Decoding Gender Mainstreaming
Gender Policy Frameworks in an Era of Global Governance

By Zeinab Khalil

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to examine gender equality strategies employed by supranational entities and international development institutions as a way to elevate the status of women. This essay specifically unpacks gender mainstreaming, a project that first emerged in the European Union (EU) and was then popularized in the past generation through conferences by the United Nations (UN). The purpose of this article is to examine gender equality strategies employed by supranational entities and international development institutions as a way to elevate the status of women. This essay specifically unpacks gender mainstreaming, a project that first emerged in the European Union (EU) and was then popularized in the past generation through conferences by the United Nations (UN). The project of gender mainstreaming has gained much clout in global affairs, and particularly in women in development (WID) networks. This article analyzes gender mainstreaming, which was configured by European feminist policymakers and liberal developmentalist discourses, through the lens of postcolonial theory and feminist political economy. Such an analysis foregrounds the transnational political economic contexts that gender policy frameworks operate in. I argue that we can only assess this project—including its possibilities and limits—in relation to its surrounding political imperatives.

Thus, this article will trace the genealogy of gender equality frameworks in the international arena and unpack the theoretical articulations of gender mainstreaming. It will analyze the implementation of gender mainstreaming via a textual analysis of a UN case study and assess its potential as an empowering project for women. Finally, we will examine whether gender mainstreaming acts as an empowering project that is able to reconfigure gendered distributions of power, wealth and resources, especially toward poor and rural women of the Global South.

CONTEXT

The summer of 1995 in Beijing marked the occasion when the UN convened the Fourth World Conference on Women. The conference marked a notable shift in how the UN addressed women’s issues, adopting a strategy known as gender mainstreaming (GM) as its main protocol for promoting gender equality at all levels of policymaking. The body called on other stakeholders to institutionalize GM as their strategy, including member states, donor governments, multinational institutions, civil society actors, and other international development agencies. GM emerged for the first time through the European Commission in 1991 as a strategy...
for member states to pursue. The Beijing Conference of 1995 then solidified the term via the Beijing Platform for Action, which incorporated gender as a category for the first time.\textsuperscript{1}

**DEFINITIONS AND MOTIVATIONS**

In 1997, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) institutionalized and defined the project as follows:

“\textit{The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.}”

This mission statement of ECOSOC reflects how other UN agencies have come to define the concept, with the Chief Executives Board for Coordination in 2012 adopting and applying ECOSOC’s gender mainstreaming mission across all UN bodies.\textsuperscript{2} UN Women took this statement a step further by articulating the universalist nature of the project, stating that GM “is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality.”\textsuperscript{3} This points to a trend and attempt by international development institutions to universalize the provincial; that is, to take a specific project (that emerged in Western Europe, in this case) and transfer it to non-European contexts without thorough regard for the epistemological and political implications of doing so. I will later discuss the particularities of gender mainstreaming to the European integrationist context where it emerged.

**DUALIST AGENDAS: GENDER AND THE MAINSTREAM**

How do GM’s dualist agendas of the mainstream and of gender equality reckon with one another? What is being mainstreamed? Does mainstreaming gender mean transforming gender, or transforming the mainstream?\textsuperscript{2}

Sylvia Walby, a British sociologist and proponent of GM, argues in her book, \textit{The Future of Feminism}, that GM must engage with the mainstream as it is a powerful tool in instilling feminist principles and goals at institutional levels.\textsuperscript{4} While she understands a possible coupling of the two, others have critiqued this approach by highlighting the tense relations between the two frameworks. The dualist agendas of gender equality and the mainstream are often at odds, requiring negotiation, especially as each is subject to its own charged connotations.

This negotiation is perhaps most evident in the rhetorical and linguistic changes around gender equality frameworks. GM employs a shift from women and feminism to gender equality and a heavy-handed assertion of women and men. In
analyzing a number of EU documents on gender mainstreaming, Maria Stratigaki looks at how evolving policy discourses are usually preceded by changes in rhetoric. She writes, “The texts and the administrative and institutional changes observed reveal underlying policy interests and intentions by policymakers; specific words are selected and specific technocratic decisions are taken.” Therefore, we should understand how changes in branding and discourses reflect broader political changes of the project. Alison Woodward also asserts the importance of linguistic evolutions in facilitating increasingly depoliticized and passive frameworks that make gender equality policies more palatable for the mainstream. She traces the material implications of changes in EU documents and policies that move from discourses of action to vocabularies of rights and inclusion. She asserts, “name changes often entail changes in substances. These, as well as shifting venues...are not merely symbolic...such changes hold serious ramifications for future possibilities and activities.”

**TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS AND MAINSTREAM TIMES**

Can serious transformative policies occur through mechanisms of “mainstreaming”? GM is a widespread effort in both public polities and private organizations, intended as per UN Women’s statement, to “transform discriminatory social institutions, laws, cultural norms, and community practices, such as those limiting women’s access to property rights or restricting their access to public space.” GM here is articulated as a transformative project, one that would logically proceed to analyze and reconfigure power relations. GM theorists posit, “mainstreaming means integration articulated as a transformative project, one that would logically proceed to analyze and reconfigure power relations. GM theorists posit, "mainstreaming means integration into the prevailing structures. As a result, it is nothing less than introducing such an ethos can fit into discourses of mainstreaming and prevailing structures reveals another source of tension within the project.

How does GM intervene in political structures? Does GM occur through an integrationist approach that adds gender to existing paradigms and the various main areas of concerns stipulated by the UN? Or does the project have the authority to set its own agenda and reconfigure policy goals? Walby asserts that GM does not cultivate a separatist gender theory, but rather, its dilemmas, tensions and questions reflect broader trends in feminist theorizing. Many “femocrats”—women politicians and bureaucrats...
who advocate for gender parity—have understood the additive approach to existing political paradigms as one that is more pragmatic for the broader policymaking arena even if they understand that ideally gender frameworks should set their own agendas. Thus, GM proponents have come to understand that feminism should not stand against political power, but with time become its new objective. In other words, this sort of feminism should no longer be the anti-system oppositional force to state authority seen during specific time periods in western feminist movements, but rather should be precisely involved with the government.

This transition, of course, comes with costs. For one, it portrays a feminist movement as defunct, as feminism gets absorbed into professionalized and institutionalized practices in the name of “gender equality.” This is actualized through bureaucratic procedures, where new departments, ministries and offices are constantly created and repurposed as guardians of gender equality. In this sense then, as feminism is co-opted by institutions of power, it also loses its public image of protest and is replaced by a gender-neutral public policy.

Accordingly, GM is understood by and large to be an additive measure rather than an uprooting or transformative one, which would undoubtedly constrain rigorous analysis or reconfiguration of power relations. Woodward, who researches European transnational civil society mobilization, argues that such an additive approach does not leave much room to reach GM goals of more equitable gender relations and gender conscious policy-making. Additionally, Diane Perrons argues that upholding economic agendas of a competitive market override concern of “gender” considerations, allowing the mainstream to always have more bargaining power than do advocates of “gender equality.” Therefore, the process of negotiation and contestation that occurs is never on an equal playing field.

Walby is aware that there are dangers to GM that can lead to the erasure of feminist demands in developmentalist and policymaking frameworks. However, she contends that such one-way conceptions of impact are not sufficient due to the “continuously evolving nature of the interaction between feminism and mainstream conceptions.” She argues that such negotiation “may not be as simple as either ‘agenda setting’ or ‘integration’” but rather that the outcomes of such negotiation are contingent on shifting political will, policy environments, and the historical strengths of various institutions.

PRECEDING FRAMEWORKS TO GENDER MAINSTREAM
Woodward identifies three stages of EU approaches to gender policy (which came to be adopted by the UN) that emerged through the changing contexts of European enlargement, feminist theorizing, and transnational organizing on women’s issues. The first phase took place from the 1950s through the 1970s, and largely focused on gaining economic and legislative rights via equal treatment. Mimicking the broader demands of liberal western feminist activists, gender equality as a strategic policy who advocate for gender parity—have understood the additive approach to existing political paradigms as one that is more pragmatic for the broader policymaking arena even if they understand that ideally gender frameworks should set their own agendas. Thus, GM proponents have come to understand that feminism should not stand against political power, but with time become its new objective. In other words, this sort of feminism should no longer be the anti-system oppositional force to state authority seen during specific time periods in western feminist movements, but rather should be precisely involved with the government.

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was understood as extending principles of sameness, equal treatment, and gender neutrality.

The second period, from the 1970s through the 1980s, was inspired by the wave of international and radical feminist movements that demanded structural analyses and remedies to gender oppression, echoing demands of domestic civil rights mobilization in the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere. This period, marked by difference feminism and affirmative action programs, asserted that legal equality does not translate into social acceptance or factual equality, and that equal treatment does not readily lead to equal outcomes. In fact, they argued that in the many cases such an approach brought forth more burdens while curtailing privileges and protections to which women may previously have had access (lower retirement ages, prohibitions on working night shifts, etc.). These advocates claimed that situating men as the frame of reference and resolutely de-gendering women so that they are constructed only as workers ignored their choices and roles. Thus, femocrats during the second period demanded special and targeted approaches needed for emancipatory politics. This period was marked by many women specific projects, campaigns, and budgetary allocations to respond to women’s socio political and economic issues.

