

Mainstreaming:  
Northern Ireland's participative-democratic  
approach

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Refereed paper presented to the  
Jubilee conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association  
Australian National University, Canberra, October 2002

## Abstract

Mainstreaming has been hailed as the new wonder-drug of equal opportunities. In the last decade gender mainstreaming has received support and endorsement from the United Nations, European Union and Council of Europe, Commonwealth Secretariat, and many governments world-wide and has been 'proselytised' by organisations such as the World Bank, the ILO, and the OECD. At a time when both practitioners and academics are calling for a greater understanding and research on mainstreaming this paper develops both a practical case study and explores some of the deeper conceptual understandings of mainstreaming models, through the analysis of the Northern Ireland mainstreaming equality approach. Recently Northern Ireland, a region not traditionally associated with equality developments, has emerged as one of the world leaders in mainstreaming equality policy. The policy involves a statutory duty on all public authorities to give due regard to the promotion of equality of opportunity on nine different counts (gender, marital status, dependant status, age, sexual orientation, disability, race, religion and political opinion). Through the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* a number of detailed requirements of public authorities are specified in relation to this duty, and its implementation is overseen by a rigorous and committed Equality Commission. This paper explores the development, breadth and depth of this model. It charts its emergence in relation to local political developments, and preliminary conclusions are drawn regarding the strengths and weakness of this unique approach. The paper places these developments within the theoretical participative-democratic mainstreaming model. As Australia has been identified as a country in which early mainstreamed advancements were made, and later co-opted and manipulated, this paper will provide an interesting insight into a case study in which Australia could draw and learn from.

**Acknowledgements:** The author is grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for funding the project 'Gender and Constitutional Change' (grant: L219252023) under the Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme, from which this paper is drawn. The author would like to thank all the participants who contributed to the data collected as part of the Gender and Constitutional Change project and Elizabeth Hendron, Director of Women into Politics, for assistance in understanding the complexities of funding for civic groups in Northern Ireland. The author is also grateful to Kate Leeson, of the Hawke Institute of the University of South Australia, for her editorial comments.

## Introduction

Mainstreaming has been hailed as the new wonder drug of equal opportunities (Amazon 2001). In the last decade gender mainstreaming has received support and endorsement from the United Nations, European Union and Council of Europe, Commonwealth Secretariat, and many governments worldwide (Council of Europe 1999; European Commission 2000; Rees 1998; Reanda 1999; Mackay and Bilton 2000; True and Mintrom 2001). Furthermore, it has been 'proselytised' by organisations such as the World Bank, the ILO, and the OECD (Woodward 2001:1; Razavi and Miller 1995).

Mainstreaming is believed to be able to promote and incorporate equity into all stages of policy development, and is considered to be an innovative and potentially transformative approach to policy making (Rees 1998, 1999; Woodward and Meier 1998; Mackay and Bilton 2000; Woodward 2001). It is innovative because it moves the focus from the results of discrimination towards its causes. Its potential to be transformative is found in the approach that equality is not merely an end, but a value which must be considered at each and every stage of decision making.

National government and supranational bodies' support for mainstreaming has resulted in its application and practice forging ahead. Theoretical analysis and scholarship, however, have struggled to keep pace. As a result, the understanding of gender mainstreaming, its potential and complexities, remains underdeveloped (CoE 1998). The limited understandings that are available have a range of interpretive and definition problems. For example no single definition of mainstreaming has been adopted (Rees 1998; Mackay and Bilton 2000; Woodward 2001), and as result there is no definitive strategy for its implementation. Consequently there has been a large variance in the substance and styles of each interpretation, opening gender mainstreaming intentions to the risk of being co-opted or diluted (Rees 1998; Woodward 2001). Australia provides a number of examples of co-option where the term 'mainstreaming' has been manipulated to undermine specific, pre-existing (and hard fought) equality initiatives (Bacchi 2001; Sawyer 2002). As a result, there is a growing need for a greater understanding of mainstreaming and how it can be applied to meet its objectives, instead of undermine them. Consequently, practitioners (Beckou-Balta 2000; Garajova 2000; Winberg 2000) and academics (Rees 1998; Verloo 1999; True and Mintrom 2001) have increasingly called for a

greater understanding of the potential benefits and problems associated with the application of mainstreaming policies.

