Practical challenges for gender mainstreaming in governance projects: Observations of a consulting practitioner

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Introduction

This discussion is based at a practical level from the viewpoint of a practitioner involved in the development-consulting sector. It aims to highlight the challenges in responding to, and implementing gender mainstreaming strategies at the field level while meeting project targets set out by donors. The ‘conversation’ below is not meant to be a comprehensive academic piece on gender mainstreaming, but ‘thinking-points’, broad observations and a record of experiences made over the course of responding to the terms of reference set out for projects. The particular focus of this paper is to look at issues in ensuring effective gender mainstreaming in governance projects such as public sector reform, corporate and financial reform (for example taxation reform, pensions reform, banking reform) and legal and judicial reform. While gender mainstreaming is still problematic in sectors such as health, education, rural development and microfinance, project terms of reference in these sectors generally identify gender as a priority issue. Activities that aim to address issues of capacity building, access to resources, and decision making are usually included. However, gender mainstreaming is less visible in the governance sub-sectors that are more technically focused particularly involving agencies at the central level of government.

Gender as a cross-cutting issue

Gender mainstreaming is a synthesising concept that addresses the well being of women and men. It is a strategy that is central to the interests of the whole community. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 pushed the dialogue on gender mainstreaming to the fore at an international level and was endorsed by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action as the approach by which goals under each of its Critical Areas of Concern are to be achieved. All players in the development sector since the Fourth World Conference on Women have been in agreement that gender matters. Since then, widespread commitment has been made by governments, donor agencies, non-government organisations and other international and national players to gender mainstreaming. There is substantial evidence to demonstrate that the key players in the development industry have identified gender equity as a priority objective. For example, each donor agency has a gender strategy paper. Some donors require organisations receiving funds to have a gender and development (GAD) policy.

Despite the tremendous progress in policy development and the abundance of information available on gender mainstreaming, all players in the sector, including multilateral and bilateral agencies, consulting firms and non-government organisations are the first to say that translating gender mainstreaming policy objectives to true outcomes in the field are challenging. This discussion aims to identify some of the factors that result in gender still being an add-on as opposed to being an integral part of the process.
Challenges faced by development consulting firms

Some general observations about the challenges in gender mainstreaming are identified below.

Focus on technical aspects

When priority is given to the more technical aspects of the reform process, gender often is not a consideration. For example, in projects involving privatisation, which usually result in workforce downsizing, the solutions designed to deal with labour redundancy issues are often based on the needs of a broad target group, the majority of whom are male and who often have differing issues and needs from women. Generally, women are less skilled or work at lower-skilled jobs that are easily replaced by technology. Differing working schedules of women due to competing family responsibilities mean that women can be left out of the consultation process unless there are strategies in place to ensure their full and active participation. The differing demographic factors can also mean that compensation packages do not adequately cater to women’s needs.

Sources of technical specialists

The technical specialists required for the type of projects listed above often include a requirement for very senior specialists who have the necessary status to give credibility to the reform process and to ensure the project management meets societal and institutional cultural norms. For example, in legal and judicial reform projects, tender selection panels tend to take into consideration ‘status issues’ so that the team is seen to be credible and able to engage at senior levels in the recipient country. The general pool for both international and national consultants who fit this criterion comprises active senior public servants, former senior public servants and academics.

Lack of developing country experience: While these specialists may be highly competent and skilled in their particular field of expertise, many international technical specialists, particularly those who fit the ‘status’ criteria, have had little or no experience in developing countries or their developing country experience is limited to high-level negotiations or involvement as members of official delegations and conference participants. All these experiences are relevant but limited.

Implications of the lack of women as senior decision-makers in the resource pool of specialists: There are proportionately fewer women in senior decision-making positions in both developed countries and developing countries. Consulting firms thus have great difficulty in putting together a gender-balanced team.

Gender blindness within the pool of specialists: The combination of these factors often leads to teams who are highly skilled, but have little experience in the developing country context, with the added ‘baggage’ of not having gender on the agenda. Even if women are included on teams as technical specialists, this does not necessarily mean they have the specialist gender skills that are needed to put gender on the agenda, particularly in developing country contexts.

Gender as an add-on: While some terms of reference set out the requirement for technical specialists who have experience in gender, problems can still arise at the implementation stage because, for example, the technical input requirements are small; the team member responsible for gender has to contend with resistance and biases of other specialists who are more focussed on the technical aspects of the project; or because of existing biases within the project country’s executing agency. The end result is that gender considerations become mere add-ons.
The need to consider issues relating to intersectionality

In the International Women’s Development Agency’s gender and development dialogue background paper, intersectionality is described as:

an approach to understanding the differences among women and among men and the ways that these differences interact to exacerbate marginalisation. It identifies subordination not solely as an issue of gender or race or class inequalities but as a location where there are often simultaneous and compounding relationships of subordination. Intersectionality offers potential as a framework for contextual analysis that may improve development outcomes for women by ensuring that particular groups of women are not excluded in policy and practice (IWDA 2003:2).

