Gendered assumptions, institutional disconnections and democratic deficits: The case of European Union development policy towards Liberia

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Introduction

Gender mainstreaming in European Union development policy

Since the United Nations Beijing Conference of 1995, the European Union (EU) has made high-level political commitments to mainstreaming gender in its development policy across many countries. In a ground-breaking resolution of late 1995 the EU Council of Ministers first declared the integration of a gender perspective into development co-operation as a crucial principle underpinning the development policy of the Community and the Member States (European Council, 1995). This was followed by a string of high-level policy documents on integrating gender equality in development, including a 1998 ‘Regulation on Integrating Gender Issues in Development Co-operation’ (European Council, 1998). In 2001 the Commission published its ‘Programme of Action for the Mainstreaming of Gender Equality in Community Development Cooperation’ which stipulates the use of a dual-track strategy to achieve gender equality. This strategy implies that ‘the EC is committed to including gender equality goals in the mainstream of EC development co-operation policies, programmes and projects’ (gender mainstreaming), while ‘concrete actions targeting women (specific actions)’ reinforce these processes (European Commission, 2001: 8–13).

The 2004 ‘Regulation on Promoting Gender Equality in Development Cooperation’ updated the earlier arrangements and reconfirmed the dual-track strategy towards gender equality (European Parliament and Council, 2004). The 2006 European Consensus on Development, jointly accepted by the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission, includes forceful language on gender equality, intended to guide the actions of both the European Community and its member states (European Union, 2006). More recently, the 2007 ‘Communication on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Development Cooperation’ aims to increase the efficiency of gender mainstreaming, as well as to refocus specific actions for women’s empowerment, providing forty-one concrete suggestions in the areas of governance, employment, education, health and domestic violence (European Commission, 2007). The 2010 Staff Working Document ‘EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Development’ implements...
the 2007 Communication but replaces the dual-track strategy with a ‘three-pronged approach’ consisting of gender mainstreaming, specific actions, and political and policy dialogue which aims to place gender equality more systematically on the political dialogue agenda with partner countries (European Commission, 2010: 7). Guided by these significant political commitments to gender equality, the EU external services are expected to institutionalise mainstreaming methodologies and gender equality principles across their policy and operational activities.

Although much has been achieved with respect to developing gender equality norms and fostering their adoption in EU political commitments to incorporating gender factors in external policy, several problems remain in practice. Internal and external evaluations of gender equality policies in EU development aid point to significant obstacles: these include a lack of gender expertise, training and awareness, insufficient resources for implementation, an overwhelming gender imbalance at high level positions within the external DGs, and a general lack of commitment by European Commission Headquarters officials and the field delegations (European Commission, 2003; Painter & Ulmer, 2002). Feminist research to date suggests that the impact of gender mainstreaming in international organisations depends largely on 1) the characteristics of the policy issue or regime area, 2) the nature of the institution’s governance and 3) the existence of networks among officials or gender specialists (insiders) and women’s organisations or advocates (outsiders) (True, 2010: 194; Woodward, 2003).

The EU development policy regime presents a less transformative example of gender mainstreaming (Allwood, 2013; Debusscher, 2010, 2011, 2012; Lister and Carbone, 2006). This issue area has a ‘non-urgent character’ insofar as it ‘raises issues of structural rather than direct violence and responds to ... inequality in foreign countries’ (True, 2010: 195). As regards the second aspect, the European development institutions are complex and numerous, operating at different levels (European and partner country) and involving both design and the financing of development policy and projects. On the one hand, involvement by the Brussels-based headquarters includes the European External Action Service (previously the Commission’s External Relations Directorate General, DG RELEX) and the Commission’s Directorate-General Development and Cooperation–EuropeAid (previously DG Development and DG AIDCO). On the other hand, there are over 130 EU Delegations and offices around the world consisting of permanent diplomatic EU staff in the partner countries. The EU Delegations play a key role2 in the implementation of external assistance, serving as the main entry points for institutionalising gender within European development aid. On this front, the picture is mixed: even though European development institutions encourage the participation from civil society actors, gender mainstreaming has generally conformed to a technocratic model where bureaucrats are the main actors, relatively disconnected from women’s activism in civil society (Daly, 2005). However, participation by women (or of their organisations) to shape the objectives, priorities and strategies of the development interventions affecting them, is crucial for women’s empowerment (Debusscher & van der Vleuten, 2012; Jahan, 1995; Krizsan and Lombardo, 2013). Empirical research has moreover shown that policies developed with the participation of civil society and women’s organisations contribute to better quality, insofar as they help to frame policy content in more transformative ways (Krizsan and Lombardo, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of this article is to examine the institutionalisation of gender in EU development policy by analysing the practice of gender mainstreaming in EU development aid towards Liberia from 2008 to 2013. The study draws on the ‘feminist institutionalist turn’ which allows to gender new institutionalist theory (Kenny, 2007; Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). Feminist approaches to institutionalism consider the existence of asymmetrical institutional power relations and the interplay between formal rules and informal norms and practices, understand institutional change, stability or inertia as driven by ‘gendered processes from within and without’ and consider actors as having agency, albeit bounded by various (institutional and gender) constraints (Kenny, 2007; Mackay et al., 2010: 584). In order to investigate the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming, I first examine the extent to which gender has been included in the policy formulation and implementation processes of EU aid towards Liberia. Next I assess the degree of gender mainstreaming implementation in this particular case by analysing the nature of ‘institutional inputs’ (Moser & Moser, 2005: 16), along with the existence of networks and partnerships with the EU Delegation in Liberia. Drawing on Van Eerdewijk, 2009 and Moser & Moser, 2005 I explore key questions that are pertinent for evaluating gender mainstreaming. The components most relevant for institutionalisation in the Liberian case are the following:

1. **The level of policy formulation and implementation**: How are overall organisational objectives regarding gender equality translated into operational policy during the stages of formulation and implementation? Are specific measurement indicators provided going beyond general guidelines?

2. **Institutional inputs**: Who is actually responsible for the implementation of the gender mainstreaming policy? How are staff competences assured? What role does training play? How gender-equal is the larger organisation? Is there internal support for or resistance to the idea of gender equality?

3. **Networks, partners and participation**: Is the organisation working with other formal entities, such as government agencies, donors or private sector NGOs, to strengthen gender equality initiatives? Are women’s organisations represented, consulted and possibly strengthened?

These variables form the backbone of the mapping study. Data gathering included the collection of EU policy documents and reports, as well as 22 semi-structured elite-interviews conducted in Brussels and Liberia. Each interview took approximately 80 min. Two interviews took place at the European Commission Headquarters in Brussels in January 2010 and twenty in greater Monrovia district from June 20th to July 8th 2011. Two interviewees are representatives of the European Commission’s DG Development and DG External Relations, two work at the EU Delegation to Liberia, two interviewees are officials at the National Authorising Office in Monrovia, two are...
representing EU member states in Liberia, two interviewees are UN representatives working as gender experts in Liberia, and 12 interviews were conducted with representatives of major civil society organisations working on gender equality. Before I delve into the analysis of EU aid towards Liberia I will briefly sketch the Liberian context from a gender perspective. Next I will link the theoretical concerns about levels of policy formulation and implementation to the case of EU aid towards Liberia, particularly with regard to education and health initiatives. I then consider the importance of institutional inputs, such as training in reconfiguring organisational culture. Finally I assess the impact of networks on the level of policy implementation and reflect conceptually on how gender is being mainstreamed in EU development policy.

**Liberia’s recent history from a gender perspective**

Liberia, a small West African country, experienced a brutal civil war between 1989 and 2003 involving ‘near statelessness, horrific warfare and warlord terrorism’ (Moran, 2009: 1). After 14 years of conflict Liberia was left with a devastated economy, infrastructure and institutions and – not in the least – a gravely traumatised population. However, without downplaying the harsh material realities and dramatic demographic changes, several Liberian activists have reported that the ‘war has helped for gender equality’, as women took up new roles varying from ‘becoming breadwinners and carrying the family’ over combatants to peace activists and negotiators. The Liberian conflict seems to have generated a remarkable level of collective female activism both during and after the war. Despite being victim of grave and systematic gender-based crimes, women found ways to organise themselves and advocate for peace with ‘an extraordinary level of persistent determination’ (Fuest, 2008).

Several authors agree that women’s tireless activism has been invaluable in the peace process and in bringing an end to Liberia’s war (Fuest, 2008; Kellow, 2010). In the post-conflict period, women’s organisations came again to the forefront, leading a mass awareness-raising campaign to promote nationwide voter registration and encourage women’s participation in all aspects of the first elections after the war. When Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected Africa’s first female president in 2005 her election was seen as ‘a display of solidarity among women voters in the presidential run-off vote’ (Kellow, 2010: 11), as well as a major victory for gender equality in Liberia. In her inauguration speech Johnson-Sirleaf expressed her ‘passion and commitment to gender equity’ and pledged to ‘empower Liberian women in all areas of ... national life’ (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2006). Despite this, observers have put forward serious concerns about the government’s ability to create ‘substantial, tangible, ... and sustained development for the majority of Liberian women’ (Massaquoi, 2007: 7), as the government operates in a male-dominated arena with a high degree of resistance against a more gender equal society. While one third of Johnson-Sirleaf’s cabinet is female, the legislature and the judiciary are still predominantly male and strongly resist a decrease in male power. At the national level, legal reforms meant to support gender equality are being ignored in practice and a lack of support by authorities at the local level has often been noted (Fuest, 2008).