In responding to these calls, academics have sought to further the conceptual understanding of the approach. To date, this has been primarily through the development of case studies, and from this analysis some theoretical positions have begun to emerge (Rees 1998; Nott 2000; Beveridge et al 2000; True and Mintrom 2001; Woodward 2001). This article places the unique Northern Ireland case study of mainstreaming amongst the existing literature and, through this, develops the understanding of Nott's (2000) participative-democratic model to include not only considerations of process, but also the impact of the model's origin on its design.

## Concepts of mainstreaming

Feminists have long questioned the presumed gender-neutrality of formal institutions and have argued that these institutions reproduce and contribute to gender inequality through their assumptions, working procedures and activities (Razavi and Miller 1995:12). Gender mainstreaming attempts to address these questions through allowing for diverse situations of different groups of both men and women to be considered in policy making. Advocates of mainstreaming believe that it will address discrimination more fully and promote equality more broadly.

Mainstreaming *methods* are not so new and there are various accounts of their different applications (Sawer 1996; Rees 1998; Mazey 2000; True and Mintrom 2001; Woodward 2001). Australia was one of the first countries to develop a mainstreaming approach in the early 1970's (True and Mintrom 2001), when the national Office for the Status of Women (OSW) was established and given the remit to assess cabinet submission for their gender impact (this remit of OSW has not been sustained over the years). However, the *concept* of mainstreaming is generally considered to have only emerged as a 'living breathing approach towards gender equality' in 1995 when it was endorsed at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Rees 1999: 5; Reanda 1999; Verloo 1999; True and Mintrom 2001). Because of the significant international, supranational and national support gender mainstreaming has been given since this point, understandings and developments of mainstreaming as an equality strategy have focused on gender goals.

Gender equality, however, is not always the sole objective of a mainstreamed approach. In regions such as Northern Ireland and Scotland, where multiple groups are considered, the process used is 'mainstreaming equality'. The concept of mainstreaming is shared by gender mainstreaming and mainstreaming equality; and the difference between the two models is the groups for which equality of opportunity is promoted. Gender mainstreaming considers men and women; while mainstreaming equality adopts a number of groups for whom equality of opportunity is considered.

There is some debate over the benefits of each model. One argument suggests that appreciating that inequalities can occur in a range of different capacities between a range of groups is beneficial:

Women are not a single constituency with the same social and cultural backgrounds, and to approach the issue of 'gender impact' on this basis would simply be to repeat past mistakes ... [and therefore] mainstreaming equality is indeed more effective and more socially inclusive than gender mainstreaming (Beveridge et al 2000: 391).

Alternatively others argue that the factors which contribute to gender inequality are distinct, and therefore a general, all-encompassing mechanism designed to rectify a number of inequality problems is likely to fall short of addressing the specific issues of groups that are discriminated against (Verloo 2000 cited in Beveridge et al 2000: 391).

The application of different mainstreaming approaches is still being measured. However, the understanding and scholarship around both approaches appears to be broadly applicable and shared, with the focus being on mainstreaming processes and not which groups are being considered.

## **Participative-democratic and expert-bureaucratic models**

Scholars have acknowledged the shared principles of gender mainstreaming and mainstreaming equality and both approaches have been considered in conceptual developments around mainstreaming. One such framework, first developed by Sue Nott (2000), identifies two broad models that can be applied to either gender mainstreaming or mainstreaming equality approaches. These are the expert-bureaucratic model and the participative-democratic model. The expert-bureaucratic model relies heavily on a 'gender' expert(s) being located within the bureaucracy, such as a women's unit, and has been popular in countries such as Australia (both at Federal and State levels), New

Zealand and Canada. The participative-democratic model is the more recently developed (and tends to be the model which is most likely to incorporate multiple equality areas). It relies primarily on the participation of civic and community groups through a consultation process. It has been popular in the United Kingdom and is epitomised in the Northern Ireland model (Beveridge et al 2000).

Nott's classification of mainstreaming models contributes to the conceptual understanding of gender mainstreaming, and is well substantiated by a number of case studies. However, it remains limited in that it only develops the understanding of mainstreaming models in relation to their processes and as yet, has not included any analysis of the impact of the national origins of the model of mainstreaming on its design. Nor has it drawn any conclusions on the different impacts model design has on applied mainstreaming outcomes. As will be shown in the Northern Ireland case, the origin of how mainstreaming policies were developed in a region is crucial to understanding the complexities of the approach adopted, its applied strengths and weaknesses.

