

# Gender and the White Paper on Irish Aid<sup>1</sup>

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*Irish Aid has stated its commitment to gender mainstreaming as a strategic approach to gender equality. Where present in the White Paper, references to gender equality are apparently contradictory in their goal and lack the kind of critical framework required if real change is to be effected. This article interrogates the conceptualisation of gender equality in the White Paper in the context of previous strategic documentation, Ireland's commitments under international regimes such as Beijing Platform for Action and in the light of feminist critiques of gender mainstreaming in development cooperation.*

## Introduction

The White Paper on Irish Aid reinforces and reiterates the government's commitment to the promotion of gender equality and the strategy of gender mainstreaming in Irish Aid.<sup>2</sup> Gender equality is one of four crosscutting issues to be mainstreamed across the development programmes of Irish Aid. The key decision on gender is "to increase our support for gender equality measures, with a specific focus on preventing and responding to gender-based violence".<sup>3</sup> This decision reflects the increasing priority given to gender issues within Irish Aid in recent years, evidenced most notably in the publication of the 2004 Gender Equality Policy and in more recent initiatives relating to gender

based violence (GBV), which recognise such violence as a violation of human rights.

An assessment of Irish Aid's gender work and the priority given to gender throughout its programme would require a major research project and is outside the scope of this article.<sup>4</sup> Rather, this article asks how gender mainstreaming and equality are being conceptualised within recent policy statements of Irish Aid, and in particular the White Paper. This article interrogates the conceptualisation of gender equality in the White Paper in the context of previous strategic documentation, Ireland's commitments under international regimes such as the Beijing Platform for Action (BpFA) and in the light of feminist critiques of gender mainstreaming in development cooperation.

## Gender mainstreaming concepts and frameworks

In publishing the White Paper, Irish Aid is not starting from a blank slate, and, in the context of gender, the White Paper refers to the range of international obligations that underpin Ireland's commitment to gender equality, specifically the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA).<sup>5</sup> Gender mainstreaming as a strategy towards gender equality has its origins in the BPfA. Irish Aid's commitment to gender mainstreaming, therefore, is informed and guided by these international frameworks, which take a structural approach to eradicating the systemic disadvantage, poverty and discrimination disproportionately experienced by women.

The BPfA recognises that gender equality requires attention to both the condition of women and the position of women and calls for the transformation of social structures and institutions, as well as hierarchical gender relations. Experiences of gender mainstreaming in development organisations and donor programmes indicate that gender mainstreaming is neither uncontested nor unproblematic. Feminist criticism has centred on the gap between the vision of the BPfA and the actual implementation of gender mainstreaming through gender policies.

Two broad approaches to gender mainstreaming – the agenda-setting approach and the integrationist/instrumentalist approach – have been identified. An agenda-setting approach views gender perspectives and the goal of gender equality as central to all

activities – policy development, research, advocacy, dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects. It seeks to ensure that institutions, policies and programmes respond to the needs and interests of women as well as men and distribute benefits equitably between women and men. Overall, it aims to reduce existing disparities between women and men in incomes, resources and opportunities through the transformation of gender relations. This approach is associated with efforts to meet women’s strategic gender needs through bottom-up mobilisation.<sup>6</sup> The integrationist/instrumentalist approach, on the other hand, builds gender issues into existing development frameworks and interventions. In this case, the overall development agenda is not transformed, but each issue is adapted to take into account issues relating to women and gender. Women are “fitted” into as many sectors and programmes as possible, but sector and programme priorities do not change because of gender considerations.<sup>7</sup>

Feminist concerns about the integrationist approach echo similar concerns in relation to the framing of development policy in terms of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which many critics see as a dilution and depoliticisation of human rights and gender equality approaches.<sup>8</sup> Many international networks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working for women’s human rights and gender empowerment have serious concerns that the MDG process inadequately addresses governments’ commitments under CEDAW and the BPfA. Critics have drawn attention to the gap between the vision of the Millennium Declaration and the goals and targets of the MDGs. The Millennium Declaration is a powerful synthesis of the goals of the UN conferences of the 1990s, reiterating and reinforcing the recognition within the UN human rights system of the equal importance of economic, social and cultural rights and political and civil rights; the indivisibility and interdependence between all human rights; and the centrality of gender equality to human rights. However, the MDGs refer to such issues as poverty, housing, and health as basic needs rather than as human rights. Such an approach does not address the underlying structural causes of poverty and inequality nor the ways that poverty and the non-fulfilment of basic human rights are connected.

