Gender Mainstreaming in Practice: A View from Rural Australia

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This article focuses on gender mainstreaming in practice using the example of agriculture departments in Australia. Gender mainstreaming is a policy initiative adopted internationally following the Beijing women's conference in 1995 to address gender inequality. The move represents a policy shift from a focus solely addressing women's disadvantage to a broader attention to gender inequality. This article provides an historical overview of the move toward gender mainstreaming in the international environment, as well as a theoretical critique. Using the Australian case example, the shift of attention from rural women to gender mainstreaming in Australian agricultural departments appears to be taking place with little understanding of the concept of gender mainstreaming or its goals. It is further argued that recent moves by government departments of agriculture toward gender mainstreaming may have disadvantaged women. This article argues that, while in theory mainstreaming is a more successful way of addressing gender inequality, in practice it risks reducing attention to women unless changes occur in departmental cultures and gender mainstreaming accountability measures are introduced at international and national levels.

Keywords: gender mainstreaming / rural women / Australia / policy

Around the world, gender mainstreaming has emerged as a key gender-equality strategy following the 1995 Beijing women's conference (see for example Kabeer 2003; UNIFEM 2002; World Food Program 1998; Alston 2003). This strategy represents a shift of policy focus from attention to women's disadvantage to a more strategic attention to mainstreaming gender across organizations as a means of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. This policy shift emerged as a strategic solution to the failure of women-focused policies to significantly change gender disadvantage. Gender mainstreaming has received significant support from the United Nations (UN) agencies, the World Bank, and other transnational networks of women's organizations and feminist groups (Kabeer 2003; ESCAP 2003; True and Mintrom 2001). Yet, there is some evidence that gender mainstreaming is little understood by many in positions of power at national levels, and consequently, the benefits for women at grassroots levels from a shift in policy focus may be meager.

At the institutional level, mainstreaming represents a change in policy from one that establishes women's units within organizations and directs
solutions to women, to one that gives attention to changing the power dynamics existing across departments and organizations. As Bhatta notes, this process is about "the radical alteration of the processes and structures which reproduce women's subordinate position" [2001, 28].

The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations defines gender mainstreaming as follows:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's, as well as men's, concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (UN 1997)

This article focuses on the shift to gender mainstreaming in Australia with a particular emphasis on its implementation within departments of agriculture. In these Australian departments, rural women's units were established in the 1980s and 1990s and were tasked with providing a focus on and for women, raising women's status, and giving women a voice in policy. Following the Beijing conference and Australia's support for gender mainstreaming, the focus within departments shifted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, resulting in women's units being reshaped, their resources cut, and their work changed. To illustrate the impact of policy changes, data is presented from a survey of the heads of rural women's policy units across Australia. This data reveals that gender mainstreaming, and Australia's commitment to it, is little understood by departmental personnel, and the move away from attention to women has allowed departmental resistance to gender equality measures.

The research demonstrates that, although mainstreaming is a more comprehensive strategy for achieving gender equality, the translation at the national level has left Australian rural women at a disadvantage. What appears to be happening is that some Australian national and state governments have used the move to mainstreaming as a reason to do away with, or downsize, rural women's policy units and the positive focus they provide for women. In their place is a policy vacuum with no organizations charged with taking responsibility for implementing gender mainstreaming. It could be argued that a move toward gender mainstreaming has resulted, whether by design or omission (and certainly by a lack of political will), in attention being removed from gender equality and women's empowerment altogether.
Gender Mainstreaming: An Historical Overview

In order to understand and contextualize the move to gender mainstreaming worldwide, a brief overview of international policy development reveals why gender mainstreaming is theoretically a more positive strategy. The second-wave women's movement of the 1970s was driven by activist and grassroots women tired of inequities in their own lives who drew attention to women's lack of equality. Of significance in the context of a discussion of Australian bureaucratic responses is that, both internationally and within Australia, the ongoing focus on gender equality has been driven by community women and groups. True and Mintrom argue that it is transnational networks of "nonstate actors" (international nongovernment women's organizations, feminist groups, and the UN) rather than state instrumentalities that are the primary forces driving gender mainstreaming across the world (2001, 27). Thus, it is significant that women's grassroots activism has driven gender policy globally, often forcing organizational changes.

A useful starting point for an historical overview of gender mainstreaming is the 1975 International Women's Year, which became a catalyst for attention to women's issues, as it captured the mood of women around the world. The UN-sponsored World Conference of the International Women's Year was held in Mexico, and despite their differences, women from across the world attending this conference recognized they shared the common experience of inequitable treatment. The conference called for equality for women in terms of "dignity and worth as human beings as well as equality in their rights, opportunities and responsibilities" (Skard 2002). The conference recognized that development was dependent on the participation of women and men and that involving women in international and national development was the key to progress. This position was endorsed at the Nairobi conference ten years later (Skard 2002).