It is not unusual that origin has been excluded from the analysis of the expert-bureaucratic and participative-democratic models, as to date the majority of analysis of mainstreaming developments have had an international focus, such as the role of transnational networks or initiatives of supranational bodies (Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000; True and Mintrom 2001). While these developments are important in the understanding of mainstreaming as an international phenomenon, they provide only one perspective of mainstreaming developments. As a result, the role of cultural, social and political factors at play within the different national contexts that have influenced local mainstreaming developments remains both underdeveloped and under-theorised.

## **Origins of Northern Ireland's mainstreamed approach**

Northern Ireland's model of mainstreaming is both unique and world leading, as it has expanded the traditional gender mainstreaming approach to include not only gender. Equality of opportunity for nine groups is promoted through a sophisticated statutory duty on all public authorities. Section 75(1) of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* states:

A public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity-

- (a) between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- (b) between men and women generally;
- (c) between persons with a disability and persons without; and
- (d) between persons with dependants and persons without.

Despite the breadth and depth of this mainstreamed approach, and its subsequent value as a case study, it has not been given extensive coverage within mainstreaming research. This is largely due to the newness of its implementation in Northern Ireland (since 2000) and the fact that Northern Ireland (along with Scotland and Wales) is often overlooked as a policy case study, as generally the literature focuses only on developments at the UK level.

The statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to promoting equality of opportunity grew out of policy guidelines in the early 1990's known as PAFT (Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment). The PAFT guidelines advised government departments to consider the impact of discrimination in relation to religion and political opinion; gender; ethnicity; marital status; dependent status; sexuality; and age. These guidelines were developed from a range of earlier mid 1980's initiatives that supported moves towards equality proofing and giving due regard to equality issues in policy development.

The sophisticated model of mainstreaming adopted in the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* was facilitated by three developments: advanced public discourse around discrimination issues (albeit narrowly defined in terms of political opinion and religion); the willingness of the British government to undertake mainstreaming initiatives, in order to meet its international (predominantly gender) obligations; and the mobilisation of civic groups around the need for a statutory duty approach to mainstreaming. >From these developments a 'window of opportunity' in the form of devolution was presented, and consequently each of these elements came to influence the design and approach of the Northern Ireland mainstreaming model.

The first influence on the model's design was the political culture. Due to the nature of Northern Ireland's unique political situation, there had previously been in a range of initiatives developed in response to the heightened inequalities of being a divided society. Discourse around religious discrimination issues has always dominated Northern Ireland's main political agenda and these debates were given prominence within the formal political arena. Within this context, other equality issues were generally ignored or overlooked and it took bold initiatives, such as the establishment of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, before gender issues were injected into the main political debates

(Donaghy and Meehan 2001). However, the focus on issues of discrimination, albeit narrowly defined, resulted in a range of anti-discrimination legislative initiatives and the development of equality-proofing schemes (McCrudden 1999; Galligan and Carney 2001). This in turn established a society in which advanced, institutionalised developments were accepted as a means of redressing inequalities. In the lead-up to devolution in Northern Ireland it was recognised that if a peace agreement was to be both substantial and accepted by all parties, discrimination needed to be addressed in a formal capacity (McCrudden 1999). This, combined with the established initiatives, provided a political environment in which discussions around equality mechanisms were familiar, foundations for developments had been laid, and resistance to suggestions of advanced equality machinery had been minimised (at least by certain sectors of the political arena).(1)

The second vehicle came from a move within the British government to promote equality-proofing as a tool for ensuring it complied with its European and international obligations (2), and in response to pressure groups lobbying for the government to give greater regard to equality issues generally (McCrudden 1999). Originally, some of these goals were realised in the establishment of PAFT. However after a number of developments it was recognised that there were problems associated with its implementation, and the UK government was faced with recommendations that there needed to be a stronger enforcement of this policy.(3) These developments at the Northern Ireland level were supported by developments at the European and international level, where there were also moves towards formalising the implementation of mainstreaming. These came notably through the UN's Beijing endorsement in 1995, the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, and the European Commission's endorsement and promotion of gender mainstreaming strategies through its Structural Funds (see Pollack and Hafner-Burton 2000). Subsequently, by 1998 the UK government was aware of pressure from within Northern Ireland and internationally for mainstreaming developments to become more formalised in application. Constitutional change provided the window of opportunity for it to respond to these calls.

