

# ESCAPING THE MYTHICAL BEAST: GENDER MAINSTREAMING RECONCEPTUALISED

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**Abstract:** Since the early 2000s, disappointment has grown about the realization of the transformative potential that was ascribed to gender mainstreaming at its launch at the Beijing conference in 1995. The critiques on gender mainstreaming tend to represent gender mainstreaming as a ‘mythical beast’, and as such take for granted the social change it is intended to produce. This special issue seeks to look both beyond and inside the mythical beast. By approaching policy making as a social practice embedded in discursive politics, we seek to advance the theoretical underpinnings of gender mainstreaming and argue for a rethinking of agency and transformation. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the ‘women-in-development’ concept in the 1970s, different policy approaches have been employed in development planning and practice, ranging from equity, anti-poverty or efficiency approaches, to empowerment strategies (Moser, 1989: 1806–1817; Brouwers, 2013). The conceptual shift from women in development to gender and development refocused attention from integrating women into existing development

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processes to the power relations that affect the position and opportunities of women and men. This shift to gendered power relations was accompanied by the notion of transformation and the need to change structures and systems. It is against this backdrop that gender mainstreaming was conceptualized and introduced as a policy strategy in the 1990s. Whereas earlier approaches relied on separate women or gender programmes and projects to redress gender inequalities and promote women's empowerment, gender mainstreaming is a strategy that seeks to ensure that the realization of gender equality is an integral dimension of *all* development programmes and policy-making processes. The idea of gender mainstreaming was, and is, that institutions, policy-making and decision-making processes themselves are gendered and therefore risk to reproduce inequalities. The implication of this idea is that gender equality cannot (only) be realized by separate and relatively isolated gender or women programmes, but that policy-making institutions and processes themselves, at macro, meso and micro levels, need to be transformed.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations in Beijing (1995), gender mainstreaming gained ground, and following that conference, this policy strategy was embraced and quickly adopted by a broad range of multilateral development agencies, bilateral donors, governments and development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Pearson, 2005). In the early 2000s, however, disappointment grew about what gender mainstreaming had brought for the promotion of gender equality. Whereas the breakthrough of gender mainstreaming had been considered historical during and after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, it failed to live up to the expectations of fundamental institutional transformation. A range of evaluations in both international organizations such as the World Bank or the United Nations Development Programme, and bilateral donors, including the Department for Internal Development, Sida and Norad, as well as NGOs revealed that the practice of gender mainstreaming was haunted by technocratization and depoliticization (cf. IDS Bulletin special issue by Cornwall *et al.*, 2004; Development & Change special issue by Cornwall *et al.*, 2007; Gender & Development special issue by Sweetman and Porter, 2005; and more recently Sweetman, 2012).

In this special issue, we revisit the evaluations of what happened to gender mainstreaming in the field of international development and reconsider the theoretical underpinnings of the transformative expectations and potential that were ascribed to gender mainstreaming in the mid 1990s. We propose to recognize policy and governance as part and parcel of social reality and processes rather than as separate from it, as a result of which, we come to a different conceptualization and appreciation of the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming. We will do so by critically assessing gender mainstreaming through an approach that is 'both broader and more specific' (Subrahmanian, 2004: 91). Such a dual approach is needed because the decontextualized use and application of the concept gender mainstreaming, in both policy and research, obscures a profound reflection on the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming:

By characterizing gender mainstreaming as a 'monolith', and without disaggregating what it entails, who is involved and what processes and strategies it compromises, in clearly situated contexts, evaluations of 'its' effects or impacts become impossible. This '*mythical beast*' is then invested with powers to effect social change, and the underlying and implicit assumptions (and models) of institutional and social change associated with it remain uninterrogated (Subrahmanian, 2004: 92, emphasis ours).

*More specific* implies a detailed analytical investigation of the formulation, implementation and practice of gender mainstreaming policies and strategies. In order to counter the tendency to take the meaning and content of gender mainstreaming for granted as if we all mean the same thing when we use the term and as if gender mainstreaming has the same face in every institution, we look for the particularities of gender mainstreaming in specific development institutions and interfaces. The *broader* approach implies that we seek to position these particularities in broader discursive and theoretical contexts. This entails a critical engagement with the ‘development discourses, ideologies and trajectories’ (*Ibid.*: 91), which characterizes the way development institutions currently operate.

