Mainstreaming: Northern Ireland’s Participative-Democratic Approach

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Introduction

Mainstreaming has been hailed as the new wonder drug of equal opportunities (Amazone, 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), and 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 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 interpretative 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), or manipulated to undermine specific, pre-existing (and hard fought) equality initiatives (Woodward 2001; Bacchi 2001; Sawer, 2002). As a result, gender mainstreaming is an area in which practitioners (Beckou-Balta, 2000; Garajova, 2000; Winberg, 2000) and academics (Rees, 1998; Verloo, 1999; True and Mintrom, 2001) are increasingly calling for greater understanding and research.

In response to calls for a greater understanding of the potential benefits and problems associated with its application, academics have sought to further the conceptual understanding of mainstreaming. To date, this has been primarily through analysis of case studies, and from this analysis some theoretical positions have begun to be developed (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 was developed as a response to this questioning. It allows 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.

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1 For example, in Australia under the guise of gender mainstreaming rhetoric there has been a severe cut in funding for specialist gender equality units, with the argument being that the responsibility for gender equality lies not with one unit, but with all units. The rhetorical arguments for this can be considered as falling within some gender mainstreaming discourse, however, the practical outcomes were manipulated to be contrary to the goal of mainstreaming.
These mainstreaming developments are considered to be relatively new. While 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), the concept 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 promoted. 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 to mainstreaming appears to be broadly applicable and shared.²

Participative-democratic and expert-bureaucratic models

Scholars have acknowledged the shared principles of gender mainstreaming and mainstreaming equality, and both the solo and multiple equality approaches have been factored into 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, 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 by the Northern Ireland approach (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

² Therefore, for the purpose of this article, scholarship which has been developed around gender mainstreaming will be referenced as relevant to the Northern Ireland mainstreaming equality approach.
yet, has not included any analysis of the impact of the national origins of the model of mainstreaming on its design. As will be shown in the Northern Ireland case, this is crucial to understanding the complexities of the approach adopted, and its strengths and weaknesses.

It is not unusual that origin has not been incorporated into the analysis of the expert-bureaucratic and participative-democratic models, as to date the majority of analyses 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 but an additional eight different groups. Equality of opportunity for all 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). In addition to this, Northern Ireland (along with Scotland and Wales) is often overlooked as a case study, as the literature too often focuses only on 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 1990s 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 came out of a range of earlier mid-1980s 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 taken, and subsequently each of these elements can be seen to have influenced the design and approach of the unique Northern Ireland model.

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3 For an overview of these developments see McCrudden (1999).
The first influence on the model’s design is the political culture. Due to the nature of Northern Ireland’s unique political situation, there had previously been a range of initiatives developed in response to the heightened inequalities of being a divided society. Discourse around religious discrimination is central to the main political agenda and these debates are 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. Hence, in the lead-up to devolution in Northern Ireland, it was acknowledged 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, delivered a culture 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).4

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, and in response to pressure groups lobbying for the government to give greater regard to equality issues generally (McCrudden, 1999).5 Some of these developments 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. 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, and it responded to these calls.6

The third vehicle, and potentially the most influential on the design of the mainstreaming approach adopted, was the mobilisation around mainstreaming advancements by grassroots 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 was CAJ (Committee on the Administration of Justice, a Northern Ireland human rights NGO), which had organised PAFT briefings which initiated the mobilisation of community and voluntary groups around the policy (McCrudden, 1999). These two

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4 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.

5 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.

6 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).
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 comprehensive and wide ranging as they are.

The specific methods adopted by those associated with the Equality Coalition will be shown later 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 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 individuals representing key civic 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).

Therefore, it was their initial drive, influence and continual involvement in the development process, combined with the unique Northern Ireland history of equality issues being at the centre of political debate (albeit narrowly defined ones) and the broader political will of the British government to fulfill its gender and mainstreaming commitments, that resulted in the specific, sophisticated mainstreaming approach developed.

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 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, 2000).

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8 On the front page of the Agreement, it is entitled simply, The Agreement. It 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.
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).\(^9\) The concerns regarding the amalgamation of the different equality agencies are 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 new Equality Commission (EC) in relation to the mainstreaming duty. The EC’s role is to offer advice on and review the effectiveness of the approach and ‘enforce the duties’. 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 (c);
- 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.