The third vehicle, and potentially the most influential on the design of the mainstreaming approach adopted, was the mobilisation around mainstreaming advancements by grass-root civic organisations. Two groups in particular were at the forefront of the move towards constitutionalising PAFT. Unison, a public service trade union, had undertaken a number of initiatives to see PAFT better implemented, including taking a government department to judicial review over its failure to give consideration to PAFT guidelines. The second group, CAJ (Committee on the Administration of Justice, a Northern Ireland human rights NGO), had organised PAFT briefings which initiated the mobilisation of

community and voluntary groups around the policy (McCrudden 1999). These two organisations joined up to lead a loose grouping called the Equality Coalition, which represented a range of civic groups that were concerned with equality issues and committed to the implementation of PAFT through legal obligation.

It was acknowledged by Northern Ireland political parties, the British and Irish governments, and civic groups throughout Northern Ireland that the referendum to establish devolution would be a very close call and that, in order to secure its success, political party endorsement would be insufficient and the co-operation of the sophisticated community network was also required. Those associated with the Equality Coalition identified the window of opportunity provided by devolution and the associated legislation, and subsequently lobbied to ensure Northern Ireland's mainstreaming duties were as comprehensive and wide ranging as possible.

The specific methods adopted by those associated with the Equality Coalition will be shown to have been clearly influential in the model of mainstreaming adopted in Northern Ireland. These methods, led by CAJ and Unison, included commissioning and circulating studies on PAFT and the need for a more formalised approach to mainstreaming; organising seminars and workshops to stimulate discussions on mainstreaming; initiating a revision of government proposals on mainstreaming; consulting substantively on White Paper proposals on mainstreaming; preparing and presenting alternatives to the White Paper; having involvement with the Agreement(4) negotiations; intensively consulting at every stage of the parliamentary process; and briefing NGOs, equality agencies and influential political and administration figures representing the British Parliament, Irish Government and American representatives involved in the peace process (McCrudden 1999). So entrenched was the lobbying and involvement in the process which came to define Northern Ireland's mainstreaming approach by these groups that it was observed:

In practice, the equality agencies and the [Equality] Coalition constructed the agenda for debate and were seen by both the British and Irish governments as the main pressure groups with which they had to deal because of their influence on this issue (McCrudden 1999:1742).

Hence it was the diversity and sophisticated lobbying of civic groups in the process of drawing up the Agreement and Act in respect to the mainstreaming section, that highlighted the depth of expertise available for policy makers to consult with for that stage of the process. Furthermore it enabled such a broad ranging consultative approach to be considered achievable.

## The Section 75 statutory duty

The implementation and overseeing of the Section 75 statutory duty is undertaken by the Northern Ireland Equality Commission (EC, which was established by Section 73 of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998*) and the functions of the EC in relation to the statutory duty are outlined in Section 74.

It is well documented that a key component of successful equality mainstreaming is having such a body to oversee, monitor and review its process (Mackay and Bilton 2000; Beveridge et al 2000; Woodward 2001), and the Equality Commission was established in order to facilitate this. Its establishment, however, was not without opposition from many supporters of Section 75 (McCrudden 1999; Donaghy and Meehan 2001). The concern was that the establishment of a single Equality Commission via the amalgamation of a number of equality agencies would result in reduced sophistication and expertise in the areas of gender, race and disability (which individual equality commissions and the disability council previously supplied). The concerns regarding the amalgamation of the different equality agencies, form part of the fear that a mainstreamed approach risks diluting and undermining specific equality machinery (Woodward 2001:13). This fear has been realised in other regions such as Australia, where there have been various accounts of this happening (Bacchi 2001; Sawer 2002). However, the fear is yet to be allayed or substantiated in Northern Ireland as it is still 'too early to tell' and it will only be through the monitoring of the Commission over time that it can be judged how much substance there is to this concern.

