ON THE BRIDGE BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POLICY MAKING

I cannot invent anything or adopt anything at the policy-level without a better understanding of it... the main idea of gender mainstreaming is that we would like to see the world to change, because the whole world is constructed around and is based upon gender inequality.

MIEKE VERLOO

E.M.V. You are teaching on women’s studies and political sciences at the University of Nijmegen, but, at the same time, you are

working as expert for different policy-making institutions, among others for the Council of Europe’s gender mainstreaming project. How are these two roads coming together and how do you manage to do both? Related to this, let me ask you as well if this is a very particular way of dealing with political science as a feminist?

M.V. It is a nice question. I think I am someone who always wants to stand on the bridge between science or research and policymaking. I have started as a researcher after my studies, doing research mainly for Ministries at a Research Institute in Tilburg. After that I worked for a national committee who tried to stimulate Women’s Studies, so I moved completely to the other side, let’s say. I was not a civil servant because it was an independent committee, but I moved to the policy-making part and I did that for two years. While I was working there, I discovered that one could not really think independently in such a job and started to miss autonomy. Of course, if one is doing research for a certain group or institution, he/she is still a researcher. Sometimes the results do not please the people who commission your research, but that is not your problem. But you are always aiming that your results will be used.

My first research was for the Ministry of Housing. They installed a new policy, according to which the so-called non-families were entitled also to have housing, in fact everyone above 18 years old had a right on housing. They wanted to know what kind of housing was needed for all these non-family households under the conditions when the number of the one-person and two-person households was growing. It was my first research, a qualitative research and it was great. I learned so much and I also really believed that my results and my recommendations were true, that they were reflecting what were the needs and wishes of students, of working young people, of migrant people who were here on their own, and of the older single people. I thought my results were clear and adequate. But the Ministry did not like it. They had already made plans of what kind of houses they wanted to build. Therefore,
the results of my research were never used. But it was very good for me to realize that it is one thing to do research and it is quite another thing to assure that it is used. I discovered that it is good that as a researcher you are independent but also that it is a pity if your results are not used.

My next research at this Institute was on the ways in which both the local residents and local authorities used research in their debates, in their conflicts and struggles. I was very well aware of the political role of the research, but there were still a lot of things I wanted to know as a researcher. Just for the sake of knowing it, for the sake of knowledge. As a feminist I both wanted to know more, to understand how gender works, and I wanted all our newly constructed knowledge to be used for feminist change. My second job was at the committee, which aimed to stimulate women’s studies. We were busy mapping out the ways in which new feminist knowledge could be facilitated. At the end of my term I decided that I wanted to be a researcher again. I wanted to go back to university, found money for a dissertation and went back.

So this is my story. I started in research, moved to policy-making, and then went back to science. This is where I came from and I am still the person who is defending the practical use of theory. I am always willing to explain to policy-makers or to NGOs, what is the state of knowledge in a certain field and how they can make use of that. To give an example, I gave lectures for women’s NGOs in The Netherlands about the ways in which social movements theory may be used. I advised them not to stick too close to the government, explaining what are the disadvantages of such a position.

It is not only in the mainstreaming project that I have this position on the bridge, and I am going from one side to the other. If I stay too close to policy-makers or some practitioners, then after a while I get very uneasy and impatient and I want to read, to think a bit longer and find out things. On the other hand, if I am burying myself in the libraries and in the books, then after a few years I get
very impatient and I want to go out and tell people about it. That is how it works for me. And yes, this is connected to being a feminist.

E.M.V. You have also a role in the organisation named Women’s International Study Europe (WISE), being its national representative in The Netherlands. How does this position relate to the rest of your agenda?

M.V. I really have a position in WISE, but because WISE is based in The Netherlands, my role is very small. I do not need to tell to our director, Margit van der Steen, how things are in The Netherlands. She knows that also very well. Within WISE I am also connected to the division on contemporary feminism and its strategies, which has organised a conference once and published a book. But this kind of work is too hard to do it more often. This year we had a small part in organising a conference on Feminism with an Eastern touch in Dubrovnik, together with Zenska Infoteka from Zagreb. In the past I have been more active at the national level, I have been the chair of the National Women’s Studies Association in The Netherlands for some years. These activities originate from my interest in strategic questions. It is about recognising that it is nice if we understand something, but it is just as important to make something happen. And that is clearly connected to being a feminist.