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\(^9\) Lobbyists favoured the option raised in the Agreement that a new Department of Equality be assigned these duties.
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 have now been required to establish relationships with civic actors and groups, who are then treated as the equality ‘experts’ to be consulted 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 were generally drawn up without any formal equality expertise, and it was not until the consultation process that expertise was incorporated. In theoretical terms, this shift signals the move from an emphasis on the formal status of government to a governance arrangement, where a partnership between civic society and governments is forced to be more formal and interactive than in the previous system.

**Northern Ireland’s participative-democratic model**

The poor performance of bureaucracies in developing equality expertise under PAFT, 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, 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. 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 possible 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 offered 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 that, even at this early stage:

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 came from both the emphasis on consultation and the process of the development of equality schemes. The Equality Commission’s feedback on the first (draft) round of schemes was substantial, as comparisons between the first draft and the final equality schemes indicate. The sophistication of the schemes are also a result of the consultations which 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. One example of this was the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) equality schemes consultation process, who posted out 245 of their proposed schemes and in return received 66 submissions, which is over a one in four response rate.

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10 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.

11 The first stage of the mainstreaming approach was the development of equality schemes.
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.

In addition to sophisticated impact assessments and contributing to a culture of governance within the new constitutional arrangements, there were also a number of other benefits of the mainstreaming initiative. Analysis shows the first stage of the process provided the basis for dramatic reform in Northern Ireland through greater consideration being given to equality throughout all aspects of public authorities’ policy making. Equality has been prioritised as part of the government agenda and the new duty has ensured that, unlike previous equality priorities, Northern Ireland now gives greater consideration to a broad range of groups. The model of consultation argued for by civic groups in the drawing up of the Act has had a flow-on impact and has been applied to wider government activities, such as the Programme for Government (PfG). While the PfG did not undergo the mainstreaming process, it did undertake a broad consultative process and incorporate an equality statement. Other developments have seen the process of drawing up equality schemes catapult issues of equality into bureaucrats’ and politicians’ considerations in policy development in a way previously unmatched. Community groups’ perspectives have been given a formal means through which they can access government and have their concerns and perspectives heard, while there is an increased awareness on behalf of government of the equality expertise within the community and the benefits of consulting with these experts. Finally, 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. From the outset, the EC demonstrated a commitment to the mainstreaming duty and to rigorously monitoring it. After these achievements in the first phase of the mainstreaming approach in Northern Ireland, the transformative goal of mainstreaming has the potential to be realised on completion of all phases of the approach.

The application of the participative-democratic model of mainstreaming in Northern Ireland, however, is not without its limitations and cost. The first limitation of the model is the assumption that there are groups and organisations with which to consult on different areas. As policy making encompasses such a broad range of areas and there are nine counts of equality to be considered, this assumption falls some way short in application for many public authorities. For example, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was faced with a number of obstacles in the consultation stage when it came to accessing groups with whom they could consult (Donaghy and Kelly, 2001). For example, there was no group which represented the concerns, or had the appropriate expertise, to be able to comment on how rural development policies would impact on transgendered individuals, gay men and lesbians. 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, at least formally, to be consulted with. This was problematic in that PAFT had already demonstrated that expertise was also largely unavailable within the public authorities, and as a result it is likely that many of the schemes were less comprehensive than they could have been.

The process of consultation, while it varied slightly amongst public authorities, was largely restricted to posting out equality schemes. This process limited the ‘transformative’ impact on policy makers, as it saw only a superficial exchange of information or expertise, which limited the educational potential of the exercise for policy makers and provided a burdensome task for consultees. While there was a training component detailed in the Act, few public authorities had the foresight to see the
consultation exercise as a key opportunity to develop their employees’ skills. The ‘paper’ process also failed to maximise the benefit of the expertise they did have access to. Community and voluntary groups identified as consultees often received over one hundred equality schemes, all in paper format, making the response process for them both laborious and time consuming. Therefore this process resulted in bureaucrats only gaining minimal advantage of consultees’ expertise, while those consulted were unable to fulfil the potential of the exercise due to their restricted resources including 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 which involves greater interaction and less emphasis on paper outputs and resource-consuming processes for consultees.