While gender is relevant to each of the MDGs and the goals address several of the 12 Critical Areas of Concern in the BPfA, namely poverty, education, health and environmental sustainability, the only target for the MDG goal of gender

equality and the empowerment of women is the elimination of gender-specific disparities in the field of education. The indicators for goal 3 relate to gender gaps in education, literacy, earning capacity and political representation, all of which may be significant pre-conditions for the strengthening of women's strategic capacities and for overcoming traditional images and roles. However, the focus on these disparities covers only the first part of the goal. Gender equality is a critical step to the achievement of women's empowerment, but empowerment requires more than equality of opportunity and equal access to resources. Empowerment means helping women to control their own destinies. A 2003 study by the Gender and Development Network in the United Kingdom outlines how gender can become depoliticised in the context of a poverty reduction focus as outlined in the MDG. Drawing on research indicating that education for girls is the single most effective way of reducing poverty, the MDG uses girls' education as a proxy indicator for gender equality. Together with the MDG focus on women's (and not men's) reproductive role, this results in a "narrow equation of girls' education and women's reproductive health with progress towards gender equality".<sup>9</sup>

This approach to the concerns of women in the traditional arenas of health, education and motherhood perpetuates damaging stereotypes, and, in the absence of strategies and resources aimed at women's empowerment, inequality will remain unchallenged. Research by Annelise Moser and Caroline Moser, and by Mandy MacDonald<sup>10</sup> identifies the predominance of instrumentalist approaches across a range of development actors. The tendency to view gender equality as a strategy towards poverty reduction, rather than as a development goal in itself, is widespread.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the analysis of power relations essential to an understanding of inequality in the context of poverty and the feminisation of poverty can become lost.<sup>12</sup> A recent review of progress towards the implementation of the BPfA internationally highlighted concerns that, although female poverty has acquired greater policy attention in recent years, the focus tends to be on women in their role as mothers, rather than agents of change. The review questions whether anti-poverty programmes that rely on women's unpaid or poorly paid work to fulfil their objectives are genuinely contributing to gender equality, or whether, in fact, women are instrumentalised through their caring and mothering roles.<sup>13</sup>

In order to tackle the gendered nature of experiences of poverty, there must be a challenge to the nature of gender roles

through which women and men play out implicit power relations.<sup>14</sup> Feminist human rights criticism has challenged the impact of the public-private divide, and pointed out that assumptions linking women's roles with the private and domestic spheres and men's roles with the public spheres can depoliticise women's interests. Sever proposes both the promotion of women's participation in all areas of public life, and the extension of conceptualisations of governance to include the concept of family governance, including, for example, intra-household resource allocation, inheritance, dispute resolution, child-rearing and violence in the home. At this level gender relations of unequal power can have the most day-to-day impact on women, particularly on poor women and those who are not engaged in income generating activities outside the home.

Finding a process of engagement whereby "effective institutional insiders and strategic external critics" can support each other and promote the transformative intent of gender mainstreaming and the political project of gender equality is a key challenge.<sup>15</sup>

## Gender in the White Paper

It must be recognised from the outset that the White Paper on Irish Aid is more promotional than challenging, reiterating broad principles, rather than presenting in-depth analysis. Any analysis, therefore, needs to be seen in the context of Irish Aid's 2004 Gender Equality Policy (GEP), which reflects a politicised approach to gender, deriving from an acknowledgement of gender as "the most fundamental organising feature in all societies" and gender inequality as "the most prevalent form of social disadvantage within societies". In this context, women's empowerment in the political, social and economic spheres is framed as a goal in itself,<sup>16</sup> and the policy's objectives are expressed in language that is consistent with the international human rights frameworks: full achievement of human rights, equal access to resources and services and equal participation in political and economic decision-making.<sup>17</sup> The GEP sets out the analytical framework and institutional mechanisms for the implementation of a gender mainstreaming strategy and outlines a range of entry points for gender mainstreaming, including policy dialogue with partners, such as national governments, multilateral agencies, civil society organisations and other government donors.<sup>18</sup> This level of detail and clarity of analysis

is not fully reflected in the White Paper. However, the inclusion and omission of gender analysis within specific sections of the White Paper present a snapshot, albeit a blurred one, of the priority given to the goal of gender equality within Irish Aid's overall vision and mission.

