Power, patriarchy, profit: barriers to gender mainstreaming in media policy

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Gender mainstreaming as a public policy goal and tool

'Gender mainstreaming' emerges in national, supranational and international processes of governance of public policy with the aim of mainstreaming considerations about gender inequality across a range of policy areas. It is closely associated with international efforts by the United Nations system to promote gender awareness and fight discrimination and violence against women and girls. The political aims of gender mainstreaming are to free women from 'symbolic annihilation', which takes place through the silencing of women's voices and absence of women from public life and their repression in the private sphere. In the domain of media and culture, the purpose of gender mainstreaming has been seen as integral in bringing about substantial structural change across the axes of employment and production of information and cultural content, literacy and access to this content by women, and the qualitative change of content from patriarchal and sexist to emancipatory and diverse.

Historically, gender mainstreaming (GM) developed as both a policy for gender equality and as a strategy for policy design. Therefore, it has been approached both as an end in itself and as the means to an end. The concept of GM emerged in the same historical period within which the debate around the role of the media and global information flows was taken up by the UN system with the 1981 MacBride report[1]. Although it does not derive from the report, which was criticised for its lack of attention to the reinforcement and impact of social inequalities between women and men, it is a close contemporary, having its roots in the international feminist social movements (Walby, 2005). The policy concept of 'gender mainstreaming' was debated in the Third Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, but was officially included as a formal policy orientation a whole decade later, at the Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1995. The process of recognising its importance in the governance of international organisations, and particularly those that advocate it as a policy measure in national and other public policy areas is long-standing and is still ongoing. For example, only recently (July 2013) saw the passing of ECOSOC resolution E/2013/L.14 on mainstreaming gender into all policies and programmes in the United Nations system.

Gender mainstreaming has attracted both support and criticism. At the policy level, it has been adopted by various national legislatures around the world as well as by the European Union and continues to be seen as a key element to be pursued in the design of public policy. A transformational agenda would disrupt institutionalised sexism and power relations and would redistribute power (Rees, 2005; Rittendorf and Gatrell, 2012). However, the impact of gender mainstreaming is debated in terms of its short- and long-term effectiveness in challenging and overturning patriarchal structures and replacing them with gender-balanced decision-making. It has been criticised as a vague and confusing term and its effectiveness is contested on the following grounds:

1. The complexity of the term causes confusion, thereby neutralising its potential.

2. Its definition is ambiguous: is it a policy, a strategy or both? At the same time it is argued that issues of sameness and difference among women are not adequately accounted for.

3. Critics point out that different interpretations result in implementations of gender mainstreaming that suit organisational cultures, hence undermining its original purpose.

4. There is concern about the effacement of 'women' as the subject and the replacement of the term by the more 'generic' term 'gender' and for not addressing needs particular to women (Sarikakis and Nguyen, 2009).

'Regardless of whether it adopts a sameness/equal opportunities or a difference/positive action strategy, gender mainstreaming has been from the outset associated with a woman-centred approach (i.e. an assumption that it is women who experience inequality, and that we must address such inequalities)' (Rittenhofer and Gatrell, 2012, pp.208). Nevertheless, the difficulty in implementing a programme of gender mainstreaming is also due to the fact that in some institutional cultures it is considered either too radical or simply an equal opportunities policy. Generally, GM is implanted unevenly, while an evaluation of its effectiveness is absent in most countries (EIGE, 2011).

Media industries and women: an uncomfortable dependence

In the media industries, gender mainstreaming is fragmented, patchy and fragile. It is not possible to talk about gender mainstreaming as a policy implemented by the media or indeed required from the media by public authorities. The only known examples of gender-aware approaches to media governance are in public service media or media with strong public service remit. The reasons are multiple but culminate in the impact of the combination of deeply engrained patriarchal beliefs and attitudes to gender roles in media organisations and society, and the dominance of private media whose function is determined by profit-making goals. Adopting gender mainstreaming goals and practices requires resources and monitoring systems for implementation on behalf of media industries. It also requires (and assumes) concerted will and effort to engage in culture change. Especially in today's media, where sexualisation seems intensified in informational, entertainment and advertising content, gender equity is more difficult to be pursued on an everyday basis. There are business models of mainstream media based precisely on the perpetuation of objectification (such as 'lads magazines', music videos, aspects of the fashion industry and advertising). For these media industries, gender mainstreaming would constitute a conflict. In everyday media, the female body continues to be a revenue source, while gendered roles of male experts (e.g. politics, science) and females in social and entertainment roles (soft news, fashion etc.) present a well-established practice that is hard to change.

The issue of gender mainstreaming in media employment policies should present no apparent scepticism, yet the media are not progressing fast enough here either. In the few cases where this has been pursued systematically, the results have not been impressive. Again, the main reason seems to be the persistence of patriarchal norms in everyday journalistic cultures and employment cultures, whereby, even in cases of increased numbers of women in the newsroom or media organisations more generally, gender roles are reinforced by employment roles. The context of these persisting structural and cultural inflexibilities is multi-fold, but the social roles and demands on women in their lives outside work determine to a great extent both objective and subjective positioning and capacities of progressing in employment environments that are not women-friendly.