We take up the challenge to look both beyond and inside the mythical beast in order to advance the conceptual understanding of what gender mainstreaming entails and where it gets stuck in the transformations it pursues. Our goal is neither to come to a conclusion whether or not gender mainstreaming has succeeded, nor to advise whether we should do away with it or not. Rather, we want to scrutinize gender mainstreaming beyond the often expressed oppositions—of success versus failure, transformation versus compliance, feminism versus mainstream and theory versus practice—in which criticism on gender mainstreaming is often framed. Our objective is to contribute to further conceptualizing and grasping that transformative core. Looking beyond the mythical beast implies also looking beyond the dichotomies that helped creating it. The critique on gender mainstreaming policies and practices tend to presuppose a sharp border between practices in the broader society and practices in policy-making bodies and institutions; this view fails to acknowledge policy practice as a social practice and social practice as inherently political. In such a monolithic view, social change comes to be posited as an external outcome of gender mainstreaming practices. We propose to see those practices themselves as part of that social change, by studying the ‘governmentalities’ that inform gender mainstreaming within and outside the state and other governing bodies. By taking up the perspective of governmentalities, we are able to connect the way we are governed and govern ourselves within and beyond policy-making organs. This governmentality perspective will be further elaborated after our discussion of the promise and the critique of gender mainstreaming (section 2).

The cases presented and analysed in this special issue are located at different levels of the so called ‘aid chain’. The cases include micro and meso practices on the work floor, workshops and gender training of particular NGOs, and policy formulation and implementation processes at the macro level of international development agencies and the new aid architecture as formulated at the Paris Declaration process. Although the analyses start from practices situated at different levels, they are not confined to those levels, as the governmentality perspective requires us to look both inside and beyond the mythical beast. The reader might observe that many of the contributions to this special issue concern Dutch institutions, NGOs, policies or practices or are written by authors (formerly) located in Dutch research institutes.<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands are an interesting case,

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<sup>1</sup>This special issue is a spin-off of the *On Track with Gender* trajectory which ran from 2008 to 2011. In this initiative, the Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hivos, Oxfam Novib as well as Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation, Cordaid and the Royal Tropical Institute engaged in a process to reflect on the policy, practice and theory of gender mainstreaming in order to take it to the next level. We are greatly indebted to all authors, respondents and interviewees, as well as participants and key note speakers of the two expert meeting and others who have in different ways contributed to this shared learning experience. The *On Track with Gender* trajectory is funded by the Development Policy Review Network (DPRN).

because Dutch governmental and non-governmental development agencies have been frontrunners on gender equality and women's rights in development since the mid 1980s and are major international donors in this domain. This long history provides a rich ground for exploring the challenges to realize the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming.

## 2 GENDER MAINSTREAMING: THE PROMISE AND THE CRITIQUE

Looking at the definitions of gender mainstreaming, which commonly circulate in international development institutions and publications on the subject, the high expectations of the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming come as no surprise. The most often referred to definition of gender mainstreaming in international development stems from the Economic and Social Council 1997 (Moser and Moser, 2005; OECD, 2007; Sweetman, 2012) and reads:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is 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 (UN, 1997: 1).

Within the European Union context, the final report of the Group of Specialist Mainstreaming of the Council of Europe has proven an important reference point for gender mainstreaming definitions (Verloo, 2005: 348–350). This report defines gender mainstreaming as the following:

the reorganization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making (Council of Europe, 1998: 15, in Verloo, 2005: 350).

The ambitions in both definitions are high: gender mainstreaming is to reorganize and improve all phases of policy processes, in all domains and all areas, by making gender concerns an integral dimension.

We are not highlighting the ambitious character of this agenda from a cynical perspective. In fact, we share the observation of gender bias and exclusion of policy processes and the material consequences of these for women and men in many parts of the world. The identification of gender mainstreaming as a strategy to promote gender justice indeed lies in the acknowledgement of the inherently gendered character of policy making in its many manifestations (Goetz, 2006, 1995). With this focus on addressing structural gender biases, gender mainstreaming is more transformative than previous gender equality strategies (Verloo, 2005; Squires, 2005). Yet, assessments of the realization of these ambitions come to critical conclusions about the transformative results of gender mainstreaming policies, practices and concepts.