E.M.V. Between 1996 and 1998 you were the chair of a group of specialists working on gender mainstreaming with the Council of Europe. Was this something new for you, or it was the prolongation of an older work? Why did you take that position?

M.V. I did not take it, but this position was given abruptly to me... although in a way, it did not come by accident, because earlier, together with Conny Roggeband, I had developed for the Dutch government an instrument called gender impact assessment. That was made in 1993 and published in 1994. This gender impact assessment is an instrument to screen policies on gender impact before they are going to the Parliament. It is an instrument to screen all policies before decisions are taken, in order to analyse its impact
on women and men. At least that is the intention of it. The nice thing about The Netherlands is that the instrument has been used, in fact now it has already been evaluated, but all this happened only after five-six years. During the discussions before Beijing I also had presented papers on this instrument, for instance in Vienna. The Council of Europe invited me to be a member of this group of specialists on gender mainstreaming, because I was one of the few people involved in making instruments, which were connected to the strategy. And when I arrived there, they appointed me to be the chair of this group.

This was a great opportunity to talk with other people who were involved in thinking about it, and a chance to develop a report. The report was really the result of lots of discussions within the group. We were eight people with very different roles. A few were researchers, like I was, a few were civil servants, working at equality units, like Brigitta Aseskog from Sweden and Agnete Anderson from Denmark. Milica Antic from Slovenia and Malgorzata Fuszara from Poland were from universities, and the Portuguese member was a former Secretary of State, so she was really more a politician, the Spanish people were from the Institute for Women in Madrid. We all reacted to the discussions in ways that were connected to our different roles and perspectives, to our positions. I think that we all got very wise in the course of these discussions. We have met five times, and each time had two or three days of discussions together on parts of the report until we could agree on a certain text.

E.M.V. What was your role? Were you coordinating the sessions?

M.V Yes, I was trying all the time to ensure that we knew what was clear and what was unclear in order to clarify the latter, and we could understand each other, could agree on something. I was proposing things and I had part in the discussion also, because I did not want to be just a traffic-regulating chair.
E.M.V. What happened with that report? How are things working in the Council of Europe in these terms?

M.V. The Council of Europe has a Committee on Gender Equality where every member state of the Council of Europe has a representative. If they want to develop a certain new idea or issue, they can appoint a Group of Specialists who, for most of the times only present a collection of papers at the end, which have been written by the members of the group. We wanted to do more. That is why we made a report that we could all agree on. The Gender Equality Committee, in order to decide what they should do with it, discussed the report presented by our Group of Specialists. They used its papers to construct their own opinion and strategy. And because we had made one single report, it was easier for them to deal with it. They discussed it and agreed on adopting this report and presenting it to the Council of Ministers and advise the Council of Ministers to adopt the report. The Council of Ministers did so, and because it got so far, it became a public report. That was the way it worked.

E.M.V. When such a report is accepted it becomes a principle of the policy on a certain domain?

M.V. Yes, but the Council of Europe still has not done too much on gender mainstreaming itself, not even within its own organisation. The only thing they promised was that they would distribute our report widely and they have done that. They have put it on the web for a while, and then re-printed it and also facilitated some translations. It has been translated into Slovenian, German, French, and in a number of other languages, because they considered it was worth for wide dissemination. But, as you know, the Council have no power on any member state, they can only try to influence and facilitate.

Anyway, I think that the report was very helpful to clarify the concept of gender mainstreaming and to elucidate the discussions. Later, in 1999 they organised a conference in Athens, where new
developments could be presented, but that was a very complicated conference. A lot of papers were presented on gender equality, but there were very few papers on gender mainstreaming. Then, in the preparation for Beijing+5, I was asked to make a report on the current state of the art, on practices and prospects. Later on, in September 2000 we had an expert meeting on gender mainstreaming, where the organisers invited all kinds of representatives of the new initiatives. To put shortly, they continue to facilitate the generation and dissemination of knowledge on gender mainstreaming, are still busy with it. The Committee on Gender Equality also wants the Council of Europe to start a process of gender mainstreaming within the Council of Europe, within all the committees of the Council, but I do not know if that will happen.

