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Gender Mainstreaming Practice and Potentials in Helping Development Practitioners Understand and Reduce Poverty and Inequality

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Abstract

Gender issues are gradually emerging as an integral part of decision making in all spheres of human endeavour. Analysing gender issues help to promote equitable gender relations in all human interactions. A number of methods of gender analysis used by development practitioners aimed to ensure equal gender participation in public life. In addition to gender intervention policies, gender mainstreaming has gained such a massive number of admirers since its emergence in development discourse. This is due to two main reasons, first, the perception of the concept as a modern approach to gender equality in public life, and secondly, the level of promotion it has received from international organisations (Daly, 2005)

Despite the general level of awareness of the concept of gender mainstreaming, there is still a degree of misunderstanding of the term. This has marred its unalloyed acceptance as a development strategy within some conservative circles. Nevertheless, the realisation that incorporating gender dimensions into development projects improve overall project outcome has contributed to the overwhelming endorsement of mainstreaming a gender perspective as a strategic shift in development discourse.

This paper which is divided into four sections, looks at 'Gender mainstreaming' as a methodology of gender analysis, examining its actual implementation and prospects, in terms of helping development practitioners understand and reduce poverty and inequality in the society. Section one introduces the concept and methodology of gender mainstreaming, beginning with a definition of gender, gender analysis, inequality and poverty. Section two looks at the emergence of gender mainstreaming in current development discourse. Section three deals with the practices and potentials of gender mainstreaming, it looks at some of the constraints that could hinder its usefulness in poverty and inequality reduction initiatives. It also examines some criticisms of the concept. The conclusion is a recap of key arguments raised in the paper. While the concept has received worldwide popularity, feminist movements view it with some distrust.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Gender issues have become increasingly recognised in all spheres of human endeavour as critical components of decision making. Although, there is much awareness about the term, there is still a gap in interpretation, in view of confusion that blurs the use of the term (IFAD, 2000) often construed to mean women (FAO, 2004). However, a good understanding of the term is sine qua non to a better appreciation of the whole concept of gender mainstreaming, as gender "encompasses both biological and socio-cultural aspects of identity" (Allen 2011, p. 42) which are highly dynamic and context specific. Gender refers to "social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men" (UN, 2001). Gender recognises the cultural variation of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' which defines privileges, expectations and values accorded to women and as well as men in different contexts.

Analysing gender issues help to promote equitable gender relations in all human interactions. It is the analysis of the social construct of women and men with the aim of achieving equity in relations and outcomes for both women and men. Gender equality is the preferred terminology within the United Nations system instead of 'equity', this preference is on the basis of the need to distance issues of women advancement from social justice interpretation derived from socio-cultural and religious views that often results to women subordination. It also ensures that women and men are able to develop their full potentials without reference to their gender class (OSAGI, 2001).

Gender analysis begins with definition of the desired gender outcomes, and then proceeds to identify problems and issues requiring solution. Optimal recommendations and decisions are implemented while outcomes are monitored and evaluated (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1996) against desired objectives. "Gender analysis is a tool for decision-making. It is a method of examining systematically and consistently how gender differences are affected by government action, and communicating that information to decision-makers" (DPMC, 2002, p. 2). The implication of this definition is the equally importance of the analysis and communications aspects of the process. It should be noted that the quality of the analysis will depend on the availability of adequate and reliable information. Gender analysis looks at the differences both in the lives of men and women including those that result to inequality with the objective of incorporating such understanding into policy development, as well as service delivery.

Inequality could manifest both vertically and horizontally. Vertical inequality is inequality among individuals and households, while horizontal inequality defines inequality among culturally and relationally defined groups, such as among men and women. For the purpose of clarity, inequality in this paper refers to horizontal inequality, defined as "inequalities among groups, with common felt cultural identities" (Stewart, Brown, and Langer, 2007, p. 4). This form of inequality manifests in multifaceted pattern, it includes inequality in political, economic, social and cultural recognitions (Stewart, Brown and Langer, 2007), which leads to the disempowerment of the affected gender, and reduces the welfare of individuals in that gender class beyond that which they would merit as individuals. This is because their 'self-esteem' reflects the overall welfare of their gender class (Stewart, 2002) which instils a notion of unfair treatment (Ravallion, 2004) in the minds of the effected gender class. Gender dimensions of inequality include gender gaps in education, employment, socio-political recognition and access to productive resources such as land.

"Poverty relates to, but distinct from, inequality" (Haughton and Khandker, 2009, p. 3) and it impinges on the ability of the affected gender group to harness their full potentials. The concept of poverty used in this paper relies on World Bank's definition as "pronounced deprivation in wellbeing". (World Bank, 2000) Some scholars defined it as deprivation (UNDP, 2006) while others claim that it represents deprivation (Stewart, et al, 2007) and thus, overcoming it would require public policy measures aimed at increasing equity in gender participation in, economic, social and political shapers, of the society. For instance UN (2005, para. 58) affirms that, any poverty reduction initiative would be incomplete without addressing inequality, discrimination and representation from a political standpoint. Poverty outcomes are also affected by societal 'norms, values, and customary practices' that lead to exclusion and discrimination of women (World Bank, 2000). Therefore, developing appropriate policies that seek to bring gender issues into the mainstream of the society would help to promote equity in gender opportunities and outcome for both gender classes by ensuring that the state and social institutions become responsive to gender issues.

