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McSorley, Leaza and Campbell, Jim (2016) What happened to gender mainstreaming? Lessons for the EU's 2014-20 Structural and Investment Funds. In: EU Cohesion Policy: Reassessing performance and direction. Routledge, pp. 140-150. ISBN 9781315401867

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10 Whatever happened to gender mainstreaming?

Lessons for the EU's 2014–20 Structural and Investment Funds

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Introduction

The concept of gender mainstreaming was adopted by the EU in the mid-1990s and became a requirement for EU Cohesion Policy delivered through the 2000–6 Structural Funds programme, which continued into the 2007–13 period. Gender mainstreaming implied the need to recognise that additional resources targeted at stimulating economic development and growth did not benefit men and women equally. Policy interventions could no longer be assumed to be gender neutral. Therefore, in order to maximise the economic impact of policies designed to stimulate regional development, they needed to be more ‘gender aware’.

This chapter explores the impact of gender mainstreaming on projects funded under the Structural Funds in Scotland in the 2007–13 period. A cross-section of ESF- and ERDF-funded projects that supported labour market participation was investigated. The main issues examined included the extent to which the participants understood and were aware of gender mainstreaming and whether they undertook any gender-based monitoring and evaluation. The case of Scotland is then contextualised within the experience of the EU as a whole, highlighting the relevance for achieving Europe 2020 targets. Finally, the chapter discusses what lessons we can learn from this experience and whether gender mainstreaming can deliver in terms of increasing female employment opportunities.

Gender mainstreaming and Structural Funds

The EU has progressively promoted equality between women and men. Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome established the principle of equal pay for equal work for women and men. Since then, EU policy has evolved incrementally through various Directives and Action Programmes as the objectives have expanded from equal pay to equal opportunities (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000).

The concept of gender mainstreaming was formally adopted by the EU as part of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 (Guerrina, 2005). At the time, it seemed to offer the potential to achieve greater gender equality in the labour market (Walby, 2005). There was also a recognition at the time that previous attempts to achieve greater gender equality had failed:

[a]t the beginning of the 1990s, gender equality policy entered a period of crisis. In light of studies released by expert networks on gender equality, the gender equality policy Community and member states' representatives began to acknowledge that, despite more than 15 years of active and interventionist Community action, inequalities between women and men in the workplace and on the labour market had not significantly diminished.

(Jacquot, 2010: 122)

By building gender equality considerations into the core of policy formulation and decision-making, the likely consequences for both men and women can be assessed as an integral and continuing part of those processes. Unintended consequences and/or effects that could undermine or prevent the achievement of stated policy aims for either men or women can be identified, avoided or monitored from the earliest stages (McKay and Gillespie, 2007). This approach is now central to the EU's policy for equal opportunities and employment as well as being a key feature of its regional policy (European Commission, 2010).

The rationale for pursuing gender mainstreaming via the Structural Funds is as much about promoting economic efficiency as it is about promoting equity

The main aim of the Structural Funds to reduce economic and social disparities and to establish the conditions which will assure the long-term development of the regions depends upon the fullest participation of the active population in economic and social life. Failure to overcome the constraints to the equal and full participation of women and men means that the development objectives of growth, competitiveness and employment cannot be fully achieved, and also that the investments made in human resources (e.g. in raising education and qualification levels) are not exploited efficiently

(Braithwaite *et al.*, 1999: 5)

If the less developed regions are to improve their comparative economic performance, then they have to make more efficient use of the resources available to them, particularly human resources. Within the EU, women account for the majority of the labour market that is inactive and unemployed (Rees, 2000: 181). In addition, there is a recognition of the need to expand the total number of people of working age in paid employment in order to accommodate the ageing population and the resulting fiscal consequences. The desire to increase women's participation in the formal labour market was also a key feature of the European Employment Strategy and the subsequent Lisbon Agenda (Rubery, 2005), and now of the Europe 2020 targets. However, the key question is whether gender mainstreaming can be any more successful than previous attempts to achieve gender equality. As Rees states, "Gender mainstreaming is hard to define but harder to implement" (Rees, 2005: 570).