Schedule 9 of the Act outlines specifically the role of the EC in relation to the mainstreaming duty. Its role is to offer advice on, review the effectiveness of the approach, and to 'enforce the duties' of public authorities. The duties of public authorities are specified in Section 4 (subsections 2 and 3) of Schedule 9 of the Act, where the equality scheme's substance and process is outlined:

(2) A scheme shall state, in particular, the authority's arrangements-

- for assessing its compliance with the duties under section 75 and for consulting on matters to which a duty under that section is likely to be relevant (including details of the persons to be consulted);
- for assessing and consulting on the likely impact of policies adopted or proposed to be adopted by the authority on the promotion of equality of opportunity;
- for monitoring any adverse impact of policies adopted by the authority on the promotion of equality of opportunity;

- for publishing the results of such assessments as are mentioned in paragraph and such monitoring as is mentioned in paragraph ©;
- for training staff;
- for ensuring, and assessing, public access to information and to services provided by the authority.

(3) A scheme shall-

- conform to any guidelines as to form or content which are issued by the Commission with the approval of the Secretary of State;
- specify a timetable for measures proposed in the scheme; and
- include details of how it will be published.

Key to the success of the schemes, and to the endorsement of them by the EC, is the consultation process between public authorities and the wider community. This is reinforced in Section 5 of Schedule 9:

Before submitting a scheme a public authority shall consult, in accordance with any directions given by the Commission-

- (a) representatives of persons likely to be affected by the scheme; and
- (b) such other persons as may be specified in the directions.

This emphasis on consultation thus emerges as central to the spirit and framework of Northern Ireland's mainstreaming approach, as outlined in the Act, placing it firmly within the participative-democratic model. The practical implications of this are that public authorities are now required to establish and develop relationships with civic actors and groups, who are then treated as equality 'experts' to be consulted with on policy developments. Ideally, some equality expertise would be found within the public authorities, but as the experience with PAFT demonstrated, this expertise was scarce and undeveloped. Therefore, in practice equality schemes generally were initially drawn up without any formal equality expertise, and it was not until the consultation process that expertise was incorporated.<sup>(5)</sup> In theoretical terms, this shift signals the move towards a governance arrangement, where a partnership between civic society and governments becomes more formal and interactive than previous arrangements.

## Northern Ireland's participative-democratic model

The heavy emphasis on consultation in the 1998 Act, the role of the EC in monitoring public authorities' schemes to ensure they have completed the required processes, including the consultation exercise, and the poor performance of bureaucracies in developing equality expertise under PAFT identifies the Northern Ireland approach as a participative-democratic model. The participative-democratic approach has already produced clear benefits even at the first stage of implementation.<sup>(6)</sup> Namely, the Northern Ireland bureaucracy has undergone a significant shift in the consideration it gives to equity in policy making; their interpretation of 'equality' has been broadened; policy outcomes in Northern Ireland are now intended to be designed and developed in a manner in which equality of opportunity is at every stage encouraged, instead of overlooked; and the relationship between civic groups and government has been formalised and developed under a governance structure.

The specific model adopted has ensured the benefits of accessing the widest possible resources, in terms of expertise and knowledge on specialised equality issues. The wide-ranging approach offers a greater availability of expertise, compared to the alternative expert-bureaucratic model (whose success tends to be reliant on one team or individual's knowledge and skills). As a result it has been found, even at this early stage, that:

In Northern Ireland, impact assessment seems to have assumed a level of sophistication not currently seen elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and seems to be firmly established in the participatory-democratic mould (Beveridge et al 2000:401).

This sophistication has come from both the emphasis on consultation and the process of the development of equality schemes. The Equality Commission's feedback on the first draft of schemes was substantial, as comparisons between it and the final equality schemes indicate. The sophistication of the schemes primarily benefited from the consultations public authorities held on their schemes. Government departments generally received over 50 consultation responses, and in some cases it was as high as 91 responses. A typical example of this was the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) equality scheme consultation process. They posted out 245 of their proposed schemes and in return received 66 submissions- over a one in four response rate.

The Northern Ireland participative-democratic model also facilitated the development of an advanced exchange of expertise between non-government groups and the policy administration. This process played a key role in the development of a new 'third way' style of governance in Northern Ireland, and contributed to the changing face of politics

under devolution, opening up policy development to groups previously under-represented in this process (Donaghy and Meehan, 2001). Had the expert-bureaucratic model been adopted, this would not have been so well facilitated, while the value given to civic society in the new constitutional arrangements would not have been so clearly demonstrated.