In a way, as a researcher, to come back to your first question, if your subject of research were policy-making, then it would be very unwise to just sit behind your desk and wait till reports are published. Because that would be really very late. If you want to know what is going on in the field of gender mainstreaming you need to do something. Doing something in that field is the best opportunity to know. But of course, that has its own problems, because then you get mixed in it and you tend to defend it...

So far I have published only one academic article on gender mainstreaming, and that is in Dutch. In these kinds of articles one may leave the rhetoric behind and discuss how things really are. It is an article, which discusses the roses and the thorns of gender mainstreaming, specifically in the case of a project made for the Ministry of the Flemish community together with Yvonne Benschop. But if I give a speech at the United Nations or at the European Commission, I have to keep their enthusiasm in gender mainstreaming up and I have to clarify the concepts, so that they do not do wrong or misleading things. My role as a consultant is a whole different one. If I would give only speeches on all the dangers involved, nobody would go on developing the strategy. In a speech,
I can only afford to point at misunderstandings and I can at best clarify them. I cannot point to the dangers, if I do not give a solution. So it is very limited what you can do with these kinds of speeches. That is why, at this very moment, I can hardly wait to walk to the other end of the bridge again, to go to the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna, to write more academically about it, to regain my independent position.

E.M.V. Now I understand your bridging. You are working on the development of the theoretical frameworks on gender mainstreaming, but, at the same time, you are also trying to understand what is happening with that when it is used in practice.

M.V. Yes, and I see this kind of activity as a form of participatory research. It is walking on a bridge between science and policy-making. What I am trying to do on gender mainstreaming is engaging in discourse transformation, which makes necessary to use a framework that can be understood by policy-makers. Because they will never say, let’s engage in the strategy of discourse transformation. That does not sound like something practical. It sounds complicated, political and unpractical, and therefore you have to translate things. As far as I am concerned I cannot invent anything or adopt anything at the policy-level without a better understanding of it. I cannot understand anything without theory, but at the same time I need to be where things are happening, to know what it is that I would like to understand. So that is why I am walking through this bridge all the time.

E.M.V. I would like to ask you to define briefly what gender mainstreaming means and why is this policy different than the previous equality policy, or the so-called women in development view on equality policy?

M.V. Well, there are a number of differences. The former women-specific policies aimed to make changes in some specific problems of women’s lives, like: they do not get into political parties and higher positions, they do not get to the top levels of the
university, or they suffer from violence in their homes, or they do not dare to go out on the streets at night, or they do not have access to loans of the banks... Specific policies always start with a problem that women have and they try to solve that problem in a direct way, in a way which makes sure that the problems are solved quite quickly. At the same time this is an incidental way of solving problems, and it is not changing the whole context of the specific problems. This strategy has advantages and disadvantages, because it is really making some change, but in a very limited way.

If this is how things are with this strategy, one should ask, well, what would we like to see instead of it? We would like to see the world to change. Because the whole world is constructed around and is based upon gender inequality, there are not only separate problems to solve. The whole government is part of these problems, because it is (re)producing gender inequality by its policies. For me this is the main background of gender mainstreaming. To make sure that governments not only are not reproducing gender inequality by their policies, but that they actively work towards gender equality, in all of their policies and especially all their normal or regular policies, their tax policies, their pensions policies, their education policies, their employment policies. The whole of it. There is so much public money involved there, that it is against all principles of justice to have policies which privilege men. This is the political legitimisation of gender mainstreaming.

But that is only the background of the issue. What you need to do for gender mainstreaming is to re-organise the whole way, in which policies are made. The whole idea is connected to how power works, and this goes back to Foucault. First of all it has to be mentioned that these people in the government are not out there, only to discriminate against women or to exclude them. The case is that they are part of the gender inequality system and of the gender inequality discourse, so they are not even able to see where this bias is, because it is part and parcel of their reality. This means that in
gender mainstreaming you always have to see first of all the ways in which the gender bias is made through policies. One should answer these questions: Where do they get their data from, where is it decided what the problem is, what is the way they make policies? And then he/she may try to reconstruct this policy process and introduce new routines, new actors or other procedures and new instruments, and make sure at the same time that they will not be able to include this gender bias again, make sure that knowledge on gender relations would be part of policy-making.