Gender equality is listed at the beginning of the Guiding Principles section as one of the areas – along with promoting human development, human security and justice, building and strengthening democracy and promoting and protecting human rights – to be supported within the overarching objective of poverty reduction.<sup>19</sup> This is followed by a key decision to increase support for gender equality measures with a particular focus on GBV<sup>20</sup> and a key decision on crosscutting issues, including gender.<sup>21</sup> The chapter entitled Human Rights and Development includes a focus on preventing GBV and contains the strongest human rights language on gender in the paper, closely following the provisions of CEDAW Articles 1 to 5 in recognising that “there can be no valid exemption” from the basic principles enshrined in the international human rights instruments. Thus, no special provisions based on national, cultural or religious considerations are allowed. GBV is therefore politicised as a human rights issue and in language that avoids characterising women in terms of passive victimhood.<sup>22</sup>

The chapter entitled Gender and Development<sup>23</sup> makes a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming and firmly links it to women's empowerment and to the framework of international human rights, specifically naming the BPfA and CEDAW. This section begins with a commitment to promote gender equality throughout the programme, acknowledging that addressing gender equality “is about implementing the fundamental human right to equality”. It outlines specific actions to improve the position and status of women, such as increasing funding to women's organisations, promoting women's economic empowerment, and improving access to education and reproductive and other health services. The authors reiterate a commitment to work against GBV and highlight the importance of implementation of UN Resolution 1325 “which recognises the need for women to participate on equal terms with men at all levels and in all roles to promote peace and security”.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the chapter called Looking to the Future makes a commitment to a strategic partnership with the Dutch government to focus on specific measures for gender equality and women's empowerment, including the promotion of women's political participation, an end to violence against women and building

strong women's movements for good governance and accountability.<sup>25</sup>

The Gender and Development chapter ends by stating that the “impact of our actions will be greater if issues of gender equality are taken into account at the outset and if the realisation of the human rights of women informs everything we do”.<sup>26</sup> On its face, then, the commitment to the promotion of gender equality is strong. However, the contextualised and challenging framing of gender in some sections, particularly the approach to GBV draws attention to the lack of consistent language and approach in the White Paper as a whole, as well as a problematic overlap of approaches and the corralling of women's concerns in specific sectors as highlighted by MacDonald and Moser and Moser and discussed above.

Apparent contradictions between transformative analysis and instrumentalist approaches are present in such key sectors of Irish Aid's programme as health, HIV-AIDS and education, which arguably frame gender issues more within traditional integrationist development' conceptualisations than transformative gender equality frameworks. Such contradictions raise questions about the translation of Irish Aid's principle of gender equality into operational strategies. For example, although education is recognised as a human right and linked to increased status and participation in society by females, it is primarily described in instrumentalist terms in relation to economic growth. A similar overlap of efficiency and empowerment considerations is found in the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>27</sup> The BPfA, however, links education in the development of women as an agent of change, focusing as much on the value of lifelong learning, adult education in non-formal settings, and the importance of non-discriminatory education, as on equal access to school.<sup>28</sup> The White Paper, in contrast, describes girls' education as a “social vaccine” and “one of the most important weapons against the spread of HIV/AIDS”, bringing to mind MacDonald's caution in relation to education as a proxy for gender equality.

The White Paper section on health and the chapter called HIV-AIDS and Communicable Diseases also present overlapping approaches. The predominant gender focus is on maternal and reproductive health of women. However, as with education, the gender analysis here is weaker than the language of human rights instruments and does not engage with the connections between women's health, women's autonomy and sexuality. Indeed, in both this section and the chapter on HIV-AIDS, the drafters of

the White Paper seem to go to unusual lengths to avoid an analysis of the influence of inequality of gender relations in the sexual sphere. While there is some recognition of the connections between discrimination against women in health and discrimination in other social and economic spheres, the increased burden of care of HIV-AIDS sufferers on women, for example, is not contextualised as an aspect of discrimination, as it is in the BPfA<sup>29</sup> or CEDAW.<sup>30</sup> Nor is the vulnerability of women to infection problematised in terms of the unequal gender power relations, particularly as it affects women's capacity to negotiate safe sex. In fact, there is no reference to sexual relations in the context of HIV-AIDS at all, apart from the extraordinarily evasive phrase "the nature of the primary means of transmission makes preventive interventions sensitive".<sup>31</sup>

Further references to gender occur in the environment chapter, including one that relates to the burden of carrying water for women and children. However, there is no reference, for example, to women's role in the management and safeguarding of water, again, in stark contrast with the BPfA.<sup>32</sup> The section on rural development and agriculture calls for "careful, equitable and well-managed land reform", but the way it frames the issue of inequality of ownership of land between women and men as an aspect of many cultures is arguably at variance with its description in the chapter on human rights and development.

