



Gendered assumptions, institutional disconnections and democratic deficits: The case of European Union development policy towards Liberia

Petra Debusscher¹

Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University, Universiteitsstraat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

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SYNOPSIS

This article maps an application of gender mainstreaming with the aim of investigating how gender is institutionalised within EU development aid. I consider the case of aid towards Liberia from 2008 to 2013, examining first the extent to which gender was included in policy formulation and implementation. Next I attempt to explain this by analysing institutional inputs and networks at the EU Delegation in Liberia. Based on text analysis and expert interviews, I argue that gender factors were abolished in the actual implementation, despite relative support from the Delegation leaders, and the availability of training and expertise. The largest stumbling block to effective implementation was institutional weakness, represented by the disconnect between formal and informal institutional rules; gendered assumptions at the EU external services constraining the expression of marginalised perspectives; and a gendered double democratic deficit in the power play over which ideas matter and who accumulates resources.

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Introduction

Gender mainstreaming in European Union development policy

Since the United Nations Beijing Conference of 1995, the European Union (EU) has made high-level political commitments to mainstreaming gender in its development policy across many countries. In a ground-breaking resolution of late 1995 the EU Council of Ministers first declared the integration of a gender perspective into development co-operation as a crucial principle underpinning the development policy of the Community and the Member States (European Council, 1995). This was followed by a string of high-level policy documents on integrating gender equality in development, including a 1998 'Regulation on Integrating Gender Issues in Development Co-operation' (European Council, 1998). In 2001 the Commission published its 'Programme of Action for the Mainstreaming of Gender Equality in Community Development Cooperation' which stipulates the use of a dual-track strategy to achieve gender equality. This strategy implies that 'the EC is committed to including gender equality goals in the mainstream of EC

development co-operation policies, programmes and projects' (gender mainstreaming), while 'concrete actions targeting women (specific actions)' reinforce these processes (European Commission, 2001: 8–13).

The 2004 'Regulation on Promoting Gender Equality in Development Cooperation' updated the earlier arrangements and reconfirmed the dual-track strategy towards gender equality (European Parliament and Council, 2004). The 2006 European Consensus on Development, jointly accepted by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission, includes forceful language on gender equality, intended to guide the actions of both the European Community and its member states (European Union, 2006). More recently, the 2007 'Communication on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Cooperation' aims to increase the efficiency of gender mainstreaming, as well as to refocus specific actions for women's empowerment, providing forty-one concrete suggestions in the areas of governance, employment, education, health and domestic violence (European Commission, 2007). The 2010 Staff Working Document 'EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development' implements

the 2007 Communication but replaces the dual-track strategy with a 'three-pronged approach' consisting of gender mainstreaming, specific actions, and political and policy dialogue which aims to place gender equality more systematically on the political dialogue agenda with partner countries (European Commission, 2010: 7). Guided by these significant political commitments to gender equality, the EU external services are expected to institutionalise mainstreaming methodologies and gender equality principles across their policy and operational activities.

Although much has been achieved with respect to developing gender equality norms and fostering their adoption in EU political commitments to incorporating gender factors in external policy, several problems remain in practice. Internal and external evaluations of gender equality policies in EU development aid point to significant obstacles: these include a lack of gender expertise, training and awareness, insufficient resources for implementation, an overwhelming gender imbalance at high level positions within the external DGs, and a general lack of commitment by European Commission Headquarters officials and the field delegations (European Commission, 2003; Painter & Ulmer, 2002). Feminist research to date suggests that the impact of gender mainstreaming in international organisations depends largely on 1) 'the characteristics of the policy issue or regime area', 2) the nature of the institution's governance and 3) the existence of networks among officials or gender specialists (insiders) and women's organisations or advocates (outsiders) (True, 2010: 194; Woodward, 2003).

The EU development policy regime presents a less transformative example of gender mainstreaming (Allwood, 2013; Debusscher, 2010, 2011, 2012; Lister & Carbone, 2006). This issue area has a 'non-urgent character' insofar as it 'raises issues of structural rather than direct violence and responds to ... inequality in foreign countries' (True, 2010: 195). As regards the second aspect, the European development institutions are complex and numerous, operating at different levels (European and partner country) and involving both design and the financing of development policy and projects. On the one hand, involvement by the Brussels-based headquarters includes the European External Action Service (previously the Commission's External Relations Directorate General, DG RELEX) and the Commission's Directorate-General Development and Cooperation-EuropeAid (previously DG Development and DG AIDCO). On the other hand, there are over 130 EU Delegations and offices around the world consisting of permanent diplomatic EU staff in the partner countries. The EU Delegations play a key role² in the implementation of external assistance, serving as the main entry points for institutionalising gender within European development aid. On this front, the picture is mixed: even though European development institutions encourage the participation from civil society actors, gender mainstreaming has generally conformed to a technocratic model where bureaucrats are the main actors, relatively disconnected from women's activism in civil society (Daly, 2005). However, participation by women (or of their organisations) to shape the objectives, priorities and strategies of the development interventions affecting them, is crucial for women's empowerment (Debusscher & van der Vleuten, 2012; Jahan, 1995; Krizsan & Lombardo, 2013). Empirical research has moreover shown that policies developed with the

participation of civil society and women's organisations contribute to better quality, insofar as they help to frame policy content in more transformative ways (Krizsan and Lombardo, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of this article is to examine the institutionalisation of gender in EU development policy by analysing the practice of gender mainstreaming in EU development aid towards Liberia from 2008 to 2013. The study draws on the 'feminist institutionalist turn' which allows to *gender* new institutionalist theory (Kenny, 2007; Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). Feminist approaches to institutionalism consider the existence of asymmetrical institutional power relations and the interplay between formal rules and informal norms and practices, understand institutional change, stability or inertia as driven by 'gendered processes from within and without' and consider actors as having agency, albeit bounded by various (institutional and gender) constraints (Kenny, 2007; Mackay et al., 2010: 584). In order to investigate the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming, I first examine the extent to which gender has been included in the policy formulation and implementation processes of EU aid towards Liberia. Next I assess the degree of gender mainstreaming implementation in this particular case by analysing the nature of 'institutional inputs' (Moser & Moser, 2005: 16), along with the existence of networks and partnerships with the EU Delegation in Liberia. Drawing on Van Eerdewijk, 2009 and Moser & Moser, 2005 I explore key questions that are pertinent for evaluating gender mainstreaming. The components most relevant for institutionalisation in the Liberian case are the following:

1. *The level of policy formulation and implementation*: How are overall organisational objectives regarding gender equality translated into operational policy during the stages of formulation and implementation? Are specific measurement indicators provided going beyond general guidelines?
2. *Institutional inputs*: Who is actually responsible for the implementation of the gender mainstreaming policy? How are staff competences assured? What role does training play? How gender-equal is the larger organisation? Is there internal support for or resistance to the idea of gender equality?
3. *Networks, partners and participation*: Is the organisation working with other formal entities, such as government agencies, donors or private sector NGOs, to strengthen gender equality initiatives? Are women's organisations represented, consulted and possibly strengthened?

These variables form the backbone of the mapping study. Data gathering included the collection of EU policy documents and reports,³ as well as 22 semi-structured elite-interviews conducted in Brussels and Liberia. Each interview took approximately 80 min. Two interviews took place at the European Commission Headquarters in Brussels in January 2010 and twenty in greater Monrovia district from June 20th to July 8th 2011. Two interviewees are representatives of the European Commission's DG Development and DG External Relations, two work at the EU Delegation to Liberia, two interviewees are officials at the National Authorising Office⁴ in Monrovia, two are

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