2. Concept of Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is one of the most encompassing strategy for the achievement of gender equality (Lang, 2009), which is complimentary to anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies in the pursuit of gender equality policy initiative. Officially adopted in 1985 (UN, 1986) in the 'Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women' which was a product of the United Nations "Third World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi" (Bastia, 2000, p. 9) and Council of Europe (1998). This was reinforced and endorsed by the 'Platform for Action' at the end of United Nations

fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in 1995 which established mainstreaming a gender perspective as a key approach towards promoting gender equality (UN, 1995; UNHCR, 1998; Bastia, 2000).

Gender mainstreaming is "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality" (UN, 1997, chap IV resolution 1, annex A). It is about bringing gender issues into the mainstream of the society and does not preclude activities which target women's needs, designed to promote gender equality (OSAGI, 2001; OSAGI, 2002; UNDP, 2007) such as affirmative actions, public policies and programmes designed to ensure equality and gender balance in public life.

Gender mainstreaming aims to bring about a shift in understanding of the problem of gender inequality realising that gender equality is an integral part of development (UNDP, 2000; Lang, 2009) which secures rights to human and social justice, as well as other social-economic goals for both women and men (OSAGI, 2002). Whereas there is no general, contextual blueprint for the application of gender mainstreaming (Lang, 2009), the underlying goal, however, should be the narrowing of gender gaps and inequality by bringing gender issues into the mainstream, since ideological practices and beliefs in the mainstream determine opportunities and privileges. It also influences societal rational for resource allocation (UNDP, 2000).

3. Practice and Potential of Gender Mainstreaming

In a study on, 'mainstreaming gender in World Bank lending', Murphy (1997) argues that gender objectives embedded as part of the main project objective instead of forming a separate component often achieved their gender goals. OSAGI (2002) reaffirms that the benefits of incorporating gender dimensions into development projects improve the overall project outcome, comparative to similar projects within the same sector, which lack gender objectives. By focusing on gender inequality outcomes and the identification of processes that cause them, development practitioners are able to address causes of inequality in project design and implementation. However, the challenge that could result from this is the pattern of manifestations of some subtle and insidious institutional gender bias norms operating below the level of conscious, analytical gaze in organisations, making it difficult to discover. For example, prescriptive gender bias, which relates to how any gender class

should behave, may discriminate against females on a job role considered agentic (Gill, 2004) even though females with agentic qualities have comparable competence level on a job role as their male counterparts. They, however, suffer social discrimination based on perceived violation of common gender stereotype (Curhan and Overbeck, 2008; Rudman and Glick, 1999 and 2001; Gill, 2004). Any hiring strategy based on such gender bias will increase gender inequality (Luzadis, Wesolowski and Snavely, 2008) particularly, against women which will affect their economic welfare (Rudman, 1998) thereby deepening poverty crises (Kelkar, 2005).

In spite of the increase in opportunities for women's advancement over the years (Coward, 2010; OSAGI, 2002; Bustelo, 2003), there are still evidence that women continue to suffer both institutional and societal forms of inequality and discrimination (Kelkar, 2005), and are among the poorest and most discriminated around the world (UNDP, 2007). Irrespective of the level of awareness about gender mainstreaming and gender equality policies, gender remains one of the determinants of societal recognition, while perception of individuals, and access to resources and opportunities are usually dependent on gender class distinctions.

A study of gender mainstreaming in the context of Europe, Central Asia and the CIS regions (UNDP, 2007), suggests the existence of gender biased inequalities against women in post socialist countries. Although, some of these inequalities occur as a result of the transitional policies of these countries, others occur due to the resurgence of conservative ideologies, subtle and insidious gender bias norms that perpetuate the marginalisation of women. In Tajikistan, the prescriptive gender biases in land distribution has perpetuated the marginalisation of women "despite their formal rights to land" (UNDP, 2007, p. 14) thereby resulting to increased gender oriented inequality and poverty. A land reform framework which incorporates gender dimension could help secure legal rights over land for women.