Case study: Scottish Structural Funds 2007–13

The main aim of the case study was to explore the extent to which gender mainstreaming featured in the 2007–13 Scottish Structural Funds programmes and to highlight any lessons in terms of what worked and what did not work, which could inform the 2014–20 Scottish Structural Funds programme.¹ The case study builds upon previous work undertaken by the authors into the impact of gender mainstreaming in western Scotland (Campbell *et al.*, 2009).

A number of ERDF and ESF projects in both the Lowlands and Uplands (LUPS) and Highlands and Islands (H&I) areas were selected for study. All projects were active labour market projects designed to get people into work or support them in work. A total of 19 projects were initially contacted and 13 agreed to be interviewed. Projects were selected to provide a cross-section of regional areas, a mix of public-, private- and voluntary-sector projects and a mix of ERDF and ESF funding.

The majority of participants who agreed to be interviewed were located within the LUPS area (eight), with five from the H&I region. In terms of types of Structural Funds, nine of the participants interviewed were in receipt of ESF funding, compared to four with ERDF funding. Of the 13 participants interviewed, 3 were from the private sector, 7 from the public sector and 3 from the voluntary sector. The participants could be split into two distinct groups: those projects that had a clear equal opportunities focus, of which there were six (five ESF and one ERDF), known as Group 1; and those projects that did not have a specific equal opportunities objective, of which there were seven (four ESF and three ERDF), designated as Group 2.

The interviews were undertaken in order to elicit information about:

- understanding of gender mainstreaming;
- access and monitoring;
- the impact of the Great Recession;
- the main legacy of these projects in terms of gender mainstreaming;
- recommendations for the 2014–20 funding period.

Understanding of gender mainstreaming

The research findings showed that overall understanding of gender mainstreaming was varied across all of the projects. This ranged from participants who displayed a great depth of understanding of gender issues and proactively embedded these considerations within their daily activities, to participants who were completely unaware of gender mainstreaming as a concept and took a more passive approach. This difference of understanding and integration was somewhat obvious when both groups' answers were compared. On the whole, Group 1 displayed greater overall understanding of equal opportunities and gender mainstreaming compared to Group 2. Despite the disparity in understanding, all of the projects had some form of equal opportunities policy in place.

As would be expected, gender mainstreaming formed a central part of Group 1's overarching thinking, whereby gender equality became part of that natural thought process. These participants displayed an informed approach and recognised that in order to understand gender mainstreaming, analysing labour market statistics and gathering demographic intelligence were fundamental to identifying where the gaps were. Nonetheless, two participants within Group 2 also demonstrated a great depth of understanding and awareness of gender mainstreaming within their daily activities.

However, the majority of those in Group 2 were totally unaware of gender mainstreaming as a concept. These projects, which were ERDF-funded infrastructure projects or provided business support services, did not consider gender to be an issue for them. This was very much the case with private-sector projects or those projects that were providing some form of business enterprise and innovation support services. For them, businesses were genderless, and they viewed gender mainstreaming solely in terms of complying with equal opportunities requirements. The majority of Group 2 participants viewed gender mainstreaming as a legal and administrative hurdle they had to overcome.

Some of the participants within Group 1 with experience in previous funding periods stated their concerns that the horizontal theme of equal opportunities was not as prominent as it had been in the 2000–6 period. Some felt it was becoming eroded. They felt that issues relating to gender had been subsumed within the broader horizontal theme of equal opportunities. This has resulted in what they felt was a lack of direction and less prominence afforded to the pursuit of equality within the 2007–13 funding period.

Access and monitoring

Across all of the projects, there was a distinct lack of the systematic data-gathering that would facilitate a gender analysis of the impact of the projects. The Group 1 participants did make some attempt to gather statistics that would enable them to have a better awareness of the impacts of the projects. However, despite this, there was no real evaluation of the impact of gender mainstreaming across all of the projects.