This was also the period in which the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) requested that member states initiate specific mechanisms and policy frameworks to address women’s issues. This period marked increased numbers of women in decision-making roles in the EU both in the Commission and the Parliament as a result of positive action programs applied internally in the 1980s. Transnational civil society efforts during this time flourished, as new networks of European women bureaucrats, scholars and activists focused not only on legal transformation, but also on instituting national actions and women’s policy machinery that acknowledged the specificity of women as workers. Thus, issues of part time workers (who were by and large women), women farm workers, the health of pregnant and young mothers, and parental leave came to the forefront of gender policy and action programs. Overall, these sets of positive actions acknowledged the particularity of women’s circumstances (although mostly in relation to the labor market) and took on measures of recruitment, targeted hiring programs, and preferential selection as a response.

Therefore, it is against this evolving backdrop that the emergence of gender mainstreaming must be understood. Rekha Mehra and Geeta Gupta have argued that GM is a response and backlash to the preceding period of interventions targeted at women that were deemed insufficient by development agencies because of their “marginalization” in policymaking. Thus, GM was seen as a way to “bring gender equality issues into the core of development activities” rather than to be pigeonholed into already under-visible and under-resourced outlets. Woodward asserts that this third stage of gender policy is a way to reconcile articulations of equal treatment and special treatment. She writes that this present approach seeks to move “beyond
'women' and beyond the labor market, to attack policy transversally for producing unequal relations between men and women.”

**GENDER MAINSTREAMING: COMPLEMENT OR REPLACEMENT?**

It is important to note that GM initially was understood not as a replacement to positive action programs of the preceding time period, but as part of a dual pronged approach to transform mainstream policies. Stratigaki explores how GM shifted from being introduced initially as an auxiliary to affirmative action program and equal treatment legislation, to becoming its own equality tool. When GM and affirmative action worked together, they often produced positive outcomes by enlarging the scope of gender equality policies as well as focusing on measurable targets for women's advances. Specific policies and positive actions were capable of addressing gendered economic distribution of resources in ways that GM (on its own) could not.

However, GM came to be used as a political tool of efficiency to replace positive action programs and avoid women-centered policymaking, rolling back the advances of the early 1990s. Stratigaki writes, "positive action was sidelined after the launch of GM as a result of the specific way GM was used by the opponents of gender equality to damage the dynamic created by the successful enlargement of the scope of gender equality" in community action programs. GM was co-opted and used to reinforce and support EU policies already in place. As a result, GM was primarily brought in to advance broader suprastructure priorities (e.g. employment or labor issues).

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Thus, an analysis of GM must consider how the project is implicated in reproducing accumulated inequalities if it does not actively intervene to disrupt them.

Furthermore, because GM focuses on assessing means rather than actualizing results, critics have regarded this approach as a kind of formal equality rather than a substantive equality that accounts for equality of opportunity and outcomes. The latter, Iris Young argues, should not be understood as compensation for oppression, but rather as a way "to diminish the current biases of institutions and decision makers," and to destabilize notions of meritocracy that uncritically advantage some individuals on the basis of race and gender among other characteristics. Oana Crusmac writes of the way the European Commission conceptualizes such difference: "gender mainstreaming does not imply the assumption of uniformity between women and men but considers that the differences should not be treated as an obstacle—hence the major importance placed on equality in the labor market: equal pay, access to all professions, increasing the number of employed women, etc." Accordingly, GM seeks gender equality not through redistributive efforts, but through equal conduct (not much unlike what we saw in the first phase of EU gender policy). In other words, the goal itself becomes the strategy for getting there.

Much of GM has focused on personal approaches and personal outcomes as a way to measure success (e.g. emphasis on personal employment as a product of equality). These sorts of remedies that understand women as individual agents, rather than understanding their lives and roles as contingent on their complex relational social webs, expose some of the epistemological, euroamerican liberal biases of GM. Conrad Winn and others have critiqued the idea that such a framework that uses the individual as its unit of analysis can be universalized or transferred onto non-western contexts. This is especially true if we consider how some women may understand themselves as relational beings, rather than ascribing to notions that underscore the full actualization of identity during one's moment of greatest autonomy. Crusmac identifies Winn's main critique with the individualistic biases of GM: "policymakers must take into account that the family, not the individual, is the bearer of social class." This, thus, this individualistic bias ignores important factors including accumulated intergenerational wealth, property ownership, and how families and spouses may "reinforce each other's class position."

Evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of GM has also been another one of its major challenges. Here GM contrasts significantly with previous affirmative...
action policies that used numerical measurements as a way to monitor progress and goals. Crusmac explains that GM has not yet actualized this sort of methodical evaluation, and that this lack of rigor is her main critique of the strategy. She vitally asks, “how can we consider the future of feminism as an institutionalized form of requirements with feminist orientation but which does not have a clear formulation nor a mechanism for implementation, monitoring and evaluation?”

**CASE STUDY: UNHCR GOOD PRACTICES IN GENDER MAINSTREAMING**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) 2001 policy report, *UNHCR Good Practices in Gender Mainstreaming*, provides a telling example of how GM has been conceptualized and utilized within a specific agency. The report is commendable in that it admits that the tools it uses for mainstreaming— including the creation of “gender networks” and “refugee gender sensitive checklists”—still require evidence that these actually promote gender parity. The report reads, “this is no easy task given that no one factor leads to empowerment, nor is the process of empowerment necessarily linear...very often, empowerment strategies do not produce immediate results, but require multiple interventions over the long term.”

However, a closer look at its specific operations in various countries exposes a number of gaps. Specifically, the report reviews cases of GM operations in four countries. In the first case, the report looks at a microfinance initiative called the Kosovo Women’s Economic Empowerment Project. The project aims to increase women’s low numbers as micro-finance clients. The disparity, we are told, is a result of:

“discriminatory practices in micro-finance institutions, international funding agencies, and Kosovar society. Women are perceived to be unproductive members of society who do not need credit. Women internalize this perception themselves, resulting in low self-esteem and hesitancy to apply for credit. Because women have been excluded from business, many lack basic skills.”

As a result, the project’s goal through GM is to rectify such stated cognitive dissonance by building women’s confidence and developing their skills for entrepreneurial endeavors.

Meanwhile, in the case of Burundi, the report points to GM as a successful and important element of the Burundi Peace Agreement. Specifically, “Burundian women were able to incorporate a gender equality perspective into the Burundi Peace Agreement. Many of the recommendations put forth by the All-Party Burundi Women’s Conference— 30 percent quotas for women representatives in political bodies were rejected— were included in the final agreement. Burundian women and girls now have a legal basis with which to claim their rights to active participation in the reconstruction and development of their country.”

Thus, the work of GM here focuses on appeals to legalism and awareness of the law.
In the Colombian case, the report examines GM efforts in responding to displacement and armed violence, especially as it affects indigenous Afro-Colombian communities in Uraba. The report reads, “as a result of UNHCR sensitization workshops, the initial resistance of male dominated communities was overcome as they began to recognize the value and importance of including women.”

Similarly, in another project that focused on the impending return of West Saharan women refugees based in Algeria, the report also emphasizes on raising awareness and capacity building as approaches to GM. “UNHCR plans to focus on rights training and raising awareness on refugee law and women’s rights through a planned joint Protection and People Oriented Planning/Gender (POP) workshop.”

It is crucial to note how in all of these cases GM is implemented through reformative approaches that do not fundamentally question the role of political economic imperatives in perpetuating these issues of economic oppression, political exclusion, conflict, and displacement. Rather, the solutions offered rely on western liberal frameworks that uphold what Lauren Leve has dubbed the “Law, Literacy, Loan trifecta.”

In her research on failed developmental policies in rural Nepal, she draws on the work of Veronica Schild, who argues “the discourse of neoliberal modernization emphasizes an active relation to the market, expressed on the part of citizens as the autonomous exercise of responsibilities, including economic self-reliance and political participation.” This cultivates governmental frameworks where “citizens are...conceived – and produced – as empowered clients, who as individuals are viewed as capable of enhancing their lives through judicious, responsible choices as consumers of services and other goods.”

This results in the creation of what she refers to as market citizens who embody the liberal norms of the market and adopt the idea that they can progress in life by being better consumer political subjects.” This assessment rings true in UN and international development policies as well, which execute a similar agenda through women’s empowerment initiatives that stress individual materialism and the rule of law, which Ugo Mattei argues are mechanisms that historically worked to “guarantee political stability in a society characterized by inequalities and in which wealthy landowners were in the minority and had to be defended against the majority.” Therefore, we must ask...
what tools are emphasized and reinforced in neoliberal developmental frameworks for women's empowerment, and what the motivations are for selecting such frameworks. In this case, we should ask: what kind of subjects does GM produce? How does GM reinforce issues that are already approved by the European Union.