Although women comprise 54% of the labour force in both formal and informal sectors they are ‘disproportionately clustered in the least productive sectors’, with 90% employed ‘in the informal sector or agriculture’. Their predominance in the informal economy translates into low earnings and ‘exposure to exploitation’. Illiteracy rates among women aged between 15 and 49 years old are particularly high: 60% compared to 30% male illiteracy and up to 42% of Liberian women have never attended school compared to 18% of men. Furthermore maternal mortality in Liberia is ‘one of the highest in the world’. In general the ‘health needs in Liberia are significant with limited access to health care facilities.’ Women are in a particularly susceptible situation in this respect as they more often than men ‘lack means of sustainable livelihoods, employment skills and suffer from higher rates of malnutrition.’ In addition, women are exposed to gender based violence, sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS. Following the end of the conflict, sexual violence has remained a serious and on-going problem (Government of Liberia and the United Nations, 2013). In this setting – if gender equality policies are to move forward – the government needs to be backed by committed international partners as well as by active and strong ‘women’s groups in Liberia to mobilise on issues that affect them’ (AWID, 2006).

Prerequisites for a strong movement are sufficient funding as well as ‘open channels of communication’ between civil society groups, the government and donors (AWID, 2006). In other words to capitalise on the opportunities that have been created by the post-conflict setting and the election of a committed female president, an active women’s movement to push gender policies forward is crucial.

**Level of policy formulation and implementation**

Throughout the civil war, the EU was the only donor which maintained its presence in Liberia through a small office. In 2009 the Monrovia office was upgraded to a fully-fledged EU Delegation, including increased staffing (European External Action Service, 2013). Currently, the EU’s development cooperation with Liberia falls under the 10th European Development Fund 2008–2013. The overall amount for that period is 150 million euro. Given the post-conflict situation in Liberia, the EU decided to focus mainly on rehabilitation (i.e. restoring the physical infrastructure and the provision of social services) and governance as key areas for assistance, for 104.8 and 150 million euro respectively. An amount of 5 million euro was committed to the non-focal sectors focused on strengthening the capacity of the National Authorising Office (the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs) and non-state actors/civil society. Finally, an amount of 20.2 million was committed to general budget support. The funding for rehabilitation encompasses basic health, education services, water provision, electricity and transportation: here the general objective is to combat poverty and facilitate economic activities.

The inclusion of gender issues in the programming of EU aid towards Liberia for the period 2008 to 2013 seemed to be promising at first sight. Gender was integrated into the rehabilitation sector from the start: the 2007 Country Strategy Paper’s response strategy explicitly stated that ‘the programme will target in particular vulnerable or marginalised groups (women, children, minorities/excluded groups, the disabled) and facilitate their participation in the identification, planning and implementation of activities.’ (Republic of Liberia – European Community, 2007: 29) The governance sector likewise included gender, declaring in the response strategy...
that ‘[g]ender approaches and those favouring children and minority/indigenous groups’ rights will focus on assisting their greater presence in the administration and in their participation in public affairs’ (Republic of Liberia — European Community, 2007: 31). The EU further insisted that ‘[a]ll efforts will be made throughout the EC’s work to promote anti-discrimination approaches and policies’. The National Indicative Programme 10 makes the outlined commitments concrete by specifying a budget and by outlining seven detailed, and specific measurement indicators on gender equality (see Table 1). However, only performance indicators connected to education (three gender indicators) and health (four indicators) had been outlined by 2007. Regarding other basic infrastructure factors (including water provision, electricity and transportation) in the NIP, gender seems to have evaporated. Neither was women’s water provision, electricity and transportation) in the NIP,

During my visit to the EU Delegation in Monrovia from June 20th to July 8th 2011 I learned through interviews that gender sensitive planning does not automatically translate into the integration of gender equality measures in development practice. In practice gender had only been mainstreamed in the health sector.

The education programme, by contrast faced a significant delay due to staff constraints which caused the programme to start two years after the normal deadline. When the EU Delegation then renegotiated the planned objectives of the education programme with both the Ministry of Education and with the Technical Assistance Agency (responsible for the implementation) the restricted timing caused the two key gender indicators to be abandoned, namely, male/female enrolment ratio of total enrolment, and educational outputs at the primary and secondary levels (disaggregated by gender). The indicator involving the increased ratio of women/men teachers in professional training organised by the EU was initially kept, however.