The development of the mainstreaming agenda in Northern Ireland has also appeared to have a number of positive flow-on impacts. Analysis shows that the process which led to the establishment and implementation of mainstreaming in Northern Ireland has also been responsible for catapulting issues of equality into bureaucrats' and politicians' broader considerations. This was demonstrated in the development of the Programme for Government (PfG). The PfG was not subject to Section 75, yet due to the new found awareness of equality issues, an equality statement was attached and consideration to different groups was acknowledged throughout the document in a way previously unmatched. Additionally, the process of drawing up equality schemes established the Equality Commission as a body committed to the seriousness of the duty and to ensuring that public authorities took their equality responsibilities seriously. This established some initial confidence in the EC and their commitment to rigorously monitoring the mainstreaming duty. Other developments have seen Community groups' perspectives be given a formal avenue through which they can access government and have their concerns and perspectives heard on a range of issues. At the same time there is an increased awareness on behalf of government of the equality expertise within the community and the benefits of consulting with them, not just in a mainstreaming capacity, but in a broader context (as was done with the PfG).

The application of the participative-democratic model of mainstreaming in Northern Ireland, however, has not been without limitation and costs. The first limitation of the model is the assumption that there are established groups and organisations with which to consult on the nine different areas. As policy making encompasses a broad range of issues, and there are nine counts of equality to be considered, the application of the model fell somewhat short in a number of instances. For example, it emerged that while groups representing women, individuals with disabilities, or religious denominations were often organised and in a position to prepare submissions on a range of departmental policies, other groups to which equality considerations had to be given often did not exist to be consulted with. This was demonstrated in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development consultation exercise, where there was no group to represent the concerns, or had the appropriate expertise to be able to comment on how rural development policies would impact on transgender or homosexual individuals (Donaghy and Kelly 2001). This, coupled with the lack of expertise within the bureaucracy, resulted

in many of the schemes being less comprehensive than intended and many group's interests being under-represented.

Another notable limitation in the application of Section 75 was the process of consultation undertaken. While it varied slightly amongst public authorities, 'consultation' was largely restricted to posting out equality schemes. Due to the time restrictions on public authorities, consultees received these large documents all in the same time period, all with the same deadlines. As a result, community and voluntary groups identified as consultees were inundated with equality schemes which demanded responses in a format which was both laborious and time consuming. Additionally, by making the consultation process a paper exercise, the process was not only burdensome for consultees, it limited the exchange of expertise between civic groups and policy makers. While there was a training component detailed in the Act, few public authorities had the foresight to use the consultation exercise as a key opportunity to develop their employee's skills. Therefore this process resulted in bureaucrats only receiving a minimal advantage of consultees' expertise, while those consulted were unable to fulfil the potential of the exercise due to their restricted resources (time, labour and financial). Clearly, if consultation is to be valued and used to its maximum advantage, then an alternative process of consultation is required, one that involves greater interaction and less emphasis on paper outputs and resource-consuming processes for consultees.

A further problem of the model is that there are no provisions to ensure the sustainability of the current process of consultation. No mechanism has been developed to measure the indirect, or broader, impact of the mainstreaming process on participating groups who are crucial to the consultation process. Current research on the women's sector is starting to indicate that the burden the Northern Ireland mainstreaming model places on civic groups as consultees is unsustainable (Hegarty 2001; Tallion 2001). There is nothing to suggest such findings would not be applicable to other groups. Despite this, there remains a lack of monitoring on behalf of government and these concerns remain outside the main measurement of success of the mainstreaming process.