Gender mainstreaming, of course, is a very long-term strategy, because it changes things very slowly… so while you are using it, you still need the specific policies, because some problems of some groups of women are too urgent. Some migrant women are women with very low incomes, if they would have to wait for the strategy on gender mainstreaming to work, they might be dead by then. So it is better if you identify groups who have very specific problems and you try to work on these problems immediately, but at the same time you should try to see why is it that they have these problems, you should ask if there are any normal or regular policies, which are also related to their problems, and if these should not be reconstructed? To work on the latter aspects, it takes a lot longer, and sometimes you do not have time to wait for that.

E.M.V. At what stage is the work on gender mainstreaming right now? On the level of developing theoretical framework, developing theoretical arguments, or is it already translated to a certain degree into operational terms?

M.V. What I do and what a number of other people do is to develop instruments, to develop procedures, to develop good examples of how you can do that. For example, the gender impact assessment which we developed for The Netherlands is one instrument of gender mainstreaming.

E.M.V. Do you want to tell something more about that?
M.V. It is just a screening instrument, very similar to the environmental impact assessment. In the case of the environmental impact assessment, if you want to build a new airport and you want to know how it will affect the environment, you do an environmental impact assessment and then, if that is negative, you try and make another plan that will be less negative. Most Western European countries have such an instrument, and most importantly, most Western European countries have it in a compulsory way. The gender impact assessment is doing a similar thing, but related to gender. It asks: if we plan to have this new tax policy or this new education policy, how will that affect gender relations, how will it affect women and men? The instrument gives answers to these questions.

Now, the difference or maybe the problem with the gender impact assessment instrument in The Netherlands is that it is not compulsory. In that sense, it is not really gender mainstreaming, because it is done in a very accidental way. It has been done at several Ministries (ten times now), but it is not compulsory, it is a bit of an accident if it happens somewhere. More precisely it is not really an accident, it has been advocated by NGOs a number of times, but it is still not the system, and in order to be gender mainstreaming it would have to be a system. Because only in this way it could ensure that policies will be not made without a gender impact assessment. If this becomes compulsory, then you have a chance that this policy will be all right. This is exactly the reason why I am involved also in a new group who tries to improve this instrument. It has been used ten times, another researcher has done an evaluation on it, and there is some group of experts who is trying to develop it further, to make it better. At the same time the Ministry is busy to stimulate its use.

There was also a project that Yvonne Benschop and myself did for the Ministry of the Flemish community who asked me to make such an instrument for them in order to integrate gender into their
personnel policy. We agreed that it would be better to screen their whole process of making personnel policies, to see the whole picture: what exactly were they doing there and where could the gender bias be part of their work and how one might counter-balance that? Yvonne Benschop is from the business school, so she knows everything about personnel policy, and I know a lot about these instruments on gender mainstreaming. In the report we made a larger description of the project. First, we decided that this strategy would have to be adopted by the top of the Ministry, because nothing will ever happen in such an institution if only the equality unit wants something. We had interviews with the top of the Ministry and we asked them what was the gender problem here, what would they want to adopt as a goal, what did they know about the gender segregation in their organisation and so on. Then we discussed that with them. After the interviews we made for them a sort of a mission statement on gender in personnel policy and they were ready to adopt it. It was like an one page text and they sent it to the whole top of the Ministry, to two hundred people, who were around there, including the eight director generals. It was very important to define gender equality as a basic goal adopted by the top and communicated to the rest of the organisation.

We were working with people involved in training or in human research management, or with the statute of civil servants and different aspects of the personnel policy. They had to tell us what it was exactly they were doing there, how were they evaluating people, or were they making new laws on civil servants, or whatever. We used this information to explain to them how a gender connection could be hidden in what they were doing. We explained that this is never a direct connection, because they do not have special training for women, or laws only for women, or evaluation only for men, and we told them that these connections function indirectly. Because, for instance, if they will have certain procedures only for the top and there will be more men on the top, or they will
make certain training only for the top or for certain parts of the organisation where mostly men are, or only for the people with a certain type of contract, or for people who work full time, they will privilege some categories, while others will be disadvantaged. That is how it works, that is how gender segregation is connected to gender inequality, and how it is related to social norms of masculinity and femininity. We had to discuss this actively with them, because they did not always see a connection to gender. In the next step we made a short analysis of what were the strengths and weaknesses, and the threats and opportunities of the organisation linked to gender segregation.

