

Gender mainstreaming : a new challenge for the federal government and the administrations

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May 18, 2009

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to talk to you about the concrete implementation of gender mainstreaming at the Belgian federal level and its challenges.

First of all, I would like to familiarize you briefly with the recent developments in Belgium to reinforce the institutional and legal mechanisms aimed at combating gender-based discriminations, the promotion of gender equality and gender mainstreaming.

1. The creation of the Institute for the equality of women and men

Until 2004, the department for equal opportunities at the federal level of my country was part of the Ministry of Labour. Its missions were primarily focused on the domain of labour and employment.

The **Institute for the equality of women and men** was created by a law of December 2002. It is an autonomous institution of public law and its specific mission is to ensure and promote the equality of women and men, to combat any form of discrimination and inequality based on gender and to develop tools and strategies based on gender mainstreaming.

The Institute receives a **budget** of more than four million euros and its **staff** consists of about thirty members.

The Institute is competent to independently support and coordinate studies and research, to submit recommendations to public authorities, to promote gender mainstreaming, to offer legal assistance to victims of gender-based discriminations and to take legal action before courts.

2. Presentation of the law of January 12, 2007 aimed at monitoring the application of the resolutions of the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 and at gender mainstreaming in all federal policies (published in the Belgian law gazette on February 13, 2007)

Ladies and gentlemen,

I. Let me first of all briefly remind you of the definition and usefulness of the strategy of gender mainstreaming.

Following the definition of the Council of Europe, *gender mainstreaming* is the integration of the gender perspective into every stage of policy processes – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – with a view to promoting equality between women and men. It means assessing how policies impact on the life and position of both women and men – and taking responsibility to re-address them if necessary.

Too often, policies are gender-blind. We realise that the male is often the only person referred to when policies are being drawn up and measures taken. Sometimes target groups are defined as broad categories : *families, risk groups, the elderly, people with special needs, and so on*. Belgian society is made up of as many women as men living different realities in accordance with their sex and who therefore have different needs. Gender analysis can play a role. For example, women more often have relatively lower incomes and more often live below the poverty line, they constitute the largest proportion of single parents, and generally live longer than men. So it might be necessary to take account of this when developing policy (social inclusion, housing, ...).

However, gender mainstreaming is more than just a strategy for achieving gender equality. It is an instrument that offers various benefits and assists in achieving 'good governance'. One of the first benefits is an improvement in the quality of the policy pursued in and by an organization. Because gender mainstreaming requires thorough knowledge of the target groups and relies on gender analyses of policy domains, the implementation of the policy becomes more effective. Since gender mainstreaming is a process that is applied throughout the organisation, the various organisational components will be better able to harmonise their policy implementation and planning. This too leads to more efficient and coherent policymaking. In addition, the analyses and dissemination of their results lead to more transparency.

Gender mainstreaming is a prospective and preventive logic, geared to ensuring that the principle of the equality of women and men is put into practice in a systematic manner.

II. The adoption of the law

In Belgium the process of gender mainstreaming followed the adoption of the Beijing Action Platform of 1995 but also the development of this strategy at the European level. Article 3 of the European Treaty asks the Union not only to eliminate the inequalities, but also to promote equality between men and women in all its campaigns and in the implementation of all of its policies.

The **Belgian law of January 12, 2007** is the result of a long process of maturation from the first initiatives that were taken in 2001 aimed at introducing a strategy of gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting on the federal level. When these projects were evaluated, the need to institutionalize the gender mainstreaming process in a sustainable manner quickly became clear.

On the one hand this act aims to improve the implementation of the Beijing Action Platform, and on the other hand it has the ambition to structurally integrate the gender dimension into all federal policies.

III. Contents of the law

In concrete terms, at the beginning of the period of office, when presenting its government policy statement, the next federal government must present the strategic objectives regarding gender equality to be achieved in the course of the period of office for all policies.

In this way, every minister will be responsible for the operational implementation of these **strategic objectives**. Every year he or she has to present the actions, measures and projects that were undertaken in this field.

For every new legal and regulatory project, the minister has to pass through a « **gender test** », a prior evaluation of the project's impact on the respective situations of men and women.

On a budgetary level, a **gender note** (enclosed with each draft of the general expense budget) must specify the amounts allocated to actions aimed at the realization of gender equality in every federal department.

The principle of gender equality must also be taken into account in the procedures for **public tendering** and the granting of **subsidies**.

My colleague Jeroen Decuyper will explain these aspects in more concrete detail this afternoon.

Besides this, every minister will have to see to the production of gender specific statistics and gender indicators in their fields of competence.

The government informs the federal Parliament about the gender policy by means of an **intermediary report** and a final **report at the end of the period of office**.

The law also creates an **interdepartmental coordination group**, made up of members of minister's offices and administrations. The **Institute for the equality of women and men** is entrusted with supervising and supporting the whole process of *gender mainstreaming*.

3. Challenges in implementing the strategy of gender mainstreaming at Belgian federal level

It's probably important to underline that there is no recipe that will guarantee the success of the implementation of *gender mainstreaming*. But we have to reflect on factors in accordance with an organisation's context and realities.

I will present a **selection of these factors** which are needed to implement gender mainstreaming but which are also the **challenges** of this implementation at Belgian federal level.