The professional training provided by the EU and implemented by the University Of Liberia and Cuttington University Corporation, targeted more than 9000 primary teachers who had been instructing without a teaching certificate and ran from March 2010 to May 2011. At the end of the EU training programme participants could obtain a so-called ‘C-certificate for primary education’ which also allows a teacher to receive a higher salary. As a result of the 14 year civil war, most of the teachers are not trained, so it is assumed that teacher trainings will enhance the quality of education and introduce established pedagogical teaching methods in Liberia. A significant majority of primary school teachers are male: 71% men versus 29% women (Government of Liberia, 2008: 47). Given the gender imbalance in the profession, one core EU objective was to attract women for this training — although no special measures were taken to ensure that women would be encouraged to participate.

The intensive training programme took place in several counties 12 during school holidays in July and August, as well as on the weekends after the summer; the programme ended with a one week class in December followed by a final exam. As most participants had to travel far distances to participate in the trainings, accommodation and food was provided during the training programme. When the training programme started it was noted that not a single woman had enrolled in the training programme. An informal survey revealed that their non-participation was due to two reasons. The first issue was the inappropriate nature of the accommodations: There were no separate sleeping rooms or sanitary facilities for men and women. As one Liberian activist commented: ‘not a single woman will willingly spend the night in the same room with men she does not know’ given the ‘extremely high rate of sexual violence’ in Liberia 13. Although in theory the training programme supposed to enable men and women to participate equally, women were excluded in practice from participating, to the extent that the programme design per se excluded any consideration for their basic human need for safety. Although the EU then moved to supply accommodations with separate toilets and sleeping rooms, ‘it was still difficult to attract females’, 14 owing to a second concern that should have been tackled. Women in Liberia are still mainly responsible for housework and caring for children and elderly: thus, the price to be paid by a female teacher for participating in an intensive training programme is inevitably much higher than for a male teacher who does not have to find child care facilities to cover several weeks and weekends while he is away. Although supplying higher per diem fees for female participants with children or offering on-site childcare could have remedied this situation, this was ‘not considered a priority’ at the time. 15 The final result was that only 15% of the participants of each training were female — which is not even half of the target group (29% female primary teachers at the national level).

### Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Intervention logic</th>
<th>Objectively verifiable indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Maternal mortality ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reduce poverty by improving the health status of the population through more effective, efficient and equitable healthcare</td>
<td>Maternal mortality ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To expand access to basic healthcare of acceptable quality; to support restructuring, rationalisation, development of human resources and management capacity of the public health system</td>
<td>Contraceptive prevalence rate; coverage of deliveries assisted by skilled staff/by county and level of care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased women’s participation at management level and gender equity in employment of health workers</td>
<td>Gender guidelines in place; % of positions occupied by women, including management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Total enrolment, male/female enrolment ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reduce poverty by improving the education status of the population through more effective, efficient and equitable access to education</td>
<td>Total enrolment, male/female enrolment ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To expand access to primary and secondary education of an acceptable quality</td>
<td>Educational outputs at the primary and secondary levels, by gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased ratio of women/men teachers</td>
<td>Guidelines to encourage women into the profession</td>
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EU initiatives in the health sector, starting in the second half of 2008 with the financial planning, however, did contain a strong gender component. This programme aimed at providing a free basic health package for all and was divided into six components. One of the six components covered aspects regarding sexual and reproductive health. This included care during pregnancy and delivery, post-natal care for mother and child, and significantly, staff training on gender based violation. It was argued by the EU Delegation programme officer that health centres are an important entry point for dealing with cases on gender based violence. The latter accounts for a somehow more holistic definition of sexual and reproductive health. The programme was mainly implemented by the international non-governmental organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). According to the EU project manager, the fact that gender was mainstreamed in the health sector should really be credited 'Médecins Sans Frontières' representatives who actively lobbied the Ministry of Health to include sexual and reproductive health in the basic package for health services. The gender indicator in relation to employment among health workers ‘solved itself’\textsuperscript{16}; indeed, it turned out to be a useless indicator, insofar as 60 to 70\% of the nursing school students are women, thus the targets were automatically met. Apart from the sexual and reproductive health component and the indicator on health workers, the health programme did not include gender aspects. As (access to) health is a gendered issue in Liberia (e.g. the higher rate of malnutrition among women) this seems to be a missed opportunity. The case of Liberia shows that gender mainstreaming takes place only when it requires no additional commitment of financial resources, or when it is pushed by external implementers.