Many participants from Group 1 and a couple from Group 2 noted that it would be useful to have some practical advice, to be able to draw on experience from other organisations and to have the opportunity to share best practice. The majority of Group 1 noted that the current claim forms submitted to the Scottish Government were not sufficiently extensive in terms of the information that they were required to report on. It did not allow for the inclusion of details of what was being done at a project level to tackle the horizontal themes or gender issues. By contrast, Article 60B monitoring visits, which were mid-term evaluations, provided a good point at which projects could take stock of what they could do over the next 18 months. The visits also provided them with the opportunity to show the managing authority what they had done to address horizontal themes and what they were going to do in the future.

The impact of the Great Recession

The Great Recession had an impact on projects both in terms of increasing the difficulty of attracting match funding due to public expenditure reductions as well as resulting in increasing demand for those projects that had an employability dimension due to the rise in unemployment particularly amongst young people.

Following the onset of the Great Recession in 2007–8 and the resulting public expenditure cuts, the reduced availability of match funding proved restrictive to a large number of projects within Group 1. They reported that it was “more and more difficult to get public funding”

Some of the participants, across both groups, involved in providing support for individuals to find employment opportunities noted a direct impact from the Great Recession. They experienced huge difficulties securing placements for beneficiaries and employment opportunities within organisations. For Group 2, the changing economic climate provided challenges for those projects that were looking for businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to invest in innovation, competitiveness and business start-ups. In other words, engagement with the private sector was more challenging in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

There was a recognition across both groups that demand for their services had increased as a result of the Great Recession. In most cases, it was reported that demand had far exceeded their initial expectations at the outset of the project. Every participant interviewed observed that there had been a significant increase in the number of requests since the start of the Great Recession.

For those providing employment opportunities and employability support, across both groups, there was an observation that the type of people accessing their services was changing. For example, there was an increase in the number of university graduates approaching them for support.

The main legacy of these projects in terms of gender mainstreaming

In terms of legacy, there were concerns from the equal opportunities-focused projects that this objective would be further downgraded in the 2014–20 funding period. On the positive side, however, there was some evidence to suggest that there was some spillover from the funded project to the organisation as a whole in relation to gender mainstreaming. This applied equally to Group 1 and Group 2.

One of the issues discussed with the participants was whether gender issues have been incorporated into other activities outside of the funded projects. For the most part, participants within both groups were very positive in response to this particular question. Participants, particularly within Group 1, stated that as a result of work within the project they had been involved in, they had been “able to inform our organisation on the wider work, whether it’s been around other activities”; “it is being embedded within our other work”; “we are learning so much from the projects”. Two participants from Group 2 observed that they were

beginning to influence the organisations within which they were situated: “Gender issues are now at a senior management level and we are now looking at how they can improve our own internal policies”.

However, despite the encouraging rhetoric from both groups, participants from Group 2 were largely unable to provide practical examples of how consideration of gender issues had been incorporated within other work they did as an organisation. Group 1 participants, on the other hand, provided a wealth of practical examples of their awareness-raising activity through workshops, providing case studies and running focus groups.

What worked well for projects across both groups was the opportunity to use ESF funding to build and develop capacity for their own organisations. Money had been used to serve far more than its original objectives; it had forced some organisations to look at their own internal activities, procedures and policies. What had not worked so well, perhaps, was the fact that gender mainstreaming and tackling gender issues had not been particularly high on the agenda for many organisations within Group 2. Work is still required to ensure that projects without an equal opportunities focus develop a better understanding and appreciation of gender mainstreaming.

In terms of the availability of pre-application advice, many participants from both groups felt that this was absolutely invaluable. The provision of workshops in the 2000–6 period, and to some extent in the current funding period, encouraged potential applicants to have those discussions in advance of final application deadlines.

