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# Women transforming the mainstream — A think piece

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## Introduction

This paper proposes a new paradigm of transforming the mainstream for the UNIFEM Strategic Business Plan 2004–2007.<sup>1</sup> It builds on the earlier technical approach of mainstreaming a gender perspective through gender tools, and on the political approach of mainstreaming women's participation in decision making. Both these approaches implicitly accepted the underlying mainstream agenda as a given, and expected change to result from the mainstreaming processes. In contrast, the new paradigm explicitly seeks to transform the mainstream agenda as a prerequisite for the realisation of the advancement of women and gender equity. It directly links a rights-based approach to the realisation of women's human rights through the transformation of gender relations, which also become an explicit target. The approach is based on an acknowledgement that women's human rights can only be realised through the transformation of gender power relations at all levels. Thus, the new paradigm involves a new relationship between women and the mainstream, recognising that:

1. transforming the mainstream is a prerequisite for and an integral element of the full realisation of women's human rights and gender equality;
2. gender-responsive decision making using gender-responsive tools within gender-responsive institutions and gender-responsive conceptual frameworks are essential to enable women and men to negotiate transformed personal, social, economic and political arrangements;
3. women's active and informed participation in decision making at all levels is both a women's human right and a prerequisite for transforming the mainstream; and
4. women must become empowered and informed decision makers at all levels on *mainstream* issues.<sup>2</sup>

Women must take, and UNIFEM must facilitate, a proactive role in developing the mainstream agenda rather than merely reacting to it. The emerging concept of human security potentially offers an appropriate framework within which women and UNIFEM might develop gender-responsive perspectives on the various components of the mainstream. These would include, among others, administrative, economic and political governance, personal, national and international

security, personal, group and national identity, and economic, social and environmental sustainability and human rights.

## Mainstreaming in the UNIFEM mandate

As the draft Strategic Business Plan 2004–2007 makes clear, the concept of mainstreaming is a central component of the UNIFEM mandate laid out in 1984. It requires the organisation to 'serve as a catalyst with the goal of ensuring the involvement of women in mainstream development activities'. However, interpretations of mainstreaming have varied over the three decades during which UNIFEM and the women's movement have sought to achieve this goal. Interpretations have varied in terms of both the strategies required to achieve the goal, and the relationship between women and the development mainstream.

## Development of the current approach to mainstreaming

The current approach to mainstreaming is the product of three broad approaches to promoting the status of women in the context of development: the WID (women in development) approach; the GAD (gender and development) or gender mainstreaming approach; and women in politics or mainstreaming women strategies.

## The WID approach — bringing women into the mainstream

The early 'women in development' approach tended to support women-targeted activities that were token in scale and impact, and marginal to the development mainstream. The overall perspective (of both women and the mainstream) was that women and their activities were largely isolated from the mainstream. Women wanted to join the mainstream in order to gain a greater share of benefits. While some sections of the mainstream saw women as an under-utilised resource that might contribute to the wider development agenda, the overall framework within which both women and development agencies worked to advance the status of women was welfare oriented.

Development agencies sought to increase women's participation as beneficiaries through women-targeted projects in two major areas. The more traditional approach emphasised meeting women's practical needs for maternal and child health,

clean water, social and welfare services and increased access to education. Another stream sought to increase women's participation in mainstream development programs, although still in limited areas such as income generation and agricultural extension for women farmers. Although the term mainstreaming was used in the UNIFEM mandate, strategies were women-oriented, with little consideration of the role of men. The low status of women was in and of itself sufficient justification for efforts to increase the status of women.

### **Mainstreaming a gender perspective**

By the mid-1980s, UNIFEM and women's groups were beginning to recognise the need for a new approach that focused more explicitly on working with mainstream institutions and the comparison between the lives and experiences of women and men. The concept of gender, which did not appear in the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, gained wider currency. Although confusion about its meaning and importance has persisted, the basic principle was comparison of the status of women and men, and recognition that women's status was lower because decision making failed to incorporate a gender perspective. Decision makers overlooked the impact of women's specific sex and gender roles on their access to resources and participation in development activities. The extent to which gender stereotypes — expectations — about the roles and capacities of women and men also led to considerable *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination against women.

The new gender mainstreaming approach brought three new dimensions to the debate on women and development: a strong comparative perspective that challenged the assumption of men and the male situation as the norm; an explicit objective of integrating women's concerns and priorities into mainstream decision making; and the genesis of a stronger emphasis on discrimination and, by extension, women's human rights.

