms of discrimination and disadvantage, or developing specific policies to improve the position of women, is a first necessary step. She advocates a model that focuses on a ‘long agenda’ of challenging the status quo, transforming organizational structures and cultures, while avoiding a construction of differences as inferior. Kirton and Greene (2004) make reference to gender mainstreaming literature and acknowledge the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming.

When turning to the literature on gender mainstreaming, the nature of the model of gender equality is again a core issue. Walby (2005, p. 326) notes that the multifaceted feminist debate on ‘sameness–difference’ prevails in the analysis of gender mainstreaming, which contains all the classical arguments about difference, universalism and particularism. In theory, gender mainstreaming is meant to go beyond the sameness–difference dichotomy. In the conceptualization of the Council of Europe (1998, p. 8), gender is a socially constructed definition of women and men and their relationship, and gender is characterized by unequal power relations. In such an understanding, gender equality means equal visibility, power and participation of both sexes. Furthermore, differences between men and women are not seen as an obstacle to equality: ‘Gender equality includes the right to be different’ (Council of Europe, 1998, p. 9). We use these notions of gender and gender equality for our analysis in this paper, because they transcend the sameness–difference dichotomy. However, it is
disputed whether practices of gender mainstreaming actually go beyond this dichotomy and achieve a transformation of existing gender standards and practices (Verloo, 2005; Walby, 2005).

A distinction similar to the ‘long’ and ‘short agenda’ is made in the gender mainstreaming literature, between ‘tinkering’, which is equal treatment, ‘tailoring’ situations to the needs of women, and ‘transforming’ policies in which new standards for everyone replace the segregated institutions and standards associated with masculinity and femininity (Rees, 1998). Gender mainstreaming is typically described as a transforming strategy and can also be seen as aspiring to the long agenda. As such, gender mainstreaming is expected to skirt the disadvantage trap, because of its theoretical ambitions to breach the genderedness of organizations, which goes beyond a comparison of positions of women and men.

One more important debate within the gender mainstreaming literature concerns the tension between ‘gender equality’ and the ‘mainstream’. In gender mainstreaming practices, established (mainstream) goals, such as economic growth, compete with the goal of gender equality for prioritization, which makes gender mainstreaming an inherently contested process that is never simply about adopting a new policy (Walby, 2005). In the critical organization literature, this is referred to as ‘the dual agenda at work’. The tension between the goal of gender equality and mainstream goals reveals itself – for instance – in the fact that, due to the genderedness of organizations, a deep commitment to gender equality can not be expected to exist prior to a gender mainstreaming endeavor. This means that gender mainstreaming in practice always has to find a way to deal with existing gender bias in order to change the gendered systems, structures and cultures. However, there is very little attention in research or development material on the competition of goals and the dynamics of the genderedness of organizations in the process of change. Most manuals depict gender mainstreaming as a harmonious process, and any tension between the mainstream and gender equality is usually dealt with by advocating education, training and the involvement of gender experts. This can be seen as an attempt to de-politicize the process of gender mainstreaming. Stark (1998) is one of the few authors to deal with this issue. She emphasizes that the absence of commitment to gender equality is problematic for gender mainstreaming. While she acknowledges that existing mentalities of regular actors are the underlying problem, she argues that organizing obligations (to participate in training or to apply instruments) is potentially more successful than trying to change attitudes. Her claim that feminist researchers should disregard negative attitudes and emotions goes hitherto unchallenged.

Our review of the debates on gender mainstreaming leads us to the following identification of the aims of gender mainstreaming. Its first aim is the diminution of the operational and implementation problems that have plagued earlier gender equality policies. A second aim is to truly address the genderedness of organizations and avoid the trap of losing the focus on gender. To do so, gender mainstreaming needs to deal with the tension between gender equality and mainstream goals and answer the question if this tension should best be solved by obligations placed on organizational members or should it necessarily involve a struggle to change attitudes. A final aim is the claim to transformative potential compared to earlier models that are based on the notion of disadvantage. In the case study below, we will examine how our gender mainstreaming project related to these aims.
The Case of Gender Balance