A survey of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 'saw major changes among donors' in terms of adopting gender mainstreaming policies (OECD, 2007: 10): an increase in the budget for gender policies, in the number of gender specialist in the staff and of the influence of gender units

on decision making. A little less than one fifth of sector-allocable aid was focused on gender equality, but most gender spending of donors have tended to focus on social sectors such as 'basic education and basic health, including population and reproductive health' (*Ibid.*: 11). Overall, the report observed that 'lip service abounds, practice remains weak', because 'only a handful (of DAC members) have the staff, budgets and management practices needed to implement (gender equality) policies' (*Ibid.*: 7). In 2005, a review of the experiences of bilateral donors, international agencies and Northern and Southern NGOs caused Moser and Moser to observe that gender mainstreaming efforts have commonly lead to the formulation of policies, but that with regard to implementation 'evidence is mixed' (Moser and Moser, 2005: 19). The focus on institutional inputs was accompanied by a neglect of the 'operational and programming implementation of gender mainstreaming', and on top of that, 'the outcomes and impact of implementation in terms of gender equality are still largely unknown' (*Ibid.*: 19).

These conclusions regarding the weak actual and practical implementation of strategies for gender equality and women's empowerment in operational activities do not stand on their own (e.g. IDS Bulletin Special by Cornwall *et al.*, 2004; Rao and Kelleher, 2005; UNDP, 2006; NORAD, 2006; Piálek, 2008; IEG, 2010). The recent synthesis study conducted by the African Development Bank Group strikingly asks whether gender mainstreaming is on a road to nowhere (ADB, 2012). Although all contributions to this issue also come to critical conclusions about the transformative results of gender mainstreaming, this special goes beyond the common observation that the disappointment about the realization of the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming only concerns its implementation and not its definitions or understanding. Our critical examination here of the definitions is fuelled by our concern about the weak conceptualization of how policy processes can be changed, and secondly, of how changes in policy processes contribute to achieving gender equality. Put differently, the promise for transformation and a transformative agenda is clearly captured in the definitions, but both its content as well as the route to its realization remain underconceptualized.

### 3 NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE OF EMPOWERMENT

We place the disappointing performance of gender mainstreaming in the perspective of *governmentalities*. The gap between policy and practice, or between aspirations and disappointment, says more about the nature of the process of institutionalization than about the shortcomings of gender mainstreaming as such (Mukhopadhyay, 2013). The perspective of *governmentalities* does not deny the disappointing results of gender mainstreaming, but it does allow us to move beyond the questions whether or not this strategy should be done away with (Davids *et al.*, 2013). A *governmentalities* perspective provides critical insight into why ambitions have not come true. The notion of *governmentalities* opens up the critical exploration of particular mentalities and regimes in government and administration, which direct the conduct of citizens, but are usually taken for granted (Davids *et al.*, 2011). This Foucauldian perspective approaches government, institutions and policymaking as part and parcel of disciplinary powers operating in and outside institutions. And this implies not only a concern with how others are governed, but also how we govern ourselves by becoming moral subjects (for example Dean, 2004; Hunt and Wickham, 1998; Larner and Walters, 2004). A *governmentalities* perspective makes it possible to look inside and beyond the mythical beast, that is, to see the particularities of gender

mainstreaming practices and understand how these have been shaped by neoliberal techniques of governance. This, in turn, generates a view on how to eventually contest and resist these.

The specific shape gender mainstreaming has taken is a sign of the neoliberal age in which international development has been operating since the mid 1990s (Marchand, 2009). Successive United Nations conferences, including Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995), served as a platform for the systematic negotiation of a progressive agenda of social justice during the 1990s, but from the start this process has taken place in the context of a global economic policy terrain that was almost entirely subordinated to neoliberal economic thinking dominated by the Washington Consensus (Sen, 2005: iii; Harcourt, 2006). The technocratization and depoliticization of gender mainstreaming runs parallel with the often criticized technical and minimalist agenda of the Millennium Development Goals, in which the perspective of social justice and fundamental and political processes of social change have been pushed out of view (Kabeer, 2005; Saith, 2006; van Eerdewijk *et al.*, 2009).