Institutional inputs

In 2004 DEVCO (at that time called AIDCO) started a process of systematic capacity building on gender mainstreaming in development cooperation, implemented by the ILO International Training Centre which offered gender training and technical assistance to the staff in the delegations and headquarters as the ‘EC Gender Help Desk’ within the framework of the project ‘Methodological Support (Manual) and Training on Gender Mainstreaming’ (2004–6) (Debusscher and True, 2009; Train4Dev Gender Expert Group, 2011). After a year of interruption, DEVCO signed a contract with consultancy firm ‘Particip GmbH’, to offer training and assistance resulting in the ‘EU Gender Advisory Services’ (2008–2010). In 2011 ‘a slimmed down version’ of the Gender Advisory Services with one part-time gender expert kept an annual gender training programme on track (Train4Dev Gender Expert Group, 2011: 8). In 2012 consultancy firm ‘AETS’ was contracted for the project ‘EU Gender Advisory Services 2012’ to provide training and methodological support (DEVCO and EU Gender Advisory Service, 2012). The team is composed of two senior and one junior experts. From 2004 to 2012 DG DEVCO has trained over 2000 persons on gender topics. Knowing that the EU external services have about 7500 staff members (3900 in DG Development and Cooperation and 3600 in the European External Action Service, of which 2060 in country delegations), the number is impressive and looks promising. However a significant part of the trained EU staff were contract agents with temporary assignments who have left the EU institutions (Train4Dev Gender Expert Group, 2011). Also some authors have questioned whether temporary contracts with outside consultants are a sustainable mechanism for mainstreaming gender at every level and across all EU policies and operations externally (Debusscher and True, 2009).

Although in principle all staff members share the responsibility for gender mainstreaming, in practice, effective implementation remains still highly dependent on the skill, commitment and time invested by individual staff members. At the EU Delegation level, this is more often than not the charge of the ‘gender focal person’ (GFP) defined as ‘a member who is responsible for facilitating the promotion of women’s empowerment and gender equality issues in the activities of the Delegation’ (EU Gender Advisory Services, 2010). The expertise-sharing network for EU gender focal persons in the Delegations was (re-)established in 2007 by the European Commission and consists of gender focal persons of the EU Delegations as well as representatives from all DGs dealing with external relations. In response to the European Commission’s request 66 EU Delegations in partner countries nominated a GFP that year. The GFP position in the EU Delegations has been more or less voluntary, involving tasks performed on top of the staff member’s main duties. In the past four years, however, the EU officials in Brussels have pushed the EU Delegations to formalise the GFP role and these tasks are now supposed to be included in the job description. The EU Delegation to Liberia (consisting at that time of only a three-person Office) was among the group of early adopters and then-Head of Office, Jeremy Tunacliff, himself actively assumed the GFP responsibilities in 2007, including participation in the Gender Focal Persons Network.\textsuperscript{17} In 2010 this position was taken up by a new staff member who had previously worked in the EU Delegation in Sierra Leone, where she also served as the GFP.

At the EU Delegation in Liberia, the Gender Focal Person performs her role in addition to her chief responsibilities in the governance sector; those tasks included general institutional capacity building, human rights and ‘whatever that doesn’t fall under the specific competence of colleagues’. Despite having had extensive experience as a GFP in Sierra Leone, she admits that now ‘it’s just a minimum amount of my time.’\textsuperscript{18} It is ‘very difficult to act’ on the issue of gender equality as there is no real allocation of time and the hierarchy seems ‘not always very aware of the time that the position implies’.\textsuperscript{19} She stressed that ‘it is not just the willingness of the hierarchy’, but also the availability of staff and funding (or lack thereof) at the Delegation that is problematic.\textsuperscript{20} Given the small size of the delegation in Liberia, with a limited staff of 14 persons, both the gender focal person as well as the non-gender staff are under considerable time pressure.

In 2010 a three-day training programme focusing on ‘Liberia and EU working together on gender equality’, was organised in Monrovia. The Head of the Delegation had pushed the Gender Focal Person to apply for this training opportunity offered by Brussels. Although initially intended for all delegation staff, due to the limited staff capacity, only three staff members could complete the full training, to ensure continuity regarding the Delegation’s daily responsibilities. The training was attended by Liberian government officials, civil society representatives and donor organisations. The aim was to offer
gender mainstreaming training on the one hand and to examine how the EU could better work together with Liberian officials and stakeholders on gender equality on the other hand. The training resulted in a report including several useful suggestions for actions, such as conducting gender impact assessments of EU-funded projects or creating a Gender Coordination Group with the other EU member states operating in Liberia. Unfortunately, no action occurred after the training, since there was ‘no time or human resources’ to follow up.21

As Mazey argues ‘a necessary condition for effective gender mainstreaming is the participation of women at senior levels of the decision-making process’ (Mazey, 2002: 234). Because the responsibility for mainstreaming gender in EU development co-operation ultimately rests with senior management, the extent to which the management team itself is gender balanced is integral to gender mainstreaming strategy. Gender balance in decision-making has long been one of the EU’s guiding policy commitments, as stressed in the 2007 Communication and prior Regulations on gender and development co-operation. Gender imbalances in senior policymaking positions among the European institutions are widespread, especially in those institutions focusing on external rather than internal policies (Debusscher & True, 2009). The gender imbalance is particularly obvious among the staff compromising the EU Delegations abroad.