The case on which we have based our discussion is ‘Gender Balance’, a project on the integration of gender in Human Resource Management at the Ministry of the Flemish Community in Belgium. The Ministry of the Flemish Community was founded in 1992 because of the state transformation of Belgium towards federalization, and comprises the departments of Employment, Science, Innovation and Media, Education, Health and Culture, Urban Planning, Agriculture and Domestic Affairs (http://www.vlaanderen.be/). The Ministry has an elaborate HRM program that includes a yearly cycle of individual performance planning, coaching, evaluation and appraisal. From its start, the Ministry engaged in an equal opportunities program and in 1997, it was decided that this program had to be integrated with the overall HRM program. The initiative for this integration was taken by the Equality Department which signaled that no attention was paid to gender in HRM. To be consistent with the Ministry’s ambitions to be an active Equal Opportunity employer and to set an example for other Flemish employers, the integration of gender in HRM was deemed necessary. Therefore, with the approval of the Council of Secretary-Generals, the project was commissioned from the authors by the Equality Department. The authors and the Equality Department discussed and agreed on a gender mainstreaming project that would include both research and interventions, and that would actively involve the civil servants who are responsible for HRM at the Ministry.

At the start of the project, underlining its importance, there was a classic pattern of sex segregation in the Ministry of the Flemish Community. The sex ratio of the Ministry showed 36% women and 64% men. The figures from the equal opportunity plans and the personnel report (statistics available at the start of the project were from 1997) illustrate a four-fold sex segregation. Vertical segregation is found as 81.3% of the highest positions are held by men against 18.7% held by women. The Ministry does not have clear statistics on horizontal sex segregation, but the impression is that men are overrepresented in technical and management functions. The segregation in full-time positions is also extensive as 98.8% of men hold a full-time position, compared with 64% of women. Finally, the division of permanent appointments is gendered as well: 92.6% of men, compared with 71.9% of women hold permanent positions in the organization.

Several actors participated in the project besides the two academics from the research team; the Council of Secretary-Generals and the staff from HRM and the Equality Department also committed themselves to participate in the project. The HRM staff were involved in three interdepartmental committees on personnel management (Personnel Interdepartmental Workgroups, PIWs), under direct supervision of the Council of Secretary-Generals. Those three committees cover the respective areas of HRM, education and personnel information, and are the main designers of personnel management in the Ministry. Both strategic and operational HRM staff participate in these committees. The small Equality Department staff (six people) is responsible for the internal equal opportunity policy of the Ministry. The department monitors gender relations in the organization through annual statistics. There was a limited budget for the researchers, and the project was included in the HRM year plan. Thus, the conditions for successful gender mainstreaming (Council of Europe, 1998) such as political and bureaucratic will, an emancipation infrastructure, sex specific statistics, resources (time and money), techniques and consistent monitoring, were relatively favorable at the start of the Gender Balance project.
Methodology

The methodology used is best described as a combination of research and intervention methodology. Following the definition of gender mainstreaming, the researchers advocated a participatory action approach involving the regular actors in the project. As gender mainstreaming is a long term process intended to continue beyond the project, this approach was thought to build ownership for the envisaged changes and to transfer expertise on gender to the organization. The benefits of a participatory approach were recognized by the Equality Department, who also welcomed the expansion of the number of people working towards gender equality. Formally, both the Council of Secretary-Generals and the HRM staff agreed to participate. For the authors, this meant a double role as researchers and consultants.

The Gender Balance project combines a qualitative case study approach with an action experiment, as it uses data gathered from interviews and document analyses as input for interventions. The combination of research and intervention manifests itself also in the techniques and tools used. Consultation and participation is designed to help build support for gender mainstreaming and build legitimacy for proposed measures, to ensure that existing expertise is utilized effectively (Vennix, 1998). Analytical techniques and tools have been used to identify to what extent gender inequality within the organization exists and is recognized as such by organization members. They have been built into personnel management processes, and hence have also been used for intervention. Educational and consultation techniques have facilitated intervention through the confrontation between

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Table 1. Overview of methodology in the six phases of the project

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basis</td>
<td>Consultation of key bureaucrats to draft a mission statement on mainstreaming gender in HRM</td>
<td>Research: interviews, document analysis. Intervention: draft mission statement, definition of project goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption</td>
<td>A seminar leads to the adoption of the mission statement by the top bureaucrats</td>
<td>Intervention: seminar, consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>The self-assessment instrument is used to transfer gender expertise to the organization and knowledge about the organization to the researchers</td>
<td>Research: development of self-assessment instrument, data collection. Intervention: sensitization, self-assessment, education &amp; consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Self-assessments are input for a SWOT-analysis, which is theoretically grounded and results in a preliminary action plan</td>
<td>Research: interpretation of self-assessments, SWOT-analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuance</td>
<td>Intensive consultation leads to a differentiated tailor-made approach, in which checklists, procedural commitments and education are central elements</td>
<td>Intervention: proposal of action plan, discussion of analysis and actions, construction of instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Recording of the research and intervention results of the project</td>
<td>Intervention: structure of responsibilities, time</td>
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organizational and academic knowledge. Table 1 presents an overview of the methodology used in the six phase project.