Many countries identified economic decision making, particularly development planning, as the most influential component of the mainstream for advancing the status of women. New partnerships were built between women's groups, particularly the new national machineries for women in government, and development planners, as well as with the national statistics offices that provided the basic data for planning and policy processes. Important new tools, including gender analysis, gender statistics and gender awareness and gender sensitivity training, were developed as part of this approach. Capacity-building in the use of these tools targeted both women's groups and advocates and the mainstream decision makers. Institutional mechanisms, including gender focal points in mainstream agencies and departments, gender mainstreaming policies and mandates within government, and associated reporting mechanisms, were also a feature.

Thus, the relationship between women and the mainstream was increasingly seen in technical rather than welfare terms. Policy makers were beginning to recognise that women were contributing to development through their increasing participation in the formal labour force, as well as in the informal sector. The objective for women was to ensure that their (different) concerns and priorities were incorporated into mainstream decision making. The rationale for mainstreaming was often presented in instrumental terms: women's different experiences and capacities would contribute to better decision making and more effective development programs and policies. As active contributors to development, women also had a right to an equal share of the benefits of development. Thus, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was more often cited as the basis for gender equal policies, and gender equality and was given prominence in the Beijing Conference. However, although women's human rights were an increasing part of the argument for gender mainstreaming, implementation strategies did not yet involve a rights-based approach.

### **Mainstreaming women *and* a gender perspective**

Although the Beijing World Conference had emphasised the importance of women's participation in all areas of decision making and particularly in politics, the political dimension of mainstreaming was not strongly emphasised until after the Beijing conference. Women had begun to realise that, in most developing countries, gender mainstreaming initiatives mainly involved men because the mainstream was male dominated. While men could appreciate and to some extent respond to the different issues and priorities of women, men's other concerns tended to take priority and act as barriers to moves toward gender equality. In the absence of strong political commitment to gender equality, the technical tools of gender sensitivity training, gender analysis and gender statistics were insufficient to overcome these barriers.

It was becoming apparent that women themselves were needed in the mainstream to guarantee that political commitment: women had to become a more integral part of the mainstream at all levels. However, there was ample evidence among those women who had gained political office that being female was no guarantee of support for the advancement of women. Gender blindness was not unique to men: many women decision makers were equally blind to the impact of gender biases and stereotypes on women (including on themselves). Thus, gender mainstreaming, gender sensitivity and awareness training and gender analysis were needed alongside a systematic strategy to mainstream women in decision making (often described in terms of promoting 'women in politics') and to ensure that women in decision making would support women's issues and priorities and promote gender equality.<sup>3</sup>

Women's human rights provided the only rationale needed for mainstreaming women in decision making at all levels: women, like men, have an inherent human right to participate in decision making. Without the active participation of women, democracy (*demos* — the people, women and men) is reduced to man-ocracy. However, the distinction between sex and gender provides a strong argument for the need to continue gender mainstreaming, regardless of the sex of the decision makers. Women have a stronger personal interest in the advancement of women and, with the support of an active and vocal women's constituency, can strengthen overall political commitment to gender equality. However, individual women are not necessarily more sensitive than individual men to the impact of gender differences in policies, plans and programs. Mainstreaming a gender perspective in decision making is not simply a matter of political will — it is a technical process that requires specific skills, tools, administrative procedures and institutional structures.

## **The mainstream has been broadened but not transformed**

A new concept of the relationship between women and the mainstream is gradually emerging that focuses on not just getting women or gender into the mainstream, but transformation of the mainstream as an explicit objective and as a prerequisite for the achievement of women's human rights and gender equality.

Increasing the numbers of women in decision making positions and processes has greatly broadened our concept of the mainstream itself. Women's interests and priorities are now moving into new areas of decision making: from income generation and microcredit to women and trade, women and finance for development and engendering macro-economic policy making; from women and water and women and energy to engendering environmental policy, engendering ICT (information and communications technology) and science and technology; from gender statistics to engendering statistical systems and gender-responsive policy analysis; from violence against women to women in peace and conflict; from women's reproductive health to a gender perspective on health systems and health policy and women and HIV/AIDS; from women in politics to women and decentralisation and women and governance.