Although the situation in Liberia is better than seen in most EU Delegations, a gender imbalance persists: 33% are females, 67% are males among both senior and general staff. While the mere presence of women in high-level policy-making positions will not guarantee that gender-specific development concerns will be addressed, if the EU has difficulties implementing gender balance internally then the global diffusion of its gender equality norms will be hampered. If the EU is not ‘leading by example’, then its legitimacy as a gender power is open to question (Debusscher & True, 2009).

Networks, partners and participation

The EU’s GFP in Liberia is a member of the EU’s Gender Focal Person Network which meets in Brussels every three years.22 In collaboration with this group, the GFP has a mandate to exchange relevant experiences, information and documentation. An online platform allows the gender focal persons at the EU headquarters and the delegations to share good practices and to liaise with each other apart from trainings or workshops organised in Brussels. During 2010 and 2011 three training courses were organised for the gender focal persons network and other headquarters staff. They focused on gender mainstreaming in development cooperation, gender equality in policy and political dialogue, and on the way in which GFPs can contribute to the implementation of the EU’s Gender Action Plan. Although this network has the potential to build expertise, as well as to devise and implement gender-equal development policies and programmes in dispersed and localised development contexts, Liberia’s GFP indicated that she has ‘no time to participate in discussions, contribute with papers or distribute information’.23

One of the specific objectives of the 2010 Gender Action Plan is to ‘strengthen the lead role of the EU in promoting gender equality in development’ by increasing ‘coordination and coherence between the Commission and the Member State, as well as with other donors, actors and organisations’ (European Commission, 2010: 5–6). As stipulated in the Commission’s Staff Working Document this would imply that ‘an EU donor is appointed as gender lead donor in each partner country for the period 2010–2015’ and that three ‘Member States are associated to jointly work on gender’ (European Commission, 2012: 5). In line with this request from the Headquarters, in 2011 the EU Delegation in Liberia indicated it would like to invite the Swedish or Danish delegation in Liberia to become lead donor on gender accompanied by the EU and two or three associated Member States to jointly work on the topic. As of 2012 nothing seems to have materialised (European Commission, 2012). The EU Delegation further indicated it wanted to start a partnership with UNWomen as they could provide expertise on gender mainstreaming budget support in the next EU Country Strategy Paper 2014–2019. The planned collaboration that will take place in the context of EU aid towards Liberia is thus elite-focussed and includes established donors only.

With respect to the participation of civil society groups in the drafting of the aid programmes, the 2007 EU programming documentation explicitly states in its aid programming that its activities will ensure women’s particular needs ‘through consultation, and participation in decision-making, implementation and monitoring of projects and policies’ (Republic of Liberia – European Community, 2007: 32). The 2007 programming document mentioned that civil society organisations had been integrated in the CSP drafting process through several meetings in Liberia in 2006. However at the EU Delegation level, only contacts with international non-governmental NGOs were mentioned. Indeed, of the twelve Liberian nongovernmental organisations interviewed none had been involved in 2006 in the drafting of the CSP for 2007–2013. In the preparation for the new generation CSP/NIP (2014–2019) one gender advocate of Mano River Women’s Peace Network and one of ECOWAS Women in Liberia have been included in meetings with the National Authorising Office of the Liberian government to prepare the new programming phase of EU aid and identify how they can ‘play an active role in the new CSP’.24 For the next generation it seems that these two established women’s organisations will be part of the CSP consultation process through the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs. One major advocate of one of these organisations underlined the importance of being included in the next CSP but regretted not having been brought into the previous CSP. She explicitly criticised the fact that the EU has conducted its work exclusively by dealing with the government, consultancy firms or international NGO’s and that ‘civil society is being isolated’.25 Several other women’s organisations criticised the donor community, including the EU, for ‘not taking [their] expertise seriously’.26 It was put forward several times that ‘[t]here is no real ownership’ for civil society, ‘let alone accountability’.27

In 2013 the EU Delegation will start using thematic “local calls” (e.g. on Human Rights) for proposals to support non-governmental organisations. This could become a source of funding for specific gender-related projects. Almost all civil society advocates interviewed in Greater Monrovia District nonetheless indicated that applying for such funding is very
difficult due to the financial requirements and complex proposal writing criteria. To receive funding directly from bilateral donors seems to be ‘impossible’. This was confirmed by interviews with the EU Delegation and the Headquarters: due to the strict procedures in place only international non-governmental organisations usually succeed in accessing these funds. However as it is mandatory for international non-governmental organisations to go into an extended partnership with local organisations in all aspects of project management (preparation, design, implementation and reporting), it was argued at the EU Delegation that this allows for capacity building and could allow Liberian non-governmental organisations to apply for such funding in the future.