Studies of media GM implementation are far too few. One such study investigated the Inter Press Service and their GM strategy in international news (Geertsema-Sligh, 2009). In this case, the news agency had taken active measures to increase the percentage of female workers and engaged in a process of culture changing. The outcomes demonstrate the difficulty in changing attitudes to gender: stories about politics and the economy were written by men while women remained concentrated in the 'soft' news stories; the overwhelming majority of sources remained men; women as sources remained concentrated in social and care related topics while the stories addressed largely men's concerns. From this detailed case study, we learn that company conscious pursuit of and commitment to the gender 'project' is core in the implementation of GM, but at the same time that knowledge of how to integrate gender and personal commitment to do so vary among individuals. This is due to professional and cultural beliefs about gender roles and/or about the need (or not) to cover gender, especially after it is perceived to 'have been dealt with'. Finally, financial limitations are a core obstacle to pursuing GM and the conflict between journalism as a public service and private companies' goal of profit-making.

Gender mainstreaming, therefore, is a matter of public policy, which however depends on intangible factors such as cultural beliefs and professional and organisational cultures for its success. Moreover, because the process is a long-term one, it requires resources and constant vigilance, proactive measures of informing, training and supporting media workers on the 'how to' and the 'why' of GM. Finally, the lawmaker has had difficulties in pursuing legislation for media content, in particular, in the liberalised environment of private media companies, due to two reasons: first, technology resists nationally bound legislation and second, resistance from the media industries is based on the sensitive matter of press freedom. Proposals for gender mainstreaming are met largely with scepticism, if not hostility, because anything other than self-regulation and industry codes are considered interference with freedom of expression.

The difficulty in pursuing gender mainstreaming strategic planning or policy in the media is also due to the lack of gender mainstreaming in the policy designed for media by national or supranational legislatures. Additionally, at the international level of multi-stakeholder summits and other forms of setting policy principles, gender is at best an afterthought. International organisations or fora do not routinely include gender considerations in their policy principles design, with the exception of organisations which include a mandate for social equality, such as the Council of Europe. Historically, and through the major changes in media liberalisation policies since the late 1980s, the state and supranational organisations have failed to consider and systematically interrogate the impact of the changing media and communication landscapes and the governance thereof for gender in society. During enormous regulatory and structural changes, in terms of media ownership and concentration, of technological design, of self-regulation and standards, of conditions for freedom of expression and of employment, to name a few, women's role and position

has been neglected. Today, after two decades of significant gender campaigning in public policy, the domain of so-called 'information communication technology' has been the only space where policies have considered gender. Yet, these policies have either not yielded the results they claimed they would or were arguably derived from an instrumentalist and short-term point of view, which limited itself to access, trivial computing skills and consumption. Throughout major changes in media regulation, there has been no gender mainstreaming in the design of policies or in their assessment. This would have been seen in a range of policies related to the media and their roles, the short- and long-term impact on the portrayal of women, their inclusion in decision-making and fair employment, their role in media policy. For example, gender mainstreaming would have allowed for the design of policies and the collection of data regarding the impact of concentration of media ownership or the role of content quotas for 'domestic' productions and the support of independent culture makers, technological design to encourage non-gendered communications and so on.

The lack of gender mainstreaming policy in the media is the outcome of regulatory bodies and the state based historically on patriarchal cultures, the dominance of profit-oriented media systems over public service media and media with public service remit and ingrained cultural beliefs of gender superiority/inferiority. In this power triangle, women's position in the media is a consideration that largely comes as an 'add-on', is an afterthought or serves as rhetoric. There is significant divide, still, over the role and potential of gender mainstreaming in policies generally and media in particular, on the basis of whether this subsumes the struggle for gender equity, in other words, by 'being everywhere' it is nowhere. At the same time, there is considerable disagreement over the role and place of 'affirmative' or similar actions with regards to quotas for women's participation in decision-making levels at media organisations and major corporations as well as the state.

Recommendations

Gender mainstreaming is, depending on the context, both a policy and a strategy for improving women and girls' position in society. It is a mistake to assume no need for gender integration into everyday working practice, decision-making and content production and consumption of the media, if some measures have been taken. The project of gender equality is a constant one.

Governments must pursue GM legislation more rigorously. International organisations should encourage their members to develop GM policies in culture and media.

Governments and media industries should dedicate resources in training, hiring, supporting existing, new and developing media workers and pursue such organisational values that are fully expressed through commitment to gender equity.

Governments and media industries should protect media workers from precarity in employment. This affects women disproportionally and creates an anxious and uncertain labour force that is preoccupied with financial survival rather than with professional and knowledge development.

The media industry should develop strategies that bring on board people from a wide social spectrum so that voices from experiences of difference to the 'norm' can be heard. Its code of conduct and self-regulatory bodies should pay attention to GM goals.

Knowledge and expertise on gender should become available to people.

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1 The New World Information and Communication Order criticised western media for world information imbalances between the global North and global South and proposed an agenda for a new media 'order'. It was part of a larger and long-standing debate about power imbalances expressed also through the communication systems of the world.