It is in this context that empowerment of women has increasingly been framed in business case terms. In fact, 'women's empowerment is heralded in today's development circles as a means that can produce extraordinary ends' (Cornwall and Edwards, 2010: 1). The clip *The Girl Effect* of the Nike Foundation illustrates this by arguing that the solution to the problems the world is facing is 'a girl', who, after having received education and a loan, will 'make the whole world better off' and 'change the course of history' by ending poverty and war, and creating peace, stability, growth and so on ([www.girleffect.org](http://www.girleffect.org)) (Chant and Sweetman, 2012: 520). Whereas this instrumentalist framing of empowerment marks a break with earlier images of women and girls as victims of oppression and poverty, it articulates a problematic notion of agency. In its instrumentalist representation of women and girls as active agents, this notion of empowerment turns a blind eye on gendered power relations in which these women agents live and operate. Empowerment and agency have entered the development vocabulary, but gender-unjust systems as well as gendered privileges go unchallenged (cf. Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). The delinking of women and gender concerns from power relations and structures, and as such the emptying of empowerment has been a recurrent critique over the past few years (e.g. special issue *Development & Change* by Cornwall *et al.*, 2007; and the recent special issue of *IDS Bulletin*; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). It made Srilatha Batliwala (2007) point out that the widespread adoption of the gender mainstreaming and empowerment language, had taken the power out of empowerment.

This convenient blindness on structural power relations and dynamics enables an optimistic tone on the possibilities to promote gender equality (Parpart, 2013; Cornwall, 2008) and obscures how gender mainstreaming policies can actually contribute to the promotion of gender equality in society. As Jakimow and Kilby (2008: 390–396) have argued with respect to the popular Self Help Groups in India, the assumption is that the disempowered will empower themselves. The responsibility for transformation is left with the marginalized themselves, and this serves as an excuse for the lack of actions of other actors: 'by devolving the responsibility of action to the people least able to do so, development agencies have in fact contributed to maintaining the status quo' (p. 394). This is

a far cry from the nuanced and subject-sensitive ideas of what empowerment of women and the attainment of gender equality actually entails. (...) A gender and development approach recognizes gender inequality as a relational issue, and as a matter of structural inequality which needs to be addressed directly and not only by women, but by development institutions, government and wider society (Chant and Sweetman, 2012: 518).

Chant and Sweetman rightly ask the question ‘whether the goal of female investment is primarily to promote gender equality and women’s “empowerment”, or to facilitate development on “on the cheap”, and/or to promote further economic liberalisation’ (2012: 521). Of crucial concern here is that this narrow concept of empowerment misrepresents the nature of transformational change.

This special issue builds on earlier observations of how notions of gender are being stretched and bent (cf. Lombardo *et al.*, 2009) as an effect of the neoliberal era in which gender mainstreaming ‘took off’. In their contribution to this special issue, Holvoet and Inberg critically investigate the opportunities for transformative gender change in the new aid architecture. The central place of ideas about efficiency and effectiveness in the new principles of aid has implications for understanding gender and change. Holvoet and Inberg argue for a ‘management for results’ approach, rather than the narrow ‘management by results’ focus of contemporary aid discourse. The former focuses on the underlying processes that lead to results and offers opportunities to include gender equality objectives and grasp processes generating impact on women’s empowerment. Their article examines the extent to which opportunities for transformative change in the principles of the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action have materialized on the ground and warn that the opportunities will not be realized automatically. They relate the downsizing and blurring of gender mainstreaming to the technocratic and narrow conceptualization of aid and development effectiveness inscribed in the aid reform.