Going forward into the 2014–20 programme, concerns were raised by a number of participants within Group 1 about whether there would continue to be a horizontal theme on equal opportunities and how that would actually work in practice as the Structural Funds (ESF and ERDF) are combined with Rural Development Fund and Fisheries Funds. They felt that there was a lack of clarity about where equal opportunities would stand within the next funding period and that there was a real danger that the equality strand would disappear. For those participants involved in both the 2000–6 and 2007–13 periods, comments were raised that the application and monitoring of the horizontal themes seemed secondary to everything else within the programme.

Summary of research finding

The research findings are based upon a relatively small sample of the projects funded under the 2007–13 Scottish Structural Funds Programmes. Nonetheless, certain conclusions can be drawn based upon the interviews:

- For participants without a specific equal opportunities focus, there was a lack of understanding about the concept of gender mainstreaming. In addition, those participants that did have an equal opportunities objective felt that the move to mainstreaming had downgraded the importance of gender equality issues compared to the 2000–6 funding period.

- There was a consensus across both groups that the level of support and information available to projects to ensure that they took cognisance of the equal opportunities agenda was significantly less than that available in the 2000–6 funding period.
- There was a lack of the systematic data-gathering that would enable a gender analysis of the impacts of the projects. Consequently, there was no real evaluation of the impact of gender mainstreaming.
- Mid-term evaluation visits were viewed as being a more useful opportunity to discuss and develop gender mainstreaming activities than reporting at the funding claim or final evaluation stages
- The Great Recession had an impact on projects both in terms of increasing the difficulty of attracting match funding and increasing demand for those projects with an employability dimension.
- In terms of legacy, there were concerns from the equal opportunities-focused participants that this objective would be further downgraded in the 2014–20 funding period. On the positive side, however, there was some evidence to suggest that there was some spillover from the funded projects to the organisations as a whole in relation to gender mainstreaming.

European Structural and Investment Funds Regulations 2014–20

The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) Regulations 2014–20 set out a number of articles and clauses that specifically relate to gender issues

In the context of its effort to increase economic, territorial and social cohesion, the Union should, at all stages of implementation of the ESI Funds, aim at eliminating inequalities and at promoting equality between men and women and integrating the gender perspective, as well as at combating discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

(European Commission, 2013: Paragraph 13)

This commitment also works vice versa; eliminating inequalities and promoting equality will enhance efforts to increase economic, territorial and social cohesion.

At a strategic level, the regulations clearly set out the ambition of the ESIF to implement gender mainstreaming and tackle gender inequalities. However, at an operational level, the detail is weaker. Articles and clauses do require partnerships and multi-level governance in all member states to include representative gender organisations (European Commission, 2013: Article 5). They also require that:

The Member States and the Commission shall ensure that equality between men and women and the integration of gender perspective are taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes, including in relation to monitoring, reporting and evaluation.

(European Commission, 2013: Article 7)

Nonetheless, analysis of the Thematic Objectives and Investment Priorities (along with their ex ante conditionalities and criteria for fulfilment) shows that only a few of the Thematic Objectives have stated gender-specific Investment Priorities. The ESF has explicit objectives in relation to gender mainstreaming and achieving gender equality targets, but the other funds have no such obvious targets. The implication is that gender considerations are mainstreamed within the other funds – but with no visible specific strategy, actions or targets, it may send out the message that gender mainstreaming is no longer an objective.

For example, the Thematic Objective ‘Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors’ will use ERDF and the Cohesion Policy Fund to deliver its Investment Priorities. The low-carbon economy will require new skills and expertise to exploit the potential of ESIF investments. The skill level varies greatly between member states and regions but, for this priority to be delivered, a skills match is required. The Commission has long advised on the looming skills gap in the low-carbon sector:

The education, training and employment policies of the Member States must focus on increasing and adapting skills and providing better learning opportunities at all levels, to develop a workforce that is high skilled and responsive to the needs of the economy. Similarly, businesses have an acute interest in investing in human capital and improving their human resource management. Moreover, gender equality is a key factor to responding to new skills needs.