## **Is the White Paper transformative or integrationist?**

The omission of references to gender equality in virtually all of the White Paper, with the exception of those sections discussed above, raises serious concerns. There is no specific reference in the following chapters: preventing and responding to humanitarian disasters; building better government and combating corruption; peace, security and development; trade and development; partnership; coherence; making aid work; Irish Aid and the Irish public; management of the programme. Although the White Paper is governed as a whole by the guiding principles set out at the beginning, with the overarching mainstreaming strategy regarding the crosscutting issues, there is a striking absence of any discussion of gender equality in the areas that deal most directly with foreign policy, macroeconomic policy, and governance. An "agenda setting" approach to gender

mainstreaming would make gender equality and women's empowerment concerns visible, addressing each substantively.

In the White Paper this apparent reduction of the political project of gender and development to what Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay calls a "technical fix" renders it "ahistorical, apolitical and decontextualised" and crucially, leaves prevailing power relations intact.<sup>33</sup> Just as the analysis of gender power relations is neglected as gender equality policy is translated into development cooperation programmes, the power relationships between North and South in the context of globalisation are generally entirely ignored in development cooperation conceptualisations of gender and gender equality. The global trend towards freeing up trade and other economic relations between countries, driven by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), has now become the most dominant and pervasive global economic model. Macro-economic policy and trade policy, as a significant component thereof, are assumed by policymakers to be gender neutral, but feminist economists, such as Diane Elson and Mariama Williams, have shown that trade policy is based on assumptions about women's and men's work and lives. Without recognition of the existing inequalities and inequities, many women's opportunities to benefit from trade policy and other economic policy will be limited, and those policies will simply reinforce existing inequalities.<sup>34</sup> In the context of the dominant economic model of neoliberalism which deepens social and economic inequality and reinforces marginalisation, gender equality cannot be advanced. The processes whereby governments compromise the interests of citizens in order to accommodate global forces diminishes and undermines development priorities, even when they appear to be rooted in a firm gender, human rights and poverty eradication framework.<sup>35</sup>

For feminist activists and development organisations, the complex, fluid and sometimes contradictory nature of a politicised discourse of gender equality and the language and institutional culture within which development interventions are planned and evaluated bring challenges, particularly in terms of finding appropriate forms of engagement with development policymakers. If we accept that development policy tends to depoliticise gender into an instrumentalist approach, rather than being framed in terms of radical social change, it is still by no means a given even that more diluted versions of gender mainstreaming will actually be implemented. Many critics have pointed to the tendency towards policy evaporation, as operational change and resource allocation lag behind paper

commitments.<sup>36</sup> In their 2005 study of 14 international development institutions, Annelise Moser and Caroline Moser found that implementation of gender mainstreaming is widely considered inconsistent, incoherent and “patchy” in the organisations they studied. Disjunctions between head office policy and field office operational practice are widespread and are attributed to organisational culture, lack of capacity, lack of understanding of mainstreaming, as well as resistance to the gender equality agenda.<sup>37</sup> Gender equality policies can founder because of lack of accountability, difficulties in obtaining sex-disaggregated data, a dearth of mechanisms that can effectively track the relative contributions of projects to gender equality goals, and the extraordinary complexity involved in measuring the intangibles that are at the root of social change, including change in attitudes, change in community norms and changes in power and status.<sup>38</sup> In this context, mainstreaming can become an end in itself – a top-down bureaucratic imperative, rather than the bottom-up mobilisation aimed at meeting women’s “strategic gender needs”.<sup>39</sup>

In summary, the gender mainstreaming approach adopted by Irish Aid is a promising but highly problematic framework for the advancement of gender equality through development cooperation. A major concern of feminist critics is the tendency to translate policy commitments on transforming gender relations into integrationist strategies. The prevalence of such strategies risks the depoliticisation of gender equality through a focus on negative impacts of poverty on women and a lack of analysis of gender discrimination and unequal power relations. The depoliticising tendency of a bureaucratic gender mainstreaming approach has drawn attention from feminist critics, such as Andrea Cornwall and Aruna Rao, who have highlighted the contradictions that arise when gender mainstreaming is extracted from the explicitly feminist political discourse from which it emerged and grafted into the frameworks of development policy. Feminist critics caution that when gender mainstreaming is presented in terms of approaches, tools, frameworks and mechanisms that are divorced from political context, these instruments can become a substitute for deep changes in objectives and outcomes.<sup>40</sup> At a practical level, there needs to be a commitment to the development of tools, frameworks, indicators and monitoring strategies for measuring the impact of gender mainstreaming on gender equality; a commitment to the collection of gender disaggregated data; and systems of accountability for gender equality work –

accountability both “upwards” to policymakers and “downwards” to Southern partners and beneficiaries and to civil society.