Van Eerdewijk (2013) investigates two specific instruments commonly applied in gender mainstreaming policies of Dutch development NGOs: gender targets and gender assessments. The article scrutinizes how notions of gender equality are encrypted in these instruments and goes on to analyse how these notions are stretched and bent in the actual implementation of these instruments. The article shows that although the gender concepts encrypted in the instruments are transformative, this transformative potential gets lost in the micropolitics of practice. Mukhopadhyay’s article profoundly unpacks how the demand for the production and distribution of knowledge on gender that was sparked off by the adoption of gender mainstreaming resulted in acceptable and homogeneous messages, which lost their resonance with grassroots experiences of women. She shows how the field of gender and development has been framed and structured by technologies of governance. Her analysis points to the mechanisms of categorization, codification and standardization through which gender has been made governable. Out of this came the image of ‘the poor woman with an expertly understood set of needs and rights’ (Mukhopadhyay, 2013), which made policy blind to real life women, and to the actual social relations and norms in which they live and give meaning to their lives and aspirations (cf. Win, 2004).

Whereas Mukhopadhyay makes this point in relation with development agencies and national states, the contribution of van Santen (2013) illustrates these processes of codification in wider processes of social change, specifically the Islamic resurgence in North Cameroon. She analyses a gender workshop provided in North-Cameroon by a European development NGO. In her ethnographic account of the workshop, van Santen shows and questions how gender is presented and translated in tools to stimulate specific discussions. By placing the workshop and its outcomes in the history of North-Cameroonian political and social change, she reveals that, rather than challenging the status quo, the workshop actually intersects with local processes of Islamization. This case allows for questioning the intentionality embedded in the overrated expectations of policies to generate certain societal outcomes. The workshop eventually comes to legitimate a change it never set out for, because the conceptualization of gender, which

does not fit with local understandings of identity and relations between people, makes that reflection on actual gender relations and questioning of the 'Self' can be avoided.

#### 4 THE AGENCY OF POLICY ACTORS

Not only the empowerment of women and the transformation of gender inequality has been governed by neoliberalism in mainstreaming processes, but also the understanding and approach to gender mainstreaming itself, the transformation of policy processes (van Eerdewijk and Davids, 2011a, 2011b). The optimistic undertone on agency also comes to the fore in the assumptions by which policy actors are able to change and transform their policy practice into a more gender-inclusive one (Parpart, 2013). Roggeband and Verloo (2006) have pointed to the diagnosis/prognosis paradox in which gender mainstreaming is caught. The problem of gender policy making is defined in terms of absolute structure, but the solution is defined in terms of free agents. 'The actors normally involved in policy making' (Council of Europe's definition mentioned earlier) are expected to be able to reorganize their institutions, the nature of policy making, and from there, to transform gender inequality in social reality. But these actors are embedded in the same discursive settings that created and continued to reproduce exclusive institutions, policies and impacts in the first place. Again, the structural and systemic aspects of gender inequality, and how these impact on policy actors and policymaking and implementation are left out of sight and go unchallenged. The conceptualization of the agency of women whose live gender mainstreaming policies claim to change hence has a parallel with the conceptualization of policy actors. Both fit with neoliberal notions of individualism and free agents.

In this special issue, Parpart observes how evaluations of gender mainstreaming policies continue to look for solutions in the same places, rather than recommending a different approach to institutional change. The reliance on more training, tools, frameworks, manuals and gender experts and units are expressions of the rational standardization of protocols, procedures and other technologies that are projected by neo liberalism (see also Parpart, 2009: 8; Woodford-Berger, 2004). This fit of gender mainstreaming with the technocratic governance of development has diverted attention away from fundamental institutional and social change. In this special issue, Parpart argues that the blame for undelivered results of policies is often put on inadequate design. She questions whether good policy is really the answer and argues that policy is a political process. She draws attention to the wider societal forces that reproduce the masculinist status quo and make institutions resilient to change, and points out that the future of gender mainstreaming has to acknowledge and deal with the resistance it generates when challenging this status quo.

The inherently political nature of the transformative project implied in gender mainstreaming is also the point of departure for Roggeband's article. She highlights that gender mainstreaming policies have favoured expertise and gender units over deliberative strategies that create space for women's voices. She specifically points at how governmental and non-governmental donors might support women's and feminist organizations in the global South to carry out their programmes and advocacy but refrain from engaging them in relation to their own policy-making processes. She argues to approach gender mainstreaming as a participative-deliberative strategy, which actively seeks to create space and give voice to actors, which are currently excluded in these roles from mainstreaming policy making. Such an approach would acknowledge that gender



mainstreaming is an on-going political struggle, in which policymaking and institutions are objects of change. Once established, commitment cannot be assumed to be permanent, but needs to be established at different levels and over and over again through contestation.