In the initial Basis phase of the Gender Balance project, data on the HRM and equal opportunity policy and processes of the Ministry were gathered from documents and ten interviews with top bureaucrats and key civil servants in the field of HRM. Interviewees indicated how they understood the concept of gender and what they considered to be the gender problem in the Ministry. The intervention component in this phase was the drafting of a mission statement and a project goal by the researchers, based upon the interviews. The second, mostly interventionist, Adoption phase was the adoption and dissemination of the mission statement. A two-hour seminar for the Council of Secretary-Generals concentrated on building commitment and a sense of ownership of the project. Major functions of the seminar were to construct a joint definition of the gender problem in the organization and to transfer knowledge about gender in organizations.

The third phase – Learning – combined research and intervention methodology and mixed analytical, educational and participatory techniques. The researchers designed a self-assessment instrument, SMART (Simple Method to Assess the Relevance of Policies To gender) for the civil servants of the Personnel Interdepartmental Workgroups engaged in policy development, implementation and evaluation of HRM. SMART is a questionnaire to identify the state of the art of HRM activities and the routines of gender discrimination inscribed in those activities. The first part asks each participant for an overview of her/his current activities, tasks and responsibilities in the field of HRM. The second part deals with the assessment of gender relevance, or direct and indirect gender effects, in those HRM activities. In the third section, participants describe where and how issues of gender are already incorporated in existing processes and procedures in their respective fields. If there is no such incorporation, participants assess the necessity of integrating gender and present their ideas of how this should be done. Also, people assess their personal expertise about gender in organizations. The introduction to SMART has an educational function as it explains the concepts of gender, gendered division of resources and gendered rules and regulations in organizations. As the civil servants perform their own analyses, the SMART instrument is intended to contribute to the sensitization to gender issues. SMART is also a research instrument as it collects qualitative data on the whole range of HRM-issues. Yet, participants are not so much respondents as informants, whose data differ depending on the HRM-issues they are working on. It was distributed to all thirty-five members of the committees; the final response rate was 86%.

The next – Analysis – phase built on research methodology only and was conducted by the researchers who interpreted the informants’ self-assessments and confronted them with theories on gender in organizations. By means of a SWOT analysis^4 the Strengths and Weaknesses regarding gender in the Flemish administration’s personnel policy were subsequently identified. The identified Opportunities and Threats were used to make recommendations for actions and measures. The result was a comprehensive proposal regarding actions and measures for gender mainstreaming in HRM. The following, Planning, phase was predominantly interventionist. Its first part consisted of intensive discussions in the PIW’s about the SWOT-analyses and the feasibility of the recommendations. The revised recommendations resulted in a differentiated plan of twenty-eight action points (see the Appendix). The plan included various instruments developed by the researchers, such as a checklist to avoid gender bias in job descriptions and criteria for gender expertise in selection committees. The second part of this phase was
to discuss how the implementation of the proposals could be guaranteed and the collaboration of the civil servants ensured, according to the principles of gender mainstreaming. Finally, the Selection phase resulted in a final report that included a detailed structure of responsibilities for implementation and monitoring, and a time schedule. It was agreed that these responsibilities were to be inscribed in yearly personal performance plans, so that compliance of employees could be monitored.

**Gender Mainstreaming in Action**

This section presents the findings of the Gender Balance project. What were the benefits and pitfalls of gender mainstreaming? Firstly, the construction of the gender problem in the *Basis* phase showed that gender mainstreaming entails specific social dynamics. The resistance that was built up in a history of positive discrimination attempts was proved to narrow the goal of the project. The problem definition proposed by the researchers was adopted relatively unchallenged. It read: ‘The gender relations at the Ministry are out of balance; resources (like time, money, positions, information) are currently distributed over the sexes unequally; cultural rules and regulations are gendered and HRM is gender blind, reproducing or even reinforcing existing inequalities’. For those at the top of the Ministry to avoid gender bias was acceptable as a goal, while there was no support for pro-active policies towards gender equality. Consequently, in the subsequent Adoption phase, the top bureaucrats took the initiative to choose gender neutrality as the project goal. The researchers then defined gender neutrality as the equal and fair distribution of resources and the abolition of unintended discriminatory effects of personnel policies. For the researchers this implied a rethinking of the rules of the organization; as became clear later in the project, this implication was not shared by the organization.