Another problem of the model is that it does not 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, such as the women’s sector 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). Despite such findings, 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, which may not have had a substantial impact on the first phase of implementing this mainstreamed approach, but clearly has implications for its long term sustainability. This was most obvious in relation to the funding of Section 75. Groups who participated in the consultation process receive no remuneration for their contribution of expertise. Despite governments being able to undertake quite complicated and, some could argue, arbitrary accounts for processes such as depreciation of government goods, 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 and 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.

The fact that groups do not receive 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

12 Due to the time restrictions on public authorities, consultees also received these documents all in the same time period, all with the same deadlines, which made the tasks even less achievable.

13 If public authorities were to put a little more creative thought into how groups participate in the consultation process, such as the futuresearch process (www.wrda.net/futuresearch), then this sharing of knowledge/expertise could be better developed.

14 From Gender and Constitutional Change interview transcript with ‘anonymous’ bureaucrat, October 2001.
heightened during the period of the mainstreaming 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 that they might lose their jobs. This resulted in many groups being unable to make long-term plans. In these circumstances policy response came well down the list of priorities for group co-ordinators or directors, as very few groups have workers specifically dedicated to policy.  

The second problem was that the funding Northern Ireland groups did receive has tended 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, than a policy response.

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) 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. Hence in this case, a lack of resources limits the development of skills and interest in policy-related work. 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 format required.

These factors, combined with the demanding timetable of the equality schemes, has meant many groups on whom administrations should have been relying, are operating under severe resource restraints. The result has been that, while there is no financial incentive, many groups have been put under great resource strain by participating in the consultation process, and often have simply been unable to contribute at all.

It has been well argued that adequate resources are central to an ‘enabling environment’ for mainstreaming (Mackay and Bilton, 2000:27). Yet, as outlined above, no financial arrangements were made to facilitate consultees providing these services, let alone providing them with a financial payment, despite these services being a high demand ‘commodity’ (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 the 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 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.

15 The author would like to thank Elizabeth Hendron, Director of Women into Politics, for assistance in understanding the complexities of funding for civic groups in Northern Ireland.
Conclusion

Despite its limitations, the Northern Ireland model of mainstreaming has resulted overall in a number of positive developments, not least a new culture and understanding of the multiple equality considerations that need to be incorporated into policy and decision making. It can be seen that 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. We can see that the consultation element of the Northern Ireland approach developed out of the lobbying of civic groups, and the opportunities of constitutional change which saw political shifts towards processes and structures of governance facilitated the development. Hence it can be argued that the origin, or process of development at the local level, was highly influential in the model designed and adopted. Furthermore, evidence of other national developments supports this hypothesis. For example, in Australia the origins of the model of mainstreaming have clear links to femocrats and the advances they achieved and institutionalised in the 1970’s and 1980’s (see Savrer, 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. Clearly the relationship between national developments around mainstreaming and the understanding of its models holds potential to be further developed. The analysis of the Northern Ireland experience goes some way in highlighting the impact of the relationships at this local level and the value of understanding the context in which mainstreaming has been developed in each region.

By developing the understanding of the link between the mainstreaming model adopted and its origin, the some of the structural strengths and weakness of each approach can be better understood. For example, the diversity and sophisticated lobbying of civic groups in the process of drawing up the Agreement and Act in respect to the mainstreaming section, highlighted the depth of expertise available with which policy makers could consult, for that stage of the process. Further, the advanced model developed through the Act reflected in many ways the high standard and variety of equality groups committed to contributing to policy developments. For these reasons, and others outlined in the article, such as the Equality Commissions role and the new priority afforded to equality issues by public authorities, this first phase can be considered as having been overall a successful approach. However, as discussed, it was not without limitation in design. While the process of consultation holds potential to be developed and refined so as not to be so laborious for the groups consulted with, 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 acknowledged the need for these groups to have the resources to continue to be sustained in order to participate in the key process of the mainstreaming model, then the extensive consultation processes would be 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.

While research in the area of mainstreaming remains in development stage, as the process and approaches adopted continue to be 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 largely mutually exclusive approaches. Best practice must incorporate a combination of each, but as the

16 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).
understandings of the impact of origin are showing, it appears that it is only likely this will be achieved when there is both a strong advocacy from equality groups within the community and a strong movement within the bureaucracy for equality developments, 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.

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