The paper also identifies the limited discussion and incorporation of intersectionality in both policy and practice (IWDA 2003:14).

Real understanding and commitment to gender mainstreaming in executing agencies

If gender is included in a set of terms of reference, it means that the government and/or the executing agency have agreed to the project objectives and activities with some form of a no-objection sign-off. The level of real commitment and understanding of gender mainstreaming within the recipient government agency, however, is often a significant constraint. In many instances, recipients adopt the language and concepts of gender mainstreaming without real commitment. The process of the sign-off is essentially a ‘tick in the box’ to demonstrate their ‘commitment’ to gender.

The resurgence of ‘Empowerment of Women’ projects

While there is no doubt that capacity building activities need to address the range of inequalities faced by women, there seems to be a resurgence of projects that focus solely on women, with a focus again in the ‘softer sectors’. The objectives are clearly praiseworthy, however, the very language and positioning within the project document goes against the notion of gender mainstreaming across the board. Projects constructed in this way provide an opportunity for donors and recipients alike to add ‘a tick to the gender box’ as a way of showing a commitment to gender mainstreaming, but without really incorporating gender mainstreaming strategies in the sub-sectors that are the focus of this discussion-aspects of which provide the over all framework for addressing gender inequalities. Such approaches also lead to the danger of compounding the trend towards ‘gender fatigue’, as it creates an opportunity for stakeholders to point to a perceived imbalance in the relative amount of resources being directed to women. This can undermine any gains made in gender mainstreaming, and be seen as a Western-imposed notion.

Capturing and institutionalising gender mainstreaming expertise

An overall problem with the tendering process is that it provides opportunities for a changing pool of consulting firms with a different mix of teams for each project. Donors often have to work within project funding cycles for the purposes of accountability to their own stakeholders and break up broad sectoral objectives within phases, each phase lasting as long as a project funding cycle. While there are often situations where a consulting firm is successful in winning contracts due to their positive track record in earlier phases or similar projects in the country or in the region, often a new mix of players are involved in subsequent projects and phases. One of the implications is that
often these new players can perpetuate existing gender blindness or setback any progress and lessons learned from earlier projects.

**Listening to women**

Women usually have very different ways of communicating. Often, it is necessary to create a space for women to be heard across the board, that is, across different levels within the agency and outside, and amongst other stakeholder groups. While women at the various levels amongst stakeholder groups may not have the necessary technical framework or expertise to articulate issues in technical terms, they often communicate issues pertinent to projects in experiential terms, and this information can be valuable and relevant to meeting overall project objectives.

**Collecting, using and access issues to data**

Collecting gender-disaggregated data as baseline data is an important step. While this happens to an extent, often the focus is on a quantitative methodology with only basic qualitative and contextual analyses. Collection of data through surveys and interviews can also direct responses towards what the surveyor wants to hear, rather than providing an opportunity to have situation and context specific dialogue. Such data are often kept separate from the core project data, and not fully integrated into core project documents. Gender analyses are often located in a separate document that is usually only accessed and used by those who already have gender on the agenda.

**Performance indicators**

There are a number of critical issues in relation to performance indicators that can perpetuate gender blindness in the project cycle. Donors place a great deal of importance in measuring outputs and impacts. The monitoring and evaluation process, while important, is driven by the desire to ensure greater accountability and cost effectiveness, and to capture lessons learned in a manner that fosters cumulative knowledge about various interventions. Donors, particularly bilateral donors, are under significant pressure to be accountable to their stakeholders in relation to budget and resource allocations. Bilateral agencies are usually under the most pressure in this regard, particularly when conservative governments are in power, and are under stress to demonstrate visible, measurable impacts/ deliverables, value for money, and cost-effectiveness to the public. The end result is that evaluation can become an end in itself, and its meaningfulness and utility is diminished. In this situation, the overly rigorous evaluation and reporting demands can be an impediment to effective project implementation in the field.

**Quality of baseline data**

If the quality of the baseline gender-disaggregated data is poor, it usually follows that measurement of real progress on gender mainstreaming is limited. Furthermore, team members have to have the necessary skills to develop and monitor progress against gender mainstreaming goals.

**Challenges in measuring attitudinal change**

Progress and lessons learned in implementing gender mainstreaming strategies need to involve not only quantitative gender-disaggregated data, but also comprehensive contextual qualitative analysis. Outcomes such as overall attitudinal change are not products, but intangible process-oriented objectives. In traditional development projects, macro-indicators relate well to precise measurement (for example for education projects: gender-disaggregated data on basic literacy rates) or project objectives can be easily measured and identified in advance with micro indicators (for example gender-disaggregated data on attendance in
primary schools). The intangible nature of gender mainstreaming objectives means that identifying indicators that are amenable to observable, replicable, verifiable measures is problematic.

Causality and attribution: Finding a relationship between the project and changes within stakeholder groups is one of the most difficult issues. There are many problems relating to causality. Some of these issues include correlations without causal links, delayed causality, mutual causality and interactive causality. Delayed causality is of particular importance as outcomes such as attitudinal change can take years and generations to occur arise outside the project funding cycle.