During the whole project, the researchers met with various organizational entities, such as the Council of Secretary-Generals and the personnel committees, during their regular meetings. This made gender part of the regular agendas of those meetings, as was intended. The researchers noted that the shocking shift in gender relations brought about by the researchers’ presence in the often exclusively male meetings seemed to cause feelings of embarrassment. These feelings, perhaps amplified by the necessity to discuss gender in organizations with designated feminists, became visible in the amount of giggling that characterized these meetings. In the discussions, these emotional responses have not been addressed explicitly, in favor of a pragmatic and rational communication style.

Secondly, the self-assessments in the *Learning* phase revealed that insights in the genderedness of the Ministry were fragmented and incomplete. Overall, three people indicated that they had reasonable gender expertise (two women), eighteen participants assessed their gender expertise as limited (twelve men), seven people (four women) did not answer the question and two men articulated that gender expertise was not needed in their work. Although the assessments of gender effects were incomplete, quite a few indirect gender effects of personnel policies have been listed, such as the exclusion of part-timers from higher positions and training opportunities, the outsourcing of typical female jobs in catering and cleaning, and the exclusion of non-permanent personnel from evaluation committees. The data from the self-assessments also show how the organizational culture, with its norms on availability and the legitimacy of absence, was gendered. For instance, political activities, as frequently engaged in by men, were a
legitimate form of absence, while women’s maternity leave raised questions about their dedication to the organization. A few policy areas, such as teleworking, and job descriptions were seen as directly relevant for gender. Remarkably, while the analysis of gender effects did point at various issues, the proposed solutions were rather one-dimensional. The few suggestions made regarding the integration of gender in HRM narrowed the gender problematic down to a representation issue that was to be solved by an equal representation of women and men.

Additionally, the complexity of gender mainstreaming became most obvious in the Analysis phase, when the SWOT-analyses made by the researchers met with considerable resistance. These SWOT-analyses dealt with issues like the job evaluation system, contracts, performance assessment procedures, selection procedures and management development. A presentation of the detailed SWOT-analyses of the different issues is beyond the scope of this paper, but an overall SWOT-analysis for the Ministry is presented in table 2 below.

Although the presentation of the SWOT-analyses was meant as a transfer of knowledge on the genderedness of their organization, the civil servants were reluctant to discuss the analyses. A defensive attitude was taken: people thought they were being found guilty of the weaknesses identified, which evoked a lot of resistance. As this threatened the acceptance of the results of the analysis and the continuation of the project, the researchers had to skip this discussion, and decided to proceed with the discussion of concrete actions. As a result, the opportunity to address knowledge deficiencies and biased attitudes perished. The discussions were held in the three committees on personnel management. These were lively interactions in which the researchers questioned and probed for suggestions, amendments and commitments from the committee members. This resulted in the Nuance phase in an accepted plan of twenty-eight concrete action points that outlined different responsibilities for researchers, committee members, Equality Department and Council of Secretary-Generals (see the Appendix for an overview). To give some examples, the researchers were to develop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
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<tr>
<td>- strive for a professional HRM</td>
<td>- competence and willingness to be innovative and transparent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- certain sensitivity of gender issues, especially in terms of the representation of women</td>
<td>- growth of the workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- availability of sex-segregated statistics</td>
<td>- availability of sex-segregated statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- emancipation infrastructure</td>
<td>- emancipation infrastructure</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- highly bureaucratized procedures</td>
<td>- lack of organizational autonomy in some areas due to the Belgian federal system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- lack of knowledge on gender</td>
<td>- societal norms on gender relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- narrowing down of gender issues to disadvantages of women (a lack of skills and ambitions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the conviction that gender neutrality is already an organizational reality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- abundance of resistance to and fear of privileging women</td>
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Instruments and checklists, the committees were to use those instruments and initiate
several projects, such as the creation of gender-balanced mobility pools, a mentoring
project, a project on the identification of high potentials and one on the integration of
gender issues in regular training courses. Examples of actions for the Equality
Department are the examination of the access rules to training programs and the
organization of a network on gender issues, whereas the Council of Secretary-Generals
was to reward managers with a good track record on promoting women.