The initial premise of gender mainstreaming was that tools such as gender analysis and gender statistics combined with gender-aware and gender-sensitive decision makers and appropriate institutional developments would ultimately bring about equality between women and men. However, experience soon showed that this was unlikely: advances in the rhetoric and even the institutions of gender equality were not matched by effective implementations or resource allocations. Gender

indicators showed slow progress at best in the status of women, and in some cases absolute deterioration. Transforming the male-dominated mainstream into a women-friendly environment is not just a technical exercise.

Mainstreaming women in decision making, and especially in politics, sought to address the lack of political will that evidently has been a major obstacle to effective implementation of gender mainstreaming in the male-dominated mainstream. More women are gaining political office at the national level. Some countries have implemented quotas of up to one-third of seats in local governments. Women comprise a major share of public sector employment in many countries and even occupy a significant share of senior positions in a few. Women have also emerged as an important group of employers and business executives in the private sector in many economies. The United Nations Security Council has recognised women's right to sit at the peace table.

Despite all of these gains, the commitments to the advancement of women given at Beijing, the full realisation of women's human rights spelled out in CEDAW and other human rights instruments, and progress toward the gender equality embodied in national policy documents, remain little more than empty promises. Transforming the masculine mainstream has not been accomplished by the simple addition of women to decision making bodies.

The image of the 'mainstream' has always carried within it an understanding that equal sharing of decision making between women and men within the mainstream would eventually lead to a new mainstream. However, the existing mainstream remains better adapted to the roles, needs and situations of men, who are its primary architects and beneficiaries.

This 'masculine' mainstream must give way to a new mainstream that will equally accommodate the roles, needs and situations of women and men. Although this has been the implicit objective of all mainstreaming, the concrete means by which such a transformation can be brought about have not been adequately identified or clearly articulated.

## **The way forward: Transforming the mainstream**

Women must now transform the mainstream and mainstream institutions so that commitments to the advancement of women, gender equality and the full realisation of women's human rights will be achieved in practice.

A paradigm shift is needed in the relationship between women and the mainstream, particularly the mainstream agenda. The prevailing concept of mainstreaming gender focuses on putting women's issues and priorities on the mainstream agenda through technical processes such as gender analysis or,

more recently, gender budgeting and engendering economic governance. Mainstreaming women or women in politics strategies focus on putting women's issues and priorities on the mainstream agenda through the direct political participation of women leaders supported, and held to account, by strong and active women's constituencies. Both approaches emphasise adding women's issues and priorities or gender issues; neither directly challenges nor explicitly seeks to determine the mainstream agenda itself. They react to a largely predetermined and mostly gender-blind agenda, rather than seeking an equal role in setting that agenda.

A new approach to mainstreaming is emerging that is characterised by women's proactive engagement with the mainstream on mainstream rather than 'women's' issues. It is based on three fundamental principles.

### **Principle 1**

**Transforming the mainstream is a prerequisite for and an integral element (rather than a consequence) of the full realisation of women's human rights and gender equality.**

*Example: getting women into politics requires changes in the broader issues of governance.* In the recent Cambodian election, women were unable to get high-ranking places on party lists because these must be bought — with cash, described quite openly as the candidate's contribution to the party. The payment is a de facto investment, and the candidate making the payment must obviously be in a position to gain the returns required to justify such an investment. Even where women or their families could raise the money (and leaving aside the question the desirability or their willingness to engage in such practices) they are often not in a position to reap the same returns as men because they are not engaged in the extra-political networks, government contracts, business deals, etc where the main returns are obtained. Thus, in order to get more women into politics, women need to address the mainstream agenda issues of good governance, decentralisation, democratic reform, legal reform, etc and transform the mainstream itself.

*Example: Gender budgeting initiatives cannot be separated from mainstream budget processes and macroeconomic policies.* In gender budgeting initiatives, it is becoming increasingly obvious that gender budgeting cannot either be separated from mainstream budgeting processes or from the macroeconomic policy framework that sets the parameters for public sector budgets. In many cases, mainstream budgeting processes remain within a narrow accounting framework and the parameters of conventional neo-classical macroeconomic policy. The main issues of accountability revolve around technical issues in terms of the validity of the processes and paperwork associated with particular expenditures, often within a political context of

widespread corruption and inefficiency. The question of impact and whether anyone, women or men, actually benefited from the expenditures is often not even on the agenda.