## Conclusion

While there are clear limitations to what can be deduced from a study of official policy, taken as a whole, the White Paper’s approach to gender gives grounds for optimism regarding the commitment of Irish Aid to promoting gender equality. However, its omissions and contradictions mean that one cannot be complacent regarding implementation. Rather than viewing the White Paper as indicating a retreat from the transformative conceptualisation of gender equality and the institutional commitment to gender mainstreaming outlined in the Gender Equality Policy, however, it is more useful to view the tensions and contradictions outlined above as opportunities for critical dialogue to promote the continued development of a transformative vision of gender equality into Irish Aid’s gender mainstreaming strategy.

The Gender Equality Policy was launched in 2004 as a three-year policy, but the action plan promised – which is central to the implementation of the policy – has not been published. Without an action plan, it is unclear what the indicators of success are and which evaluation frameworks and mechanisms are in place. The development of a plan within a renewed timeframe would advance the long-term project of implementation of the policy and provide a space for policy dialogue between Irish Aid, development NGOs and Irish Aid’s partners in the South. It is surely significant that the most challenging references to gender in the White Paper are in relation to GBV, where a dynamic group of NGOs, including Amnesty International, have come together with Irish Aid and former UN Commissioner for Human Rights and former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, in order to take leadership in defining innovative and proactive responses to a key aspect of gender inequality. These responses are backed by strong institutional support and grounded in conceptual clarity based on a process of research and reflection. It is critical therefore that the White Paper’s commitment to allocate more resources to women’s organisations in the South is not limited to organisations engaged in service provision, but that resources are directed to those organisations which challenge power relations and promote the participation of women in all areas of political, social and economic life.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the advice and insightful comments of colleagues in Banúlacht and WIDE (Network Women in Development Europe) in preparing this article: Brita Neuhold, Eileen Smith, Eilish Dillon, Helen O'Connell, Martha Salazar, Patricia Muñoz, Zohra Khan and of Mary Rusimbi, Tanzania Gender Networking Programme.
- <sup>2</sup> Irish Aid manages the Irish government's overseas development cooperation programme whose objective is to reduce poverty, inequality and exclusion in developing countries. A copy of the White Paper on Irish Aid (2006) as well as the Gender Equality Policy, are available from Irish Aid, Department of Foreign Affairs, Bishop's Square, Redmond Hill, Dublin 2 or can be downloaded from [www.irishaid.gov.ie/whitepaper](http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/whitepaper).
- <sup>3</sup> White Paper, p.9
- <sup>4</sup> The UK Gender and Development Network carried out such a research project in 2003 and I have drawn on the report for this article: MacDonald (2003).
- <sup>5</sup> White Paper, p.62.
- <sup>6</sup> Madden and Dillon (2004), p.2
- <sup>7</sup> MacDonald (2003)
- <sup>8</sup> See generally Barton and Prendergast (eds., 2004) and Painter, G. (2005)
- <sup>9</sup> MacDonald (2003), p.13
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.; Moser and Moser (2004)
- <sup>11</sup> Moser and Moser (2004), p.14
- <sup>12</sup> MacDonald (2003), p.13
- <sup>13</sup> Molyneux and Razavi (2006), p.15
- <sup>14</sup> Sever, Charlie (2005); [www.irishaid.gov.ie/article.asp?article=599](http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/article.asp?article=599)
- <sup>15</sup> Rao (2006), p.4
- <sup>16</sup> Development Cooperation Ireland (2004), p 4
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.14
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.8
- <sup>19</sup> Irish Aid (2006), p.9
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.13
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.15
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.61
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.62
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.117
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.62
- <sup>27</sup> *Beijing Platform for Action* (1996), Critical Area of Concern B, Women and Education and Training, notably paragraph 70
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp 47-56
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., paragraphs 93 and 98
- <sup>30</sup> Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, Preamble, and Article 5
- <sup>31</sup> Irish Aid (2006), p.48
- <sup>32</sup> *Beijing Platform for Action* (1996), paragraphs 249, 250 and 251
- <sup>33</sup> Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay quoted in Cornwall (2004), pp. 1325-42
- <sup>34</sup> Madden and Dillon (2004), p.6
- <sup>35</sup> Molyneux and Razavi (2006), p.20; Madden and Dillon (2004), p.6

- <sup>36</sup> See generally, Moser and Moser (2004), MacDonald (2003) and Rao (2006)
- <sup>37</sup> Moser and Moser (2004), p.15
- <sup>38</sup> Rao (2006), p.2; Moser and Moser (2004), p.18
- <sup>39</sup> Madden and Dillon (2004), p.2
- <sup>40</sup> MacDonald (2003)

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## Abbreviations

BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action (1995)
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination
DCI	Development Cooperation Ireland (now Irish Aid)
GBV	Gender based violence
GEP	Gender Equality Policy
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development