Finally, three priorities were chosen from these twenty-eight action points in a joint
meeting with the three chairs of the personnel committees, representatives from the
Equality Department and the researchers. Part-time work, performance management and
attention for New Employees were prioritized because of their importance for gender
relations, feasibility of the actions proposed and significance for actual developments in
the Ministry. Such actions could jump on the bandwagon of ongoing initiatives. The civil
servants perceived this as increasing the chances of implementation. The chairs of the
committees made the final decision for the three priorities elaborated below. The gender
analysis that the researchers deemed necessary was incorporated into the prioritized
actions after all, as will become clear in the following section.

At the Ministry, part-time work was an impediment for training and career
possibilities. Part-time work in higher positions, for example, was impossible and rules
on part-time work institutionalized an inherently lower valuation of this type of work by
defining part-time work as ‘diminished performance’. Since women work part-time more
often than men (36% vs. 1%), this represents women as low achievers, while there is no
proven relation between the hours worked and the quality of work. The actions adopted
entailed a gradual approach, starting with redefining ‘diminished performance’ to simply
‘part-time work’, increasing possibilities for part-time work and organizing a workshop
about Leadership and Part-time Work to counterbalance prevailing prejudices. The
second priority was performance management. At the Ministry, performance rules
favored those staff members able to display unlimited dedication, as only extra output
was rewarded. The implicit norm states that good employees always prioritize their work
over other obligations and activities. That people may be inspired by other activities, in
ways that may benefit the organization, is denied. Given the division of responsibilities
in society, such rules unintentionally favor men over women. The proposed action was a
research project on current performance standards, on the time needed to realize the
desired output in relation to the actual and the perceived workload. The last priority
concerned New Employees. At the Ministry, processes of assessment and appreciation of
personnel were based on abstract norms of what constituted good employees that did not
match the day-to-day reality of many employees. This abstract employee was also the
basis for job descriptions, job responsibilities and career policy. The concept of the New
Employee, meaning an emancipated and economically independent citizen, who
combines work and care responsibilities (OECD Report, 1991), was introduced to
counter this abstraction. Focus groups were proposed to examine the needs and
experiences of ‘New Employees’ in the Ministry, so that HRM could be grounded in the
realities of the workforce.

Overall, the benefits of gender mainstreaming in this project are mostly visible in the
prioritized actions, which accounted for the mainstreaming of gender into regular HRM
processes and practices. The pitfalls had to do with the problem definition that was not so
shared after all. There has been a tendency to simplify the gender problematic and an
ongoing resistance to gender analysis, which made it difficult to accomplish the goal of
gender mainstreaming: that the regular actors inscribe gender in their work.

Aims of Gender Mainstreaming

The question now remains regarding the extent to which the aims of gender mainstreaming
to achieve sustainable gender transformations have been realized. These aims have been
identified above: one is to solve the operational problems connected to the lack of
instruments and the weak infrastructure for gender equality; other aims are to address the
genderedness of organizations, to avoid the risk of ‘losing gender’ and to move beyond the
notion of disadvantage to a transformation of the organization. Some of these aims of
gender mainstreaming have proved feasible in practice.

Gender mainstreaming in the case described above has indeed contributed to the
solution of some operational problems found in simple equality policies. Several gender
mainstreaming instruments have been created and they have since been used in other
projects (Hondeghem & Nelen, 2000). Furthermore, a greater legitimacy of gender issues
has been realized in this case. The involvement of the personnel committees has resulted in
an increase in the number of people working towards gender equality. The visibility of the
Equality Department has increased and its access to HRM-decision makers has improved,
so that gender has been placed on the organization’s HRM agenda (Verloo & Benschop,
2002) more firmly.

Concerning the aim of addressing the genderedness of organizations, we observe some
progress as well. In the Gender Balance project, this becomes visible in the three priorities
outlined above. In all the proposed actions regarding part-time work, performance
management and New Employees, existing – fossilized – gender norms and routines have
been questioned. None of the actions refer to ‘disadvantages’ of part-time workers or New
Employees and the proposed solution entails a rearrangement of the organization, not a
change in the behavior of part-time workers or New Employees. Some actions, such as
changing the definition of part-time work, illustrate how gender mainstreaming can
successfully address the discursive level of organizational change. In all these actions
gender has not been ‘lost’ in the project and a ‘long agenda’ is pursued, which is a notable
achievement.