After we had some kind of agreement on what was the problem, we started to develop ideas with them on what we could do. We proposed a whole action-plan. I will give here only some examples. We proposed that they always should have a segregation measurement in the annual personnel report, year by year, in order to see if things improved over time or not. We told them how to make such a measurement, because we knew what kind of data they had. They were very busy with making new job descriptions, so we made a checklist about how to avoid gender bias in job descriptions, and they promised us that they would use the checklist in making new job descriptions. We made a final agreement with them, about what they should do and who could do that. And as they were modern bureaucrats, this agreement got a place in the departmental annual plans. Of course, they still might not do it, but anyway, they built these principles into the normal evaluation procedure. And all this happened at the level of the individuals, as well. Everybody knew what he/she should do in each year, this became part of his/her annual plan and she or he would have a problem in the evaluation of that year if he or she had not done that.

E.M.V. This work must have take very much time...

M.V. Yes, it took a whole year. This is a good practice for gender mainstreaming, but obviously there are more good practices.
This was one, in which I have been involved. At that organisation there was a very small equality unit that had been trying to do something on the personnel policy, who found that our project improved their position, in particular it became a normal member of the personnel committee. As a result, they had a better access to and knowledge about the whole policy process, they could be present at all these meetings, they knew about all these promises, so they could also be a watch-dog in this committee. It was good for them. The Ministry decided to offer the possibility to four of their public institutions to do a similar project. We did this in the past years, just finished it before summer. And did a similar project for the Flemish Water Company, the Flemish Land Company, the Flemish Institute for the Entrepreneurs and a psychiatric hospital. These reports are now finished and most projects have been successful, with one exception. The Psychiatric Hospital, we discovered, hardly had any personnel policy. It is very hard to do gender mainstreaming on a policy that they do not have. They were a very old fashioned kind of institution, people got hired and fired, but they had no programs for selecting or training their people, no policy on how to improve them or how to evaluate them really, nothing much happened there. And if there are no procedures, you cannot change them. There has to be a procedure first, which one may start to improve.

This goes for Central European countries as well, I guess… There is a lack of procedures and routines in policy-making. At the same time, a certain kind of transparency is needed, as well, in order to find out how policies are made. Because it is very well possible that there is a routine for policy-making, but if there is no transparency at all, one can almost not find out who is really deciding something or where, or why? Of course, if you start a gender mainstreaming initiative, it can increase the transparency of the policy-making process. In any case, your work is easier if you work in a country like The Netherlands, where we have a law on
public information, due to which basically all information is public here.

E.M.V. And first of all you have to have an institution, or an organisation which recognises that there is a problem there with gender segregation and discrimination. Because the big problem, at least in our country, starts somewhere there... people usually say that there are no problems in the terms of gender equality and this is not an issue that we have to be concerned with. In this case the question is, how do you make people aware of the problems and how do you make them to accept that there is a problem and they have to solve that?