Many of these limitations relate, to some degree, to the way the mainstreaming process in Northern Ireland has been funded. Analysis of the process shows that the greatest structural limitation of Northern Ireland's participatory-democratic approach lies with its lack of supporting financial arrangements, an issue which has implications for its long term sustainability. Groups who participate in the Northern Ireland consultation process receive no remuneration for their contribution of expertise. Despite governments regularly undertaking quite complicated and even abstract accounting processes (such as the measurement of depreciation), the explanation provided by a senior bureaucrat as to why

consultees did not receive a form of financial support was because it was too difficult to assess, possibly more telling- potentially too costly:

...it sounds not unreasonable that resources should have been provided to help people [consultee groups], but when you sit down and think about how you would do it, it became very clear that it was impossible ... When you think about what they [public authorities] were asking for in terms of any [consultative] group to respond to, well ... talking about equality schemes was only the start of it, because then we're actually talking about the equality impact assessments which were coming behind. So it's a black hole. We could have been pouring money out and the other thing of course was, how did we know we would have got value for money ... you know, he or she looks at this equality scheme and puts in a response on behalf of the group. But is the response worth anything? You know there's a quality element to the responses ... So it became an impossible issue to fund.(7)

The issue of groups not receiving any financial assistance for their participation in the mainstreaming process is compounded by the fact that many within the community sector face considerable financial difficulties in sustaining their organisation's work. This was particularly heightened during the period of the first consultation stage, as this was a time when many organisations faced problems of 'funding gaps' (the period between which the funding of different programs is distributed), such as the gap between the end of the special European Peace I Structural Funds and commencement of Peace II funding. This meant that groups in this period had to focus on staying afloat rather than taking on extra work. There was such uncertainty about funding during this period that many workers were on protracted notices. This resulted in many groups being unable to make long-term plans. In these circumstances policy responses came well down the list of priorities for group co-ordinators or directors, as very few groups had workers specifically dedicated to policy, as their focus at that point was sustaining their core programs.

The second problem was that the funding Northern Ireland groups receive tends to be allocated for specific programmes of activity, with responding to policy generally not being included in the allocation. Hence, from a monetary point of view, there was not even any secondary financial benefit for groups participating in the consultation process, which resulted in the argument that staff time 'could be better spent doing other work'. For example an organisation may have felt that instead of committing resources to responding to a department's consultation process, they would be better employed in running an education program informing women about the new equality legislation in the *Northern Ireland Act 1998*, as this activity would be more closely aligned to their 'on-the-ground work' objectives, and was an initiative they were more likely to be given funding for.

A third problem that relates to finances is the type of organisations able to respond to Section 75 consultations. Those that have been established for a long time and have more money (because they are not solely reliant on one funding source, such as Peace I or II money) are more likely to engage in consultation. Smaller, less-well established groups do not have the resources or the skills to be able to respond. Therefore, many organisations with key expertise that would have benefited the consultation process may not have responded to equality schemes due to there being no member of staff skilled or available to do so in the 'paper' format required.

It has been well argued that adequate resources are central to an 'enabling environment' for mainstreaming (Mackay and Bilton 2000:27). Yet, as outlined, no financial arrangements were made to facilitate consultees providing these services, let alone providing them with a financial payment for their service, despite these services being in high demand in a market-driven economy. Clearly, along with the fact that payment was 'too difficult', the assumption was made that these groups and individuals would facilitate public authorities in meeting their duty free of charge because they had supported and lobbied for the constitutionalisation of PAFT. Questions are yet to be asked about this assumption, and the value associated with the time and work undertaken in the voluntary and community sector compared to the private sector. It seems unlikely that profit-orientated groups would have been expected to provide that same depth and quality of consultations *pro bono* on a continuing basis. Therefore, while the participatory consultation element holds the opportunity to produce rich results in mainstreaming approaches, the important role of supporting finances for these groups should not be overlooked by supporters of the participative-democratic model or, more specifically, the Northern Ireland statutory duty.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the Northern Ireland experience goes some way in highlighting the impact of the relationships at the local level and the value of understanding the context in which mainstreaming has been developed in each region. The model of mainstreaming equality adopted in Northern Ireland was clearly influenced by the main actors who lobbied for its development as a statutory duty. Specifically, the origin, or process of development at the local level, was highly influential in the model designed and adopted in Northern Ireland. Preliminary comparisons suggest there is evidence of other national developments which support this hypothesis. For example, in Australia the origins of the model of

mainstreaming have clear links to femocrats(8) and the advances they achieved and institutionalised in the 1970's and 1980's (see Sawyer 1990; Eisenstien 1996). Subsequently the expert-bureaucratic model adopted in Australia, which places the key processes as bureaucratic functions, can be linked to the lobbying and advancements achieved by those feminists within the bureaucracy. Hence, the relationship between national developments around mainstreaming and the understanding of the models design holds considerable potential to be further developed.