However, the project did not challenge the genderedness of the Ministry on the whole,
not only because of the limited number of action points but also because of the ongoing
dominance of a ‘short agenda’. While mainstreaming and this project’s action plans
problematize the organization’s contribution to gender inequality, the civil servants
involved did not seem to recognize that problem. At the Ministry the problem is still
commonly attributed to women who are lagging behind in some way. Mainstreaming
efforts are thus confronted with a discourse in which gender is seen in terms of
disadvantage. This has been most clear in the dynamics concerning the definition of the
problem to be addressed. The choice of gender neutrality as the main goal of the project
enabled a seemingly joint problem definition at a discursive level, but in reality a split
occurred. For the researchers, it was essential that this meant not only an equal and fair
distribution of resources, but also the abolition of unintended discriminatory effects of
personnel policies. For many in the organization this interpretation was easily lost as they
believed that their organization was gender neutral already and therefore the problem had
to be about women. Even if they were convinced by some of the examples of genderedness
that were presented by the researchers, they saw them as exceptions to the rule of gender neutrality rather than symptoms of genderedness. Power relations, and the participatory approach chosen for the project, made it impossible for the researchers to impose their definition of the problem upon the organization. The question is if, and to what extent, such a schism in the definitions of problems can be explicitly considered and overcome given the power differences between researchers with their (limited) expert power and the Ministry with their (substantial) position power.

In point of fact, the participatory approach to gender mainstreaming chosen in this project requires special skills of all those involved. The participatory nature of the Gender Balance project has necessitated the confrontation of the civil servants at the Ministry with the ‘unbearable strangeness’ of the feminist researchers during their regular meetings. Communication was hampered not only by the subject, but also by the researchers’ contribution to the often exclusively male meetings. The assumption of open communication and a free exchange of ideas in participatory research (Vennix, 1996), therefore, proved to be untenable as power differences, presuppositions and conflicting discourses about masculinity and femininity impeded open communication.

Looking back on the social dynamics of our gender mainstreaming project, we conclude that the assumption of cooperation that is part of the definition of gender mainstreaming is problematic. At the Ministry, complex problems regarding gender relations had to be translated into familiar or ambivalent (gender neutral) terms to link up with the regular actors’ frames of reference. This has diminished the possibilities to profit from a theoretically informed analysis. Moreover, as an explicit confrontation with feminist theories and, therefore, a more profound problematization of the genderedness of organizations was largely avoided, due to the anticipated resistance, the evident lack of gender expertise (as self-diagnosed in SMART) was not fixed. We argue that the risks of conflict avoidance and even self-censorship are not specific for this project, but are inherent to gender mainstreaming, and call for explicit attention for conflict regulation in the design of mainstreaming projects. In fact, it might even be more fruitful to conceptualize gender mainstreaming as a contestation rather than a collaboration process.

The project also shows that the problem of a lack of commitment to gender equality is not solved easily in the way Stark (1998) advocates. Her position that participants’ mental commitment to gender equality is not crucial, and obligations can be a substitute for lacking this deep commitment, is not supported by our project. Gender mainstreaming cannot ignore existing attitudes, since organizing obligations to ensure equality implies the critique of attitudes and the questioning of existing routines. Stark (1998) is right in suggesting that it is better to take the organization of obligations as a starting point, because changing gender blind attitudes is a notorious policy problem. Yet, forced responsibilities merely evoke new escape attempts: the Equality Department has informed us that not all promised action plans have been realized. Apparently, the inclusion of staff obligations in personal year plans has not been enough to secure implementation of action plans. Notably, the least motivated civil servants also have the least results, and try to pass off their unwillingness as incomprehension. Hence, Stark’s claim that feminist researchers should abstract from attitudes and the underlying emotional stratum and substitute this by organizing obligations to ensure gender equality does not hold. We argue that gender blind and gender biased attitudes are important manifestations of the genderedness of organizations and that any gender mainstreaming project has to deal with these attitudes and the accompanying escape tendencies.
Concluding Remarks: Sisyphus’ Sisters

Taking stock of gender mainstreaming as a feminist intervention strategy, we have to conclude that gender mainstreaming is not breaching the genderedness of organizations in the way it aspires to, precisely because it involves the inclusion of regular actors. Our case suggests that the necessity for compromise with existing attitudes hinders its transformative potential. While gender mainstreaming is positioned as participatory, invoking an image of cooperation between equal parties pursuing a dual agenda of business needs and feminist goals, we have seen how the crucial power differences between the parties determine the outcome. The feminist researchers remain organizational outsiders, while the civil servants have the power to decide what is an acceptable agenda for change. This means that the agenda for gender equality will necessarily be watered down. Clear examples of these mechanisms in the Gender Balance project were the choice for gender neutrality as the central goal of the gender mainstreaming efforts, and the decision to play down the analysis because of the resistance and incomprehension it invoked.