Conclusion

This article has investigated how gender is being institutionalised within EU development policy by assessing the extent to which gender factors have been included in policy formulation and implementation processes regarding European Union development aid towards Liberia. Field research shows that the EU’s gender equality objectives in development policy are, to a degree, being translated into EU aid programming to the extent that both governance and rehabilitation (including health, education, transport, infrastructure and water) initiatives have included a strong gender component. However, when it comes to the operationalisation and rendering measures more concrete, only the health and educational programmes have sought to include gender equality through the use of gender-sensitive indicators. Finally the case shows that gender dimensions tend to disappear even further during the implementation phase, for example, when gender indicators pertaining to education were abolished, because the EU Delegation in Liberia decided that gender equality was not a priority anymore when faced with time and budget constraints. Some gender-sensitive components concerning health initiatives were left intact, but only due to the active intervention of an external implementer (Médecins Sans Frontieres) or because they require no additional investment. The case of gender mainstreaming in EU aid towards Liberia thus reveals a significant policy evaporation during the policy process, as gender equality factors tend to be seriously watered down, or may evaporate entirely in planning and implementation.

But why is it that – almost two decades after Beijing – institutional redesign is still so difficult? Why is it the case that despite the inclusion of a strong gender component in the programming of EU aid, gender nearly disappears in development practice? The extant literature suggests that the failure or success of gender mainstreaming remains highly dependent on the nature of institutional inputs and governance, as well as on the existence of active networks among officials, gender specialists and women’s organisations (Moser & Moser, 2005; True, 2010; Woodward, 2003). Do these variables offer a credible explanation in this particular case?

The existence of gender networks (or lack thereof) seems to offer some explanation as to why gender mainstreaming has not been successful in relation to the EU Delegation in Liberia. First, the Delegation’s gender equality initiatives have been undertaken in relative isolation, since the Delegation does not support or take part actively in any (inter)national gender network. Second, the cooperation with other gender experts planned for the future focusses mainly on institutional and elite actors, such as officials from the United Nations or the Danish and Swedish Delegations. The important body of Liberian gender activists and experts seems to be largely neglected. As a result the European Commission seems to be missing out on the momentum for gender equality that was generated in the aftermath of the Liberian conflict.

The tendency to ignore Liberian civil society organisations is not without implications for the quality of gender mainstreaming, as illustrated by the failure to include women in the EU’s training programme for teachers. European conceptions of gender (in)equality risk losing touch with the lives and experiences of the stakeholders; they are clearly limited in their scope, focussing only on “traditional” domains like education and health. Concerning the impact of institutional inputs, the picture is mixed. Neither the relative support from the EU Delegation hierarchy, the availability of training or staff competence prevented gender factors from being ignored or eliminated during the actual implementation process.

If institutional inputs, such as expertise and training, are not a satisfactory explanation, what else is? A feminist institutionalist lens points us towards ‘the structure’, towards ‘the EU as a whole’ to better see the dynamics of gendered power (Kronsell, 2012: 23). Indeed, the largest stumbling block to putting gender sensitive policies into practice seems to be a broader institutional weakness. First of all, the case of EU aid towards Liberia has shown that there is significant disconnection between ‘formal and informal institutional environments’. While the highest formal – binding – EU rules are very clear that ‘equality between women and men’ is a core objective (Article 2, TEU), that has to be integrated into all aspects of its operations and policies (Amsterdam Treaty, Article 3.2 TEC), this is not matched by the informal norms and practices in the EU’s external services which tend to marginalise women (in decision making) and gender equality issues (in its policies). Feminist research has highlighted that the informal ‘rules of the game’ should be seen as institutions in itself, next to and in interaction with formal institutions. Informal mechanisms are thus equally important to understand processes of continuity and change and variable outcomes as they ‘shape institutional processes, developments and outcomes’ (Mackay et al., 2010: 581). An implicit rule of the game at EU Delegation level seems to be that when priorities clash – as was the case in the education programme – the gender equality norm is the first to lose out. There is thus an obvious clash between the formal institutional rules stipulating that gender should be mainstreamed in every policy and programme and the informal modus operandi in the EU Delegation in Liberia stipulating that if gender is mainstreamed, this should be in education and health. Moreover gender indicators are seen as an add-on that will be stripped the moment priorities clash or resources (time or money) are scarce. Previous research has shown that this is not a stand-alone case, but rather an informal institutionalised rule or mode of thinking in EU development policies (Debusscher, 2010, 2011, 2012; Debusscher & van der Vleuten, 2012; Lister and Carbone, 2006). The EU’s political and policymaking institutions working on external policies are indeed structured by gender assumptions (such as depicting governance as a male arena or linking equality only to education and health) which in turn reproduce social and
political expectations (e.g. the disconnect between women and governance).