In addition to gender intervention policies, gender mainstreaming has gained such a massive number of admirers since its emergence in development discourse. This is due to two main reasons, first, the perception of the concept as a modern approach to gender equality in public life, and secondly, the level of promotion it has received from international organisations (Daly, 2005), such as World Bank and the European Union. However, the ambiguity in gender mainstreaming literature, although politically focused, has raised a number of questions due to the lack of clear distinction between the work that seeks to promote the concept theoretically and that which seeks to advance it as a policy making strategy (Daly, 2005). The distinctiveness of the concept, is its approach of institutionalising equality through embedment of 'gender sensitive' culture, norms and practices into public policies, such as the adaptation of gender mainstreaming into the World Bank systems and

European Union (Booth and Bennett, 2002). The EQUAPOL research project 2002-2004 on gender integration into public policy framework, in eight European countries selected on the bases of their past public policy culture as well as gender relationship management history, found a wide reception and adoption of gender mainstreaming in the focus countries (Daly, 2005). This was mainly due to their history of public policy making and growing institutionalisation of the concept by international and regional development corporations.

Irrespective of its trans-national acceptance as a powerful strategy to address inequality and poverty crises, especially those affecting women, by incorporating gender sensitive policies and programs into the mainstream. The concept has drawn a number of critiques who argue that, even though it has brought about positive changes in closing gender gaps in socio-economic and political discourses, it too works against women in at least three identified ways, which include the functional, economic and bureaucratic reductions of women equality agenda. The functional reduction of the concept to a "checkbox equality" (Lang 2009, p. 338) which measures projects by their comprehensive benefits to both gender classes, without reference to women's agenda, seems to contradict the feminist conception that gender mainstreaming as a development agenda for addressing women's empowerment issues (Lang 2009, p. 338). However, the concept is all encompassing as well as addictive, recognising that men, as well as women, face different levels of discriminations in different contexts. This has caused apprehension within various feminist movements that the functional reduction effect would "either always include men or sideline an explicit women's equality agenda", (Lang 2009, p. 339) with the implication of relegating inequality to the background.

The second critique of gender mainstreaming is the reduction of fundamental 'democratic norms', 'institutions' and 'practices' to a mere economic question, arguing that the concept does not add any value beyond the gratification of women's economic empowerment using equality as a cardinal point. (WECF, 2005) (cited in Lang 2009, p. 339) There is the misconception that gender mainstreaming might not bring any value addition to public policy discourse with reference to issues that do not directly bring economic benefits to address gender inequality and poverty. Incorporating gender dimensions into development projects improves the overall project outcome (OSAGI, 2002). However, focusing on its value added, blurs understanding of the cardinal objective of the concept and is capable of relegating it to the background, there is a "need for a radical restructuring of masculinist governance" (Lang 2009, p. 339) and a shift in ideology that would emancipate women from subordination. Development practitioners, therefore, need to focus on the central objective of gender mainstreaming, which centres on, the achievement of equality for both women and men while incorporating a gender dimension to development projects and public policies.

A third critique of the concept of gender mainstreaming is the 'bureaucratic reduction' which hides "women's issues in the state" (EWL, 2005) (cited in Lang 2009, p. 340) actions and as well as lack of practical inputs from civil society thereby causing increased resistance to the use of the strategy by feminist movements. There is a general feeling among feminist movements that reliance on gender mainstreaming would not produce the level of radical transformation required to achieve gender equality, due to the fusion of the concept into state bureaucracies as a panacea to de-radicalize feminist agenda.

Beyond the functional, economic and bureaucratic reductions, there is the notion that, the concept is a top down strategy to achieve the state and supra-state agenda. Others claim that, its definitional ambiguity blurs understanding, which potentially works against women's equality initiatives, and in order to be relevant, should be combined in a two-tier system designed to identify women's equality measures (Lang, 2009). Neoinstitutionalists have noted persistence in global gender inequality, although, there has been some improvements in understanding and acceptance of the concept in public life, notwithstanding the slow progress (Silova and Abdushukurova, 2009). There is also a feeling that the pursuit of gender equality has received inconsistent attention (Couclough, 2008).

4. Conclusion

Gender issues have become paramount in public policies with public institutions adopting gender dimensions in corporate strategy formulation. Despite the general level of awareness, there is still a degree of misunderstanding of the term. This has marred its unalloyed acceptance as a development strategy within some conservative circles. Nevertheless, the realisation that incorporating gender dimensions into development projects improve overall project outcome has contributed to the overwhelming endorsement of mainstreaming a gender perspective as a strategic shift in development discourse. Gender mainstreaming aims to bring about a shift in perception of the problem of gender inequality, realising that gender equality is an integral part of development, which is potent to reduce poverty when applied in the formulation of public policies.

Irrespective of its wide reception in public policy domain, gender mainstreaming has raised a number of criticisms from feminist movements due to its functional, economic and bureaucratic reductions. There is also a perception that the application of the concept sideline radical feminist ideology. The existence of prescriptive gender bias norms in organisations compounds the challenges faced by development practitioners, especially, in an attempt to understand and use gender mainstreaming strategy to

reduce poverty and inequality. This is because such prescriptive gender bias operates without notice, and as well as unconsciously accepted as part of organisation's culture. There is also need for development practitioners to reconceptualise their definition of poverty and inequality in a way that would not blur understanding of the concepts.

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