Gender Mainstreaming sounds great! But what does it mean?

The Rural Development Regulation is the EU directive which governs the European Common Agricultural Policy as well as the Rural Development Programme. Gender mainstreaming is specifically written into this regulation stating that ‘Member States and the Commission shall promote equality between men and women...this includes the stages of design, implementation, monitoring & evaluation’.

What is gender mainstreaming?

Gender mainstreaming is seen as the most ‘modern’ approach to gender equality. While gender mainstreaming is supposed to refer to equality for men and women, it is usually understood to be addressing women’s inequality.

Earlier equality strategies tried to achieve equal treatment (making women’s position more like that of men) or followed positive action approaches (specifically focusing on women). Gender mainstreaming is different because it goes beyond a focus on individual men and women, and looks at how practices and cultures of organisations can actually maintain gender inequality. In other words, we need not just to look at women and men in a society, but also how social practices and social structures embed and prolong gender inequality.

How does gender mainstreaming work?

The biggest claim gender mainstreaming makes is that it is ‘transformative’; it aims to transform or fundamentally change organisational practices by eliminating gender biases from existing routines. It does this by allowing policy makers and civil servants to think about the gendered assumptions in how policy is constructed and put into practice. A key practical instrument is the Gender Impact Assessment, or Equality Impact Assessment (EIA). Policies are initially ‘screened’ to assess if they require a full EIA. If they do, then the policy is assessed to see how adverse gender impacts might be alleviated, or what alternative policies might better achieve gender equality. While the policy is implemented it is monitored to see if it has an adverse impact. Baseline information is crucial.
to this process in order to ascertain if progress has been made or not.

**Some Challenges**
One challenge with gender mainstreaming is the ‘divorce’ between theory and practice. In practice it has become a technical project, where the goal is to show that due regard has been paid to the principle of gender mainstreaming. But this is a long way from the underpinning theory which aimed to challenge gender inequality and unequal power relations.

**Who is responsible?**
Some reviews of gender mainstreaming suggest that responsibility is given to quite junior staff and it is under-resourced. Thus gender mainstreaming can become marginalised in a government department. While the resources such as manuals and toolkits are often excellent, other reviews have found that these are rarely used. Another problem that arises is that people try to avoid engaging with gender mainstreaming and there is a tendency to lean towards ‘screening out’ documents and saying that they do not need an Equality Impact Assessment in order to avoid gender mainstreaming.

**Tensions between gender and the mainstream**
Gender mainstreaming presumes that ‘gender’ and the ‘mainstream’ go together like a happy couple. But this is not necessarily the case. The gender part is, in theory at least, about feminist goals. The mainstream part usually tends to be about business needs or economic growth goals. Each of these goals commands a different amount of power. Business rationale uses language that seems more legitimate and convincing than gender language. Political and policy commitment tends to be with the mainstream part of gender mainstreaming in the first instance.

**Moving forward:**
The change brought about by gender mainstreaming is usually incremental in policies, strategies and activities. In the longer term the idea is that attention to gender equality will pervade all policies, strategies and activities.

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**Further reading:**

‘Inspirational Rural Women’ published by Rural Network NI
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www.ruralnetworkni.org.uk