The strategies endorsed in Mexico included the provision of integrated programs as well as programs specifically targeted to women. While this was an essential first step that made visible the productive work of women, it also allowed women to be viewed in isolation and targeted programs that were usually marginalized and had minor impact. The limited shift in the status of women between the first conference in Mexico in 1975 and the fourth in Beijing in 1995 saw activist women gradually change focus from a commitment to a focus on women's issues toward a more comprehensive attention to advancing and empowering women. Thus, by the time of the Beijing conference, emphasis was placed on incorporating a gendered perspective in all policies and programs, heralding the beginning of the gender mainstreaming approach.
A brief summary of the conferences between 1975 and 2000 shows this gradual shift in emphasis. The Mexico conference called on governments to establish agencies aimed at improving the status of women. This call resulted in national instrumentalities being established by governments to address the status of women, and in Australia, this resulted in the Office of the Status of Women being located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Following the Mexico conference, which announced the beginning of the decade for women, a commitment was made to the advancement of women. The decade of women, from 1975 to 1985, carried with it the primary goals of equality, development, and peace. The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. The Convention defines discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” (CEDAW 1979).

At Copenhagen in 1980, the midpoint of the decade for women, the second UN world conference adopted the “Program for Action,” stressing equality, development, and peace. This conference reinforced the benefits of the participation of women, noting that equality included the participation of women as beneficiaries and active agents of development policies (UN 1986).

At the conclusion of the decade of women, and representing the significance of CEDAW and the UN’s efforts, the Nairobi conference held in 1985 attracted 2,000 delegates and approximately 15,000 visitors to the unofficial forum (Weinberg and Woodman n.d.). “The Forward Looking Strategies” developed at this conference called for sexual equality, women’s autonomy, and power; recognition of women’s unpaid work; and advances in women’s paid work (Women and Sustainable Development 1995). It also called for a further conference to be held before 2000. In 1995 this was fulfilled with the Beijing conference, which was the largest UN world conference ever held, drawing up to 50,000 to the official forum and the unofficial forum held nearby (True and Mintrom 2001).

Criticisms of a women-focused approach emerged in the lead up to the Beijing conference. These included the dangers of viewing women as an indivisible category; focusing attention on women in one small area of organizational structures and thus ignoring the institutional/organizational cultures, the complex gender relations, and the ideologies that perpetuate women’s disadvantage; and a lack of significant change in gender disadvantage over time (Chant and Gutmann 2000).

The Beijing conference reinforced a commitment to the advancement of women and called for equality and empowerment of women, naming the
rights of women as human rights (UN 1995). However, concern at the lack of significant changes in gender equality across the world led the Beijing delegates to formalize a commitment to gender mainstreaming as a more effective way for governments to respond to gender equality issues.

In 2000, the Beijing +5 conference was held as a special session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. A political declaration affirming commitment to the Beijing Declaration and previous strategies was released, the outcome of this session being termed “Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century.” The commitment to equality was further reinforced at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 (Annan 2000).

The UN world conferences provided the critical international focus for efforts to address the political, economic, and social status of women (True and Mintrom 2001). Following Beijing, national machineries set up to promote gender equality and the advancement of women have increased. Many of these programs also have been upgraded or located in more strategic areas and their roles are increasingly to oversee gender mainstreaming (Commission on the Status of Women 2003).

Further significant world summits where gender has been prioritized include the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 (where the human rights of women and girls were particularly prioritised), the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 (FAO 1999), and the World Summit on Sustainability in Johannesburg in 2002. The Johannesburg Declaration emphasizes women’s empowerment and emancipation and the need for integration of gender equality in all activities included in Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Extra impetus to transnational gender equality has come through the European Union where legislation has been enacted in support of gender equality measures and women’s empowerment (European Commission 2003). These significant international events have provided support for a move away from a focus on women, toward a focus on gender mainstreaming. Within organizations it is seen as imperative for gender equality measures to be implemented across departments and not just confined to women’s units. One particular concern, however, is whether women’s units should be disbanded or reframed as gender-expert units overseeing the implementation of gender mainstreaming (Kelkar 2003). Nonetheless, others argue that targeted activities for women are a necessary complement to gender mainstreaming (see Hannan 2003).

What is clear is that the move holds significant dangers for women if attention is not given to its implementation. As in this Australian case, it could entail the removal of women’s units, the loss of gender expertise, and the failure of governments and organizations to provide infrastructure
to support gender mainstreaming. As Chant and Gutmann note, "it would seem inadvisable to eliminate [women-focused] machinery, until there is more convincing evidence for fundamental changes in gender attitudes and relations in organisations" (2000, 11).

However, while transnational activism around this issue has been strong, often the will to enact gender mainstreaming at a national basis has been limited. Of most concern to feminist scholars is an international backlash by national governments against any measure deemed feminist. For those of us from Australia who value a commitment to women's advancement and empowerment, the failure of the Australian government to ratify the Optional Protocol of CEDAW is of serious concern. Other countries were similarly reluctant providing evidence of a backlash in many countries against gender equality and empowerment of women. As a feminist, I fear that the adoption of gender mainstreaming without adequate international accountability measures or dedicated infrastructure may give further impetus to conservative policymakers in their efforts to dismantle the machinery of equality, which in Australian means