M.V. You need data, of course, to show them ... To explain how this happened in The Netherlands, I have to start before we made the gender impact assessment instrument. What has been very influential in The Netherlands was a study called „Unseen difference according to sex“. The researchers of this study analysed, I think, five policies, policy reports. You know, in The Netherlands we do not make many laws, we have a lot of policy reports that set out the direction. It is quite a vague type of policy-making here, sometimes. They had analysed five of these existing policies, their connections with gender, hidden norms on gender, hidden norms on femininity and masculinity. That work has been very influential, I think also because one of the policies was on sport. The current Minister for Sports at that time was a very famous feminist. This Minister was furious when she was „accused“ of having gender bias in her policies on sports. At first she tried to block publication of the report altogether, and that caused a lot of attention. Since then no civil servant, being in his/her right mind cannot afford to say that they have neutral policies. As I said, five policies were analysed, selected quite randomly. All of them appeared to have a large gender bias in them. As a result, there was a very firm ground to ask for the gender impact assessments.
When we made the instrument, we did four pilot projects on existing policies: two in a field where we thought everyone would think that there is a gender relevance, and two in a field of which people would think that it has nothing to do with it. We did an investigation on a policy about family forms, one on social security and employment policy, one on chronic illness policy, and another on the open-air recreation policy. Especially these last two ones were shocking. Because the whole program on open-air recreation did not even mention the words men and women, while it was only about activities that are predominantly „male“: fishing, sailing, jet-skying. It was not about hiking or swimming or aerobics, or something like that. The policy on chronically ill people was also outrageously male biased. This policy said that the problem of chronically ill people was that they were not a full part of society. They get isolated and what we need to do in order to solve that problem is to find them places on the labour market. Now, that is really ridiculous in The Netherlands, because if you look at who are the chronically ill people in this country, you will find that the majority of these people are old or middle-aged women. And most of the middle-aged women in The Netherlands have never been on the labour market. We always had a very low female participation on the labour market. It is improved now, but this has no impact on the middle-aged women, only on the younger ones. So if most of these chronically ill people are women who have never been on the labour market, not even when they were healthy, you can see that to propose such a solution is practically nonsense. Who would hire someone without any experience on the labour market at the very moment when she is middle-aged and chronically ill? That is ridiculous. This policy could be a good strategy in the case of young people (mainly men), who have had an accident and became chronically ill as a result of that, but they are a total minority. Analysing this policy, we could show how a terrain that seemingly is gender-neutral, is deeply gender biased.
And I think this is what you could do in all countries where it is a problem: to take a few existing policies, analyse their texts and show very clearly that they are gender biased and try to get that into the public debate, so that it gets widely known.

E.M.V. Do you know any of such analysis done in Central and Eastern Europe?

M.V. No, not really... maybe in Slovenia. I think they made a good plan. In a way, they said, well, let’s not start everywhere because we have limited resources, but let’s start with an inter-ministerial group of three Ministries, which are open to the subject. Let’s start with a process of training people, so that one may induce some gender expertise into the process of policy-making. But they did not get anywhere because the political context changed in a negative way. Since then, as far as I know, it has not been better.

E.M.V. Your research is also about how gender mainstreaming is used by different actors in different countries?

M.V. Yes...

E.M.V. And you have data on this from Western European countries...

M.V. Yes, the countries that are most advanced are Sweden and The Netherlands, but other countries have been quite active as well, like Norway, Belgium or Flanders also. And recently, there have been very interesting initiatives in Switzerland and France, at the regional level. So, yes, I keep track of that.

The reason for which I am interested in comparing is that countries seem to make very different choices in how to start and where to start. If you look at The Netherlands, we started with a gender impact assessment instrument, and in a way that was a very technocratic way of doing it. It was about de-politicising the issue. In Sweden, at the national level, they started with training their Ministers and State Secretaries on gender. What are the differences between the two approaches? The latter is much more dynamic, because these people can use their new expertise in all the things
they do. But one may ask what will happen if a new government comes, is it arranged or not that the new people would get training? If this is not organised, such an instrument is weak.

It is clear that you can develop all sorts of instruments. Part of the Swedish instrument at the local level – called 3R – is that you have to go and talk with all the people. At the local level you can do that, but at the national level it is almost impossible, participatory democracy does not work with millions of people. But if it is about villages, and it is about a youth policy or sport policy in that village, you can clearly go out and talk to the people and make sure you talk to as many women as men. You may try to take the different needs into account, and use consultation as a very important instrument for mainstreaming. Shortly put, it is easier to use this instrument at the local level, or maybe in specific fields, or in cases when one could consult with representative NGOs or with experts.

It is very clear to me that there are so many ways of doing it, and that is why I am wondering if there is a rule in the way in which these different contexts and these different ways of doing are connected. We tend to think that Sweden has a bit of a patronising policy style - think about the fact that Sweden is a country where alcohol is totally regulated in a prohibiting way -, they are acting as if their society would be better if they make something compulsory or forbidden. That is very different from The Netherlands. We think that something can only happen if we all agree on it. We think that if you would prohibit it will not work. So this is a difference in national culture and in the bureaucratic culture… The Netherlands also has a long tradition of dealing with problems in a technocratic way, which makes them solvable. This is a strategy of taking the political edge out of a problem, so that it can be discussed and solved. In a way, the gender impact assessment fits well into this pattern.