Practicalities in the field: The political situation in the field can be highly fluid. This scenario is generally significant particularly in newer democracies where decision makers frequently change and key actors may have shifting priorities. This can lead to an overall sense of ‘one step forward, two steps back’ for implementers. Implementers are under pressure to ensure that projects are not seen as failure, as such a result generally has implications for future funding or consulting opportunities. There is a sense amongst implementers that, despite the known challenges, donors have high expectations about project outcomes and expect implementers to demonstrate positive outcomes within a limited period of time, that is, within the project funding cycle. This result is that implementers often focus on the technical targets of a project, while gender is considered only superficially.

Gender blindness of independent evaluators: Increasingly donors and implementers alike are using ‘independent’ evaluators for the purpose of looking at the project with ‘fresh eyes’. However, such evaluators tend to be just that, ‘fresh eyes’ who often have limited skills in evaluating progress against gender mainstreaming strategies and understanding of the gender context of the particular project.

Recommendations
It is widely accepted that mainstreaming is not about adding a ‘woman’s component’ or even a ‘gender equality component’ into an existing activity. It goes beyond increasing women’s participation; it means bringing the experience, knowledge, and interests of women and men to bear on the development agenda. With this framework in mind, some broad recommendations that arise from observations discussed above to incorporate gender mainstreaming at a practical level are:

1. As a starting point, gender mainstreaming strategies need to be increasingly integrated into the important sectors that are the focus of this paper — sectors which are highly technical and still gender blind.
2. All agencies, including consulting firms and organisation such as the International Women's Development Agency, actively seek out women technical specialists who are interested in working in the development sector.
3. All technical specialists should be provided with at least base-level training on gender mainstreaming concepts and tools in the overall developing country and country-specific contexts.
4. When terms of reference are developed for projects in these highly technical fields, gender mainstreaming should be built in as a key requirement.
5. An ongoing dialogue on gender awareness and gender mainstreaming needs to be built-in across the board, at all levels and across all stakeholder groups. This should not be dealt with as a separate issue, but integrated into all aspects of staff development.
6. While doing stakeholder analyses for the project sectors in question, it is essential to identify target groups such as civil society and professional groups, within and outside agencies and internationally and nationally, which have gender on the agenda to discuss project implications in relation to gender mainstreaming.

7. At the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation stages, the technical team, or members of the technical team should be trained to create the space for women to actively participate in the project cycle, to have the necessary ‘listening’ and analysis skills to ‘hear’ what the women are saying, and to capture such analysis and findings into all aspects of the project cycle.

8. Gender-disaggregated baseline data, information and quantitative/qualitative and contextual analysis should be included as a matter of course at all stages of the project cycle. The baseline information at the design stage should be tested at the project inception and implementation stages, and developments tracked at the monitoring and evaluation stages. Lessons learned and successful gender mainstreaming in the particular project’s context should be well recorded, collated and made widely accessible. This information while classified and collated in the ‘gender’ section of knowledge management systems and processes, should also be included upfront within core project information so that it is not seen as a side issue.

9. Consulting firms should be strongly encouraged to institutionalise gender mainstreaming within their own internal organisational environment through strategies including having:
   - an in-house gender specialist who advises on all aspects of the project process, including an audit of technical proposals submitted for tenders;
   - an ongoing process of gender-awareness raising and training within the organisation, which involves business development, senior management and project management teams as a part of staff development strategies;
   - a briefing on context specific gender mainstreaming as part of the briefing process for mobilisation of teams;
   - a process to capture lessons learned from past and current projects on gender mainstreaming which is accessible and shared internally and across teams directly involved in project implementation;
   - a process to share these lessons learned with donors and recipients as part of the overall knowledge management process; and
   - active involvement in the ongoing dialogue process at institutional, national, regional and international levels on gender mainstreaming and intersectionality;

10. Gender specialists need to be included in the tender assessment process. If there is a presentation is part of the tender assessment process, team members should be tested on their thinking on gender mainstreaming within the specific project context; and

11. The international development sector as a whole needs to give greater recognition to the importance of attitudinal change and recognise it as a long-term process.
Conclusion
Effort must be made to ensure gender fatigue does not jeopardise the translation of policy into practice. A fine balance must be maintained, so as to minimise any perceptions of gender mainstreaming being ‘forced’ on projects and so undermining the credibility of efforts to date. At the same time, gender mainstreaming should be given the full attention it deserves as a strategy for improving effectiveness at the implementation stage of projects, particularly projects in the governance sub-sectors. This process of bringing the issue onto the radar screen, and incorporating it effectively, requires sensitivity and skill. Dialogue processes such as that organised by the International Women’s Development Agency, which include all the players in the international development sector, are commendable. With their strong practical implications, processes such as these should continue at all levels. A common understanding of gender mainstreaming, developed in an environment of mutual support and learning, will promote its effective implementation.

Notes
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i. Due to word limitations, the observations are limited to gender streaming and issues around intersectionality have only been touched on. In addition, these observations are personal, and do not represent the views of the author’s current employer.


Reference