These gendered assumptions and 'constructions of masculinity and femininity' shape 'ways of valuing things, ways of behaving and ways of being' as well as constrain 'the expression and articulation of marginalised perspectives'. In this particular case it is the view of Liberian gender activists that is constrained despite the formal rule that stipulates otherwise. At the level of the EU's external services are the organisational units and staff that work on gender equality specifically and women in general that are most commonly disadvantaged in the power play over which ideas matter and who accumulates institutional resources including money and decision-making positions (Mackay et al., 2010: 582). The difficulties are both illustrated and strengthened by the gender imbalance found among senior policymaking positions in the EU organs concentrating on external policies (Debusscher & True, 2009). The political will to address gender imbalances within the externally-oriented DGs does give an indication of the motivation for mainstreaming gender in the EU's external policies, while it also confirms a power imbalance between men and women. Although the EU Delegation in Liberia is in better shape than most Delegations, it too is plagued by a serious gender imbalance. In sum, viewing the EU's external policy through an institutionalist gender lens exposes a 'double democratic deficit' (Abels & Mushaben, 2012: 14) — one involving women's underrepresentation within the externally-oriented DGs and the other reflecting the marginalisation of gender issues in EU external policy.

Organisational structures have mainstreamed gender equality in a way that implies it is at the same time everyone's but ultimately no one's responsibility. Although competence and support do exist at the EU Delegation level, this staff is working in an institution that has not really taken gender equality on board (Painter & Ulmer, 2002). The Liberian case study thus shows that serious problems remain regarding the institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming of EU development aid at both EU headquarters and in country-specific delegations. The EU's external services need a more powerful gender structure within the hierarchy to increase gender responsibility and awareness among senior management abroad and in Brussels. This should be accompanied by tackling gender imbalances within the externally-oriented DGs, as the existing power imbalance between men and women render the EU's gender mainstreaming policy less credible. At the EU Delegation level, a transnational gender network should be set up, in order to formalise and intensify collaborations with Liberian gender activists. Otherwise, the EU's gender mainstreaming approach will continue to confirm existing hierarchies between established development players and national actors, between state and non-state actors, and ultimately between men and women.

Endnotes

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2 The role of the delegations has expanded greatly as a consequence of the devolution policy decided by the EC in 2000 and the delegations are now closely involved in programming and managing development programmes and projects directly from start to finish within the framework of rules set in Brussels. In principle they should also take the lead in on-the-spot coordination of the implementation of all EU assistance, multilateral and bilateral, to increase synergy and EU visibility. Depending on the country, the framework covers a range of areas from traditional development sectors such as education and health, to humanitarian assistance, support for democracy and human rights, mine clearance and reconstruction, institution and capacity building (European External Action Service, 2012).


4 The National Authorising Office (mostly located in the Ministry of Finance or Economic Affairs and Planning) represents the partner country government in all the operations financed through the European Development Fund.

5 In addition to the 22 interviews I conducted 14 more interviews in the district of Monrovia in the framework of a research project on the Liberian women’s movement (respondents included government officials or members of parliament, international nongovernmental organisations working on gender equality and Liberian gender advocates). Although these interviews were not directly used for the purpose of this article they helped to interpret the findings and sketch the broader context of EU aid towards Liberia.

6 Interview with Gloria Scott, Senator of the Liberian Legislative co-founder of the women’s organisation ‘Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia’, Monrovia, 30 June 2011.

7 Maternal mortality is estimated at 994 deaths per 100,000 births (DHS 2007/2008 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey).

8 The Commission adopted the 10th European Development Fund aid allocation criteria on 1 August 2007. The resulting aid allocations for the national indicative programmes were decided by the Commission on 30 October 2007. In total the 10th EDF has been allocated €22.682 billion. See: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/liberia/projects/overview/index_en.htm.

9 A Country Strategy Paper is a bilateral agreement between the EU and the government of the partner country. It consists of three parts: the country analysis, which depicts the social, political, economic, trade and environmental situation; the overview of past and on-going development aid; and the response strategy, which establishes the development priorities in order to tackle the problems described in the country analysis.

10 The National Indicative Programme makes the priorities from the Country Strategy Paper’s response strategy operational by outlining the specific programmes in selected focal and non-focal sectors and adds timetables, budgets and measurement indicators.

11 Interview with a Deputy National Authorising Officer/Programme Coordinator, Office of the National Authorising Officer in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, 20 June, 2011, Liberia, Monrovia.

12 Trainings took place in north central region Bong, Margibi, Bomi, Gbarpolu, Grand Cape Mount and Grand Bassa counties.

13 Interview with a civil society representative, Monrovia, 6 July 2011.
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