If one looks at Central and Eastern Europe, he/ she may see that those countries who are most eager to enter into the European Union are motivated for gender mainstreaming also along the line of
the Accession. Gender equality policy is one of the things which they can do to show that they are part of the West, or part of Europe, or whatever you call it. Two or three years ago, when I started to think about these differences I also aimed to contribute to gender mainstreaming developments in Central and Eastern Europe. But there are very different chances. I think that those Central and Eastern European countries where some feminist NGOs have developed, have some advantage because at least they have an agency in society that can work on gender equality. If the European Union is pushing these countries towards gender equality, NGOs can push from the other side to increase the chance for action. Countries where pushing comes only from the European Union can never get so far. It is clear that these NGOs are important, must be important in Central and Eastern Europe. I hope to find out more about this because I do not know enough. There is one main point where all these countries are really having an opportunity for gender mainstreaming and that is the fact that they are all undergoing large changes in the policy-making processes. There are no totally fixed routines in those countries, they are all undergoing changes, and wherever there is change in such a radical way there are opportunities for many things, because a system that is changing is not closed, cannot be closed. But I do not have any idea yet about how things will really happen on this domain.

Or, and that is the other part of the story, within Western Europe „equality” is the main framework to talk about gender mainstreaming. In fact equality is not naturally resulting from gender mainstreaming, no, gender mainstreaming is only a strategy to integrate a gender perspective. It does not prescribe what that gender perspective is exactly. This is one of the things I have discovered after having made the gender impact assessment in The Netherlands, when other countries called and wanted to adopt it. I had to ask myself: is it specifically Dutch or not? In the gender impact assessment, as we developed it, there were two criteria used
to decide if a policy was positive or negative, the criterion of equality and the criterion of autonomy. We could use these two criteria in The Netherlands because they were already there, they were in use in the policy-making process. Equality was adopted within what we call emancipation policy in equality before the law, and equal treatment, and so on. Autonomy was used in the field of development, in the sense of political autonomy, economic autonomy, sexual autonomy, physical autonomy, in a sense that women should have the opportunity to make their own decisions about what is a good life for them. We know that equality as a criterion has always a risk of having a male norm inside. Equal to whom? It is always women equal to men. There was a big risk of installing a male norm and in order to counterbalance this we thought that the idea of autonomy would be better than the concept of difference. Because difference easily implies that you have to assume some kind of essential difference between men and women, which we did not like, and which is totally not part of the Dutch culture. I think there is a large consensus in The Netherlands about the fact that basically men and women are both human beings, they are not really different. We tend to downplay the differences, whereas Southern European countries tend to emphasise them, stressing that men and women are really two different kind of people. So it is clear that through the criteria of the gender impact assessment, the goals and the fundamental criteria of gender mainstreaming are linked to the Dutch politics on emancipation. The same criteria would not be adopted probably in an Italian context, or in a Spanish context, or in a French context where difference is such a highly valued criterion.

To me, it is clear that there is not enough discussion within Europe on our different political views on what equality is and on the meanings of gender equality. People understand it very differently. For many people is not clear that equality is about gender, and not only about men and women, is about how the world
is defined, about how the world is interpreted, which are the
definitions of femininity and masculinity, the definitions of, for
example, who is a good father, and why is that different from being a
good mother and so on. And what our schools are doing with that. I
think there should be more political discussion on these issues.

But on a political level people may think that it is quite
dangerous to have these discussions because now you can at least act
as if you agree. You can pretend to agree. On specific levels, there are
a lot of issues where the whole women’s movement agrees. In the
field on the violence on women, on domestic violence, for example,
there is a large agreement on the fact that this is wrong. But if you
look at prostitution you already see that there is no agreement in the
women’s movement. The Netherlands are defending good working
conditions for prostitutes, and consider that legalisation of
prostitution is a kind of solution, but the rest of Europe thinks that is
really horrible.

I think we need a discussion on the goals and on what a
gender perspective is. Yes, this discussion might be dangerous.
Because at this point, there is consensus, even if it is a „pretended”
consensus needed in order to be able to do something. Anyway, as
far as I am concerned, I am interested in analysing how different
views on this problem and on solutions are hidden in the policies on
equality, and also how they get into a gender mainstreaming policy.
That is one of the many things which I would like to find out in the
next months.