Mainstreaming gender analysis within such a budgeting and governance framework is unlikely to contribute significantly to improving women's lives. Gender budgeting needs to engage with the mainstream budgeting and governance agenda, not focus narrowly on merely adding gender to inherently corrupt and inefficient systems. Again, in order to address the women's agenda, we must first engage in the mainstream budgeting processes.

*Example: Eliminating the feminisation of poverty requires the eradication of poverty.* Regardless of the definition of the feminisation of poverty, all poverty, including that of men and children, affects women. Thus, although measures specifically reducing the impact of poverty on women remain an important priority in the short and medium term, in the broadest sense and the long term the feminisation of poverty can only be addressed through strategies that seek the eradication of all poverty.

### **Principle 2**

**Women must become empowered and informed decision makers on *mainstream* issues. This vision must explicitly recognise the rights of different groups of women — poor women, indigenous women, disabled women, etc — to participate in decision making on mainstream issues. Mainstreaming approaches on the role of women in leadership and decision making have emphasised getting 'women's issues' and a gender perspective into the mainstream.**

However, if women are to transform the mainstream, they must bring their unique experience and perspective to the decision making table in respect of the key issues of the day. They can no longer be outsiders 'begging' to put 'their' issues on the agenda: they must become key players who, by their informed, empowered and active presence, help to shape a world in which the issues of all, women, men and children, rich and poor, will be addressed.<sup>4</sup>

### **Principle 3**

**Women's human rights can only be realised through the transformation of gender power relations at all levels.<sup>5</sup> A rights-based perspective must be explicitly based on challenging prevailing power relations. This may — and often will — include addressing unequal power relations among groups of women, as well as between women and men.**

While human rights instruments, particularly CEDAW, are critical tools, the full realisation of women's human rights requires explicit strategies to transform power relations between women and men at all levels and in all UNIFEM activities.

This perspective needs to be built in to all elements of the new mainstreaming paradigm: mainstreaming a gender perspective through the use of gender tools; mainstreaming women's participation in decision making; and transforming the mainstream agenda to give equal importance to the interests and priorities of women.

## Conclusion

UNIFEM is engaged in transforming the mainstream in several areas, but has not yet articulated a new mainstreaming paradigm. This new approach is implicit in a growing body of work emerging from UNIFEM and the women's movement in general, but it is not yet explicitly articulated as a new dimension of mainstreaming. For example, the recent comments from the Economic Security and Rights Section on the draft terms of reference for the new Inter-Agency Task Force on Gender and Trade requested the task force to consider the unequal terms of trade, the continuation of agricultural subsidies in developed countries, and proposed new trade agreements such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), all mainstream issues. International Alert's recent project, *Women Building Peace: Sharing Know-how*, included an analysis by women of their perspectives of the mainstream agenda on conflict and peace, the main factors giving rise to armed conflict and women's views that both international and local factors generate and perpetuate violent conflict.

UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Hayzer's report on UNIFEM's experience in working on women and peace in Africa suggests a recognition that women must be at the main peace

table, not just to present their own issues — although that remains important — but also to contribute a women's perspective to debates on the mainstream issues of conflict and peace. Women's issues can only be addressed within the framework of solutions to the broader issues of conflict, peace building, reconciliation, justice and nation building.

## Notes

1. UNIFEM Executive Director Noeleen Hayzer requested this paper after a side discussion at a lunch during her recent mission to Bangkok. It builds on some ideas we shared about a new approach to mainstreaming, and draws on some of the experiences she shared with us on working on peace and conflict in Africa. It also reflects my experiences in developing and implementing the Asia-Pacific and Arab States Regional Programme on Engendering Economic Governance, as well as conversations with Lucy Lazo and Kornvipa Boonsue in the Bangkok office. The paper has also benefited considerably from input from Geoff Corner. It is still very much a work in progress.
2. I am indebted to Kornvipa Boonsue, Programme Manager for the EVAW Regional Programme in the Bangkok office, for this insight.
3. See Lorraine Corner, *Capacity Building for Gender Mainstreaming: Background Paper for the ESCAP High Level Meeting for the Beijing + 5 Review*, October 1999.
4. Others are thinking along the same lines. I recently received this notice: '*World Birth* is a new magazine that aims to address the under-representation of women and children in the international news media. The mission of this newly-launched publication is to "bring the voices of leading women and children to the forefront of our global problem-solving dialogue".'
5. Thanks to Kornvipa Boonsue for this insight.