In all of the above four cases in the UNHCR's GM projects, we see liberal solutions in the form of: 1) an emphasis on literacy, awareness building, and sensitization workshops, that shift responsibility and burdens on marginalized individuals without addressing structural impediments; 2) an emphasis on law that upholds western legal exceptionalism as given and the law as the ultimate method of social order without regard to its specific transnational, capitalist imperatives; and 3) an emphasis on microcredit loans that do not question the effects of globalization on land dispossession and privatization of services, and the context of a deregulated, informal economy that most microcredit projects function in. These three elements individualize poverty and transpose it onto "the backs of poor women" rather than offer holistic responses by the supranational structure to alleviate oppression and poverty among women. Thus, the solution to women's empowerment and poverty reduction is portrayed as simply getting women to work harder and become more educated and aware while also placing on them more responsibilities without considering alternatives for traditional forms of social protections and support that come to be erased through neoliberal politics.

Additionally, GM facilitates and standardizes a normative approach to address women's issues; you can address gender by working through the supranational structure itself. In accordace, another trend we see in GM is what Sabine Lang refers to in her own work as the institutional advocacy bias. Lang, who looks at the impact of women's advocacy networks amid EU engagements, argues that gender issues become constrained to institutional advocacy due to the legal and economic constraints set by the supranational agenda. Thus, because women's NGOs are limited by wider legal and economic stipulations, they are funneled into institutional advocacy and issues that are already approved by the European Union. Similarly, we can understand GM as directing gender policies toward specific types of women's issues and forms of advocacy that do not question broader legal and economic boundaries and must remain within the dictates of government contexts.

This is why we often see GM focused on issues of labor market policy. The overemphasis on the labor market is not coincidental; focusing on labor issues (retirement age, working hours, etc.) is a way to leverage the discourse on gender equality in favor of state economic interests. Stratigaki argues that GM's adoption in employment and labor policy by the state in particular moments was a way to reinforce broader economic policies. However, when push came to shove and unemployment began to disturb male-dominated policy circles, GM was thrown under the bus and mainstreaming employment came to dominate community.
were also now working in low paying, part time, temporary, flexible jobs. The European Employment Strategy in the 1990s indeed did result in more women in the labor market, but more women result was often not favorable for women. The European Employment Strategy in labor market and work and family policies where GM was incorporated, the gender policy is beholden to, and not women's emancipatory interests. For example, in labor market and work and family policies where GM was incorporated, the result was often not favorable for women. The European Employment Strategy in the 1990s indeed did result in more women in the labor market, but more women were also now working in low paying, part time, temporary, flexible jobs.

CONCLUSION

Overall, while GM has made some strides and advances beyond equal treatment paradigms, it has also harmed and eroded women-centered affirmative action programs that produced positive outcomes on women's issues. Stratigaki argues that GM becomes an abstract principle, not a strategy, as it focuses more on broadening rather than transforming. She asserts that the broad reach and scope of GM, which was its innovative and trademark feature, is also its greatest weakness. In trying to be a blanket policy that addresses every level of policies and programs, the project’s politics and impact become diluted. Such unclear articulation of roles can have dire consequences. As Mehra and Gupta caution, “when mainstreaming is everyone’s task, it can become no one’s responsibility...there is a real danger that gender equality goals can be swept away by the mainstream, instead of changing it.”

History has given us many accounts of policies that concern women’s livelihoods, bodies, and interests as projects that are not neutral or benign, but politically motivated. Ultimately, what we see through GM is an appropriation of women’s issues as a pacifying strategy toward women’s movement building and women-specific interventions, as well as an opportunity to co-opt women as productive citizens who can better serve and uphold transnational imperatives that are more concerned with profitable land and resource competition than redistribute efforts that respond to the challenges and poverty of women, and especially women from the Global South. As scholars and practitioners of gender, development, and global affairs, we have much reason and responsibility to interrogate and expose such motivations and ask in this specific case, what tools and approaches are allowed and reinforced in GM? Which ones are excluded? How are gender equality policies co-opted to fit broader economic priorities of the supranational governing institution? Fundamentally, GM’s prospect of emancipatory outcomes for women is limited as the project is constrained to offer solutions that do not disturb politico-economic imperatives and to which supranational entities are beholden.

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