(European Commission, 2008: 3–4)

This proactive approach, strategic leadership and clear guidance need to be implemented for the Thematic Objective of a low-carbon economy to ensure an appropriately skilled labour force can be provided to meet the need for skills in this sector in the forthcoming funding period of 2014–20.

The ESIF has been designed to support the Europe 2020 targets and therefore will have an important role to play in enabling the EU to reach its target of a 75 per cent employment rate for the 20–64 age group. In order to achieve that goal, the female employment rate will need to increase from its 2014 level of 63.5 per cent (Eurostat, 2015). In 2014, the male employment rate in the EU28 for the 20–64 age group was 75 per cent, giving a gender employment gap in that year of 11.5 per cent, compared to 16.1 per cent in 2004 (Eurostat, 2015). Thus there has been some improvement in narrowing the gender employment gap, although this masks wide disparities between the member states. Throughout the EU, there are significant variations to the headline female employment rate. Greece had the lowest female employment rate in 2014 at 44.3 per cent (compared to a male employment rate of 62.6 per cent), whereas Sweden had the highest female employment rate of 77.6 per cent (and a male employment rate of 82.2 per cent) (Eurostat, 2015).

The European Commission is committed to “promoting equality as part of the Europe 2020 strategy” (European Commission, 2010). A key element

of that commitment is to increase the female employment rate. However, the Commission recognises that it is not sufficient to simply increase the number of women in employment if that also means increasing the number of women in low-paid and low-skilled employment. In addition to increasing the female employment rate, gender equality also requires action to be taken to reduce the gender pay gap and also gender-based occupational segregation. Part of the reason for the persistence of the gender pay gap in the EU, which stood at 16.4 per cent in 2012 (European Commission, 2014), is that women tend to be concentrated in occupations that are regarded as low skilled and therefore tend to be poorly paid, and in addition women tend to be under-represented at senior management and decision-making levels.

Recommendations

The ESIF has an important role to play in tackling these issues and delivering greater gender equality within the EU. However, in order to do so, policymakers need to be aware that interventions funded under the ESIF are not gender neutral and if gender mainstreaming is to be implemented more effectively in the 2014–20 period, then the following actions are necessary:

- Resources need to be committed to providing leadership and oversight of gender mainstreaming as a horizontal theme. This is especially true for non-ESF funds, where there appears to be a lack of conditionalities for ensuring that gender mainstreaming is implemented.
- Projects require clearer practical guidance on what is involved in gender mainstreaming – for example, the provision of awareness-raising workshops on gender mainstreaming at the pre-application stage as well as the establishment of Gender Equality Champions within the projects' managing authorities and strategic delivery partners. Particular focus should be on supporting member states and regions that have not received funding in previous periods.
- Funded projects need to gather gender-disaggregated data and indicators. There is a need to better understand differences in how men and women access and benefit from the ESIF
- Gender equality and gender mainstreaming should be given greater prominence as objectives in the 2014–20 funding period.
- Thematic Objectives and Investment Priorities (along with their ex ante conditionalities and criteria for fulfilment) require clearly stated gender equality and mainstreaming targets. Although the Regulations clearly set out gender equality and mainstreaming requirements, these are not followed through sufficiently in the Thematic Objectives and Investment Priorities.
- A more robust appraisal of projects is needed to ensure that gender equality objectives are met, particularly at the mid-term evaluation stage.

The ESIF 2014–20 cannot assume that gender mainstreaming lessons have been learned from the 2000–6 and 2007–13 funding periods. New member states, new regions receiving funding and the consolidation of funding in older member states may mean that institutional learning is lost. This implies that continued leadership and guidance – not just at a strategic level but at an implementation level – should be an ongoing resource commitment for the ESIF. This sustained commitment to gender mainstreaming is needed to ensure not only that the ESIF delivers on its targets but also that the objectives of Europe 2020 can be met.

Note

- 1 This case study research was funded by ESF Technical Assistance funding and commissioned by the Scottish Government.

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