- *Involving and defining responsibilities of parties directly concerned, in particular the political and administrative leadership*

The success of a *gender mainstreaming* project goes through a process of mobilisation and involvement of the various actors concerned : from civil servants to political representatives. It is not enough to have a minister and a department responsible for equality. Collective, transversal and preventive action is needed by everyone in the whole of the process. At the Belgian federal level, we have to work with services responsible for training, compiling and analysing statistics, elaborating legislation, internal evaluation units, ... It's also important not to forget the partners with whom the civil service collaborates for all or some of its missions (associations, university teams, consultancy or study agencies).

To make a success of a *gender mainstreaming* project requires identifying these partners, raising their awareness of the importance of taking gender into account, and also getting them to make reports on how gender was encountered in their work.

Finally, commitment at the level of senior managers is absolutely necessary. If senior managers convey the message, support within the ministries will be strengthened. However, senior managers are generally only convinced to convey a message if their political superiors are committed to a cause. This means that commitment from the political top of a ministry (minister, state secretary) is crucial. At the Belgian federal level, this responsibility at political and management level is clearly defined in the law.

- *Mobilising resources, instruments and expertise*

Even if *gender mainstreaming* has to be implemented by all members of the policy-making staff who are also normally involved in that policy, it doesn't mean that no extra resources are needed. *Gender mainstreaming* is an investment in the overall quality of policy. The costs of this quality improvement should therefore be counted as regular policy costs. **Staff and budgets** should be made available. For instance, at Belgian federal level people will be designated as coordinators of gender mainstreaming in each ministry.

In addition it is important that there are adequate **instruments** for *gender mainstreaming*, if necessary tailored to the needs of the specific ministries.

Amongst the most important instruments we can mention sex-disaggregated statistics and gender indicators.

Carrying out *gender mainstreaming* projects requires having disaggregated data available, but that goes well beyond using the sex variable as an independent variable. It is a matter of using these disaggregated data and sex-differentiated analysis to tackle the sources of inequalities between women and men, which are the feminine and masculine stereotypes or the roles and representations customarily assigned to the sexes.

The law clearly foresees the development of these statistics and indicators. The Institute has produced a brochure entitled “Women and men in Belgium. Gender statistics and indicators” in collaboration with an academic team. This brochure, which is to be updated every two years, contains close to a hundred indicators that present the gender equality situation in different domains in Belgian society.

Another type of instruments are manuals designed to provide support for implementing gender mainstreaming.

The Institute has already produced and distributed two manuals:

- a manual on the integration of gender into government contracts;
- a manual relating to training courses in the subject of gender.

Furthermore, the Institute is putting the final touches to a manual for « gender mainstreaming in the federal public service ». The aim of the manual is to present the process and the instruments that permit the integration of the gender dimension into the working of administrations and minister’s offices. For instance, it will propose check-lists that make it possible to verify that concerns about equality between women and men have been integrated into the different phases of a policy.

The gender expertise has to be made available.

If *gender mainstreaming* is to be successful, staff members should have up-to-date knowledge and awareness of gender issues. In certain cases the executive civil servants do have the feeling that gender should be able to play a role, but they don’t really know how to research this or how to include it when drafting policy.

There are various ways in which to develop expertise :

- *external expertise*

An important source of gender expertise can be found in universities, user-groups, documentation centres, social partners and organisations.

- *awareness-raising seminars*

Last year, the Institute organized a conference and 4 seminars cofinanced by the European Commission, destined at sensitizing, informing and training the different political and administrative authorities directly involved in the implementation of the law. During these seminars Belgian and foreign experts focused on different themes directly linked to the implementation of the law, such as gender budgeting.

- *trainings*

The success of the implementation of the law will also depend on offering general and tailored training modules about gender mainstreaming. Therefore, it’s very important to ensure that gender is integrated into a series of existing training courses organized through the all administration.

- *databases*

Through its website, the Institute offers access to several databases that could also contribute to implementing gender mainstreaming. These databases concern:

- Research and publications on the subject of gender;
- Training courses on the subject of gender;
- Experts on the subject of gender.

- *Establishing adequate internal structures*

It is also important that it is clear to everyone who is responsible for *gender mainstreaming* within his or her department, and how the internal *gender mainstreaming* structure is organised. Without an executive and without a structure it is difficult to get things regulated. For this reason the lines of responsibility must be clear to everyone, including such things as who the contact person is and who bears the ultimate responsibility. As mentioned before, The Belgian law creates an **interdepartmental coordination group**, made up of members of minister's offices and administrations. The idea is to have gender mainstreaming coordinators in each department with a final responsibility in the hands of the top management.

- **Defining key concepts and clear objectives**

Gender mainstreaming means dealing with the concept of difference. But is not always easy to take account of the differences. After all, the mainstreaming technique does not cover which differences between men and women people want to combat and what people want to support. Every government involved in *gender mainstreaming* needs its own definition of gender equality. In order to implement a gender mainstreaming process, they must, among other things, face the following question: What are the differences we want to take into account to improve gender equality ? The concept of *gender mainstreaming* does not in itself imply what the political objectives are. Equality is the only guideline. In this context, the strategy must not to be confused with the goal...

If clear objectives are not defined, it is hard or even impossible to design or employ appropriate instruments and to keep people motivated to pursue a cause. The goals and plans should be clear and available for all concerned within and outside the ministry. This is the only way by which the effectiveness of *gender mainstreaming* can be measured and can contribute to more awareness and support within the ministries and government departments concerned.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that, in order to be effective and efficient, every gender equality policy needs to be carried by all institutional parties concerned and must go further than one-off projects to result in automatic reflexes, be a long-term investment and allow for a permanent embedding into institutional practice. This will ultimately benefit society as a whole.

Thank you very much for your attention.