The ready adoption of gender mainstreaming reveals the eagerness by which policy making was embraced as the solution, whereas the proposition of gender mainstreaming was actually based on identifying policy making as one of the problems in the perpetuation of gender inequality. The feminist disappointment in gender mainstreaming might well be related to the weak conceptualization of policy as ‘a package that could be transferred to another context without turning into something different’ build on a top-down linear idea of policy implementation (Eyben, 2010: 55). The scope of engagement with change and transformation has been narrowed down, by ‘conflating policy reform with changes in bureaucratic practice, and confining the analytical gaze to the advancement of women’s ‘cause’ within institutions with often little mandate and power to effect real change’ (Subrahmanian, 2004: 90). By focusing on finding ‘the right mix’, gender mainstreaming policies have actually neglected the inherently gendered nature of institutions and policy making, and potentially contributed to their reproduction. Van Eerdewijk’s investigation of the practice of gender mainstreaming instruments underscores how the design of these instruments allows for by-passing both organizational priorities and interests of individual staff members, rather than challenging them (this issue). Van Santen’s analysis of the gender workshop in North Cameroon shows how the way gender concepts were codified in the workshop make that the gender agenda is distorted to larger societal processes (this issue).

## 5 RESILIENCE AND RETHINKING AGENCY

The issue of governing practices in institutions has already been taken up in an article by Goetz, which first appeared in 1995, and had, interestingly, not lost any of its topicality when it was reprinted in 2006. She argues that:

Understanding institutions as frameworks for behavioural rules and as generators of experience contributes to understanding why it is that when new agents and orientations are introduced to institutions – such as women, and concerns with gender equity – outcomes can seem so little changed. Institutional rules, structures, practices, and the identities of the agents which animate them may continue to be primarily iterated to the political and social interests which institutions are designed to promote in the first place (2006: 72).

Gender practices and gender mainstreaming may be well understood as ‘wicked problems’: ‘problems that persist despite the numerous efforts to remedy them over the years’ (Stoppelenburg and Vermaak, 2009: 40). Wicked problems are characterized by both content and process complexity; the former implying the multidimensionality and interrelatedness of problems, which makes them ‘ambiguous, fuzzy and hard to pin down’, and the latter points to the involvement of a range of actors in different roles, with their own ideas and values, which makes ‘participation ambiguous and ill structured’ (*Ibid.*: 40). These complexities make institutional practices resilient to change. The fact that the mainstream is neither neutral nor apolitical is all the more pertinent for transformative strategies as gender mainstreaming, which aim for a redistribution of resources and seek to redress exclusion and unequal structural relations. Because gender mainstreaming means

doing things in a fundamentally different way, it 'is an inherently contested process that is never simply about adopting a new policy' (Benschop and Verloo, 2006: 22).

This resilience and consequent resistance to gender mainstreaming in practice, Parpart argues, have been silenced in both concepts and policies of gender mainstreaming. The contribution of Davids, van Driel and Parren (2013) further unpacks the theoretical foundations that allow for this silencing of resistance and this simplified understanding of fundamental transformation. They reconstruct that it was the theoretical shift from women to gender, and in relation to that from negative to positive notions of power, which enabled a view on institutions and policy making as problematic in terms of being gender-biased and exclusionary. In conceptual terms, the notion of gender and sex have been split, as a result of which gender is located outside the subject and therefore considered as easily changeable. It is this binary split and distorted subject theory that allows for positioning women as the best change agents in the quest for gender equality.

A renewed subject theory needs to be articulated in gender mainstreaming (Davids *et al.*, 2013). In that articulation, we can draw from reflections on agency within feminist theory that try to go beyond coining the subject as a free and autonomous agent as part of the inheritance of enlightenment thinking that fits very well with contemporary dominance of neoliberalization. This strand of theorizing rather explores how agency consists of simultaneously upholding as well as subverting norms and normality. Agency is then as much about compliance as it is about resistance (for instance Cornwall and Edwards, 2010; Eyben, 2010; Davids, 2011, van Eerdewijk, 2009). With such an understanding of agency, Davids *et al.* (2013) argue in their contribution, change comes to be conceptualized as slow, fragmented and contradictory and cannot be understood in utopian terms of a clean and clear cut break with the past, which produces something totally new, something similar to 'a genderless world'. Change therefore is not external to the everyday repetitions of norms and normalities, but generated in and through this repetition (Butler, 1990).