In terms of the application of the model, preliminary successes and limitations of the Northern Ireland model have already begun to emerge. Civic groups' expertise has been acknowledged and valued in a new capacity, which has resulted in a number of positive developments. Additionally, a new culture and understanding of the multiple equality considerations has emerged- a key development in a society traditionally preoccupied only with religious discrimination. This development has been supported through the consideration of broad equality issues at the early stage of policy development. This is a key difference to Australia's approach, where often the earliest intervention comes at the cabinet submission stage, by which time a policy focus has already been established, and gender or equality considerations are most likely to be 'inserted' into the policy, instead of entrenched in its design.

In terms of the shortcomings of the Northern Ireland model, the *process* of consultation holds potential to be developed and refined so as not to be so laborious for the groups consulted with, and the model *structure* could also be improved to take account of the limitations associated to a possible lack of consultees. This applies to specific groups in particular policy areas, but also in terms of the sustainability of broader representations. In relation to this last issue, had there been a financial element to consultation, or an acknowledged need for these groups to have sustainability and resources to participate in the key process of the mainstreaming model, then the extensive consultation processes would have been better facilitated. Finally, by not having an expert within the bureaucracy to support the development of the mainstreamed approach, the Northern Ireland participative-democratic model can be seen to rely almost entirely on outsourced expertise. The danger of this is not only the risk of this expertise no longer being available, but without taking a more holistic approach the transformative impact becomes potentially limited- leaving the goals of mainstreaming unfulfilled or only partially fulfilled. The alternative expert-bureaucratic model, as developed in Australia however, has also shown considerable limitations in not having a greater accountability to community equality groups.

Research in the area of mainstreaming remains in development stage. As the processes and approaches adopted are played out in practice, it is becoming increasingly clear that neither the expert-bureaucratic model nor the participative-democratic model are sufficient when developed as mutually exclusive approaches. It appears best-practice must incorporate a combination of each. However, it seems only likely this will be achieved when there is a strong advocacy from equality groups within the community *and* a strong movement within the bureaucracy, and both of these movements are given equal consideration by the decision makers in government. As this combination is likely to be rare, the challenge lies with researchers of mainstreaming to highlight this, so that reforms of models and new developments in approaches can incorporate a number of clear criteria that will establish a best practice approach that includes sustainable and protected elements of both participatory consultation and expertise within the bureaucracy.

## Notes

1. This was not a culture supported by all, and traditionally nationalists had been the advocates of anti-discrimination initiatives which were often opposed by some key unionist actors. However, it was a culture that was at least familiar with strong institutional equality mechanisms.
2. According to True and Mintrom (2001) this second set of circumstances is a common way by which many national governments have developed a gender mainstreaming approach.
3. For example, the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights undertook a formal review of the operation of legislation and government policy in the area of fair employment. This investigation found that PAFT was largely ignored within government policy making (Osborne et al 1996 in McCrudden 1999: 1716-17). In addition, they also responded to other reports produced on PAFT's ineffectiveness (produced by CAJ- Committee on the Administration of Justice); supported specific guidelines setting out new mainstreaming processes; and gave serious consideration to the outcomes of consultation submissions in the drawing up of Section 75 of the Act (McCrudden 1999).
4. On the front page of the Agreement, it is entitled simply, The Agreement. Its fuller title inside is: The Agreement. The Agreement was reached in multi-party negotiations. In an annex, it contains an Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland. The popular nomenclatures reflect their being reached in Belfast on Good Friday (10 April), 1998 i.e. Belfast Agreement of Good Friday Agreement. Some people use the popular names interchangeably. Others see in them a unionist (or Protestant) and nationalist (or Catholic) preference, therefore, this paper will be directed by the title used, and will refer to the document simply as the Agreement.
5. While it appears this was the most common scenario, it was not universal, and some public authorities, such as Belfast City Council, already had an equality officer employed, in which case a level of expertise was incorporated into the drawing up of the scheme prior to the consultation stage.
6. The first stage of the mainstreaming approach was the development of equality schemes.
7. From Gender and Constitutional Change interview transcript with 'anonymous' bureaucrat, October 2001.
8. Femocrats is a term widely used to describe feminists working in the bureaucracy, usually with a feminist agenda holding a senior post (see Eisenstien 1996).

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