So, is gender mainstreaming then as futile as Sisyphus’ labor was? Is it impossible to use this strategy to transform the genderedness of the organization? We acknowledge that the realities of gender mainstreaming are not without problems, but our experiences in the Gender Balance project show that this strategy also offers sufficient advantages. Gender mainstreaming transcends the liberal feminist approaches of equal treatment and equal opportunities for it addresses fossilized norms and complex power relations rather than reproducing simple notions of disadvantage. Although as the result of the project the gendered discourse changes to ambiguous at best, it does change. The prioritized actions on New Employees and part-timers show how the Ministry started to include ‘others’ than abstract ideal workers in their discourses and realities.

Hence, we recognize the family connection, but rather think that gender mainstreaming can be seen as the work of Sisyphus’ sisters. In the face of the problem of one step forward, two steps back that is so common to equality work, they are slightly smarter than their brother, and organize their work so that they can start from a slightly improved position every time. By tapping in on the rhetoric of the organization, improving the position of the Equality Department, enhancing the legitimacy for gender issues, broadening the range of people working towards gender transformation and organizing obligations for agreed upon action points, they build the will and resources to work towards gender equality, even though they know they are part of a process that will go on for a long time.

Notes

1 Sisyphus is a character in Greek mythology who was punished by the Gods and condemned to push a heavy rock up a mountain daily only for it to roll back down at the end of the day. Hence, the expression Sisyphus’ labor refers to repetitive, hard work that does not lead anywhere.

2 The classical argument for difference reads that women differ from men essentially and that a revaluation of feminine values, life experiences and/or characteristics is called for. A central debate in gender studies focuses on universalism and particularism, the first referring to the commonalities of women as women claiming that there are universal problems shared by all women; the latter stating that differences among women are crucial and hence attention for the particularities in context is needed.
This section discusses the case organization providing more contextual information on the Ministry of the Flemish Community and its decision to commission this project. The next section discusses the specifics of Gender Balance as a combined research and intervention project. An overview of the design of the project in six phases has been provided in table 1. This section is deliberately kept descriptive to avoid confusion between design and analysis of the project.

A SWOT analysis combines an internal examination of Strengths and Weaknesses of a program or organization with an examination of Opportunities and Threats in the external environment (Jackson et al., 2003).

References


OECD (1991) *Shaping Structural Change, the Role of Women* (Genève: OECD).


Appendix

### Table A1. Action plan Gender Balance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Action point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td>Checklists on job evaluation, teleworking, changes in legal regulations and personnel planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criteria for gender expertise of selection committees members</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultation of other federal actors concerning personnel selection</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification of relevant sex segregation statistics, development of segregation measure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proposal for anchoring gender issues in new committee on personnel management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proposal for strategic analysis of training and education needs (with committee Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee HRM</td>
<td>Focus groups on the experiences and wishes of ‘New Employees’ (with committee Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of checklists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research project on gender effects of teleworking on employees and organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research project on performance norms and workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification of high potentials for Management</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development, including attention for female high potentials (with committee Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research project on the gender effects of turnover, organization of exit interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mobility pool to counter replacement problems (with committee Personnel Information)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Committee Education</td>
<td>Development of specialized courses on gender in HRM and integration of gender issues in seminars and courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training for managers who deal with part-time working employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring project with 50–50 m/f protegees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Personnel Information</td>
<td>Redefinition of part-time work in legal regulation from ‘diminished performance’ to part-time employment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research project on extending the possibilities for part-time work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of checklists and criteria on gender expertise</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research project on gender effects of various selection procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality Department</td>
<td>Additional gender sensitive assessment of high potentials</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workshop on Leadership and part-time work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization of network on gender issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research project on genderedness of legal regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examination of the access rules to training programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council of Secretary-Generals</td>
<td>Covenant on gender expertise and representation of women in decision making bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bonus for managers with a good record for cultivating female talent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>