The blindness of gender mainstreaming to 'policy as a site for resistance and contestation' (Eyben, 2010: 55) undermines the realization of fundamental transformation. The practice, evaluation and thinking on gender mainstreaming hence seems to be caught in a conceptual paradox. Whereas feminist analysis that pointed to the genderedness of institutions and policy making was crucial in identifying those institutions and processes of policy making an object for transformation, gender mainstreaming practices have, ironically, been built on a simplistic notion of policy processes. The original diagnosis that policy and institutions produce and reproduce gender hierarchies has not lost any of its significance. What we do need, however, is a better grasp of the nature of change and processes of transformation (cf. Sandler and Rao, 2012).

## 6 HOW TO ESCAPE FROM THE MYTHICAL BEAST?

How to move the institutionalization of gender equality ahead without looking for solutions in all the same places, to use Parpart's words (this issue)? Trying harder does not help to address wicked problems. Wicked problems are obviously not easily addressed, and because earlier attempts to solve them have failed, attempts to deal with them can become controversial. 'The stabilizing resistance of the dominant existing systems' tends to 'water down' and 'take the punch out of the new approach' (Stoppelenburg and Vermaak, 2009: 41). The contributions to this special issue put forward suggestions for the future of gender mainstreaming. What ties these suggestions together is that they all propose not to give up

gender mainstreaming (cf. Standing, 2004; Sandler and Rao, 2012), but to redirect its focus away from individualistic change processes to the structural and institutional aspects of gender inequality and of exclusionary policy and decision making. They seek to reconnect to the realities of women (van Santen, Parpart) through triangles of empowerment (Roggeband) and destabilize the knowledge that is currently produced on women and gender relations (Mukhopadhyay). These suggestions resonate strongly with the strategy of displacement, which expresses a way of thinking about change in which both the strategies and the goal of change cannot be fixed and have to flexibly adapt to 'gender equality as a moving target' (Verloo, 2005: 347). Displacement seeks to destabilize and displace hierarchies and the operations of their regimes, because the problem is 'not (only) the exclusion of women, or men as a norm, but the gendered world itself' (*Ibid.*: 346).

We need to go beyond the unproblematic and naïf emphasis on policy making as an instrument for social change. The neglect of policy making itself as a social practice is part of the construction of gender mainstreaming as a mythical beast. Escaping this mythical beast implies reconceptualizing gender mainstreaming as a social, political practice in which practice and theory intersect. The acknowledgement of institutions and policy making as disciplinary processes provides insight into why gender mainstreaming has taken the shape it has, and at the same time opens up theoretical and practical avenues for exploring agency in disciplinary power (Butler, 1990; Bacchi 2005; Lombardo *et al.*, 2010; Krook and True, 2012). When disciplining is an ongoing process in which inherently instable meanings of the social world are produced as taken for granted, unlimited opportunities arise for on-going investment with producing that social world. The answer regarding the future of gender mainstreaming therefore lies not in the formulation of specific instruments or policy measures that are applied universally, but requires a high awareness of both policy actors and women's rights activists of the way in which policymaking and institutions are embedded in deep structures (Bacchi, 2005; Rao and Kelleher, 2005), and how these structural inequalities are constantly reproduced in the particularities of everyday life and practice. The fundamental transformation that gender mainstreaming is claimed to pursue hence requires an engagement with the technologies of governance within organizations, institutions and wider societies. Instruments or policy measures that, in whatever small ways, can rattle the cages of these technologies should be used to further this engagement, but above all have to be appreciated on their capabilities of doing just that in specific contexts, times and places, rather than being attributed such a revolutionary potential. Reflexivity and deep structure awareness are crucial requirements for an engagement with the technologies of governance. And so is the recognition that revolutions often come about in small steps and on small scales, which might or might not eventually produce an evolution in great big strides. The radicalness of change then should not by definition be related to scale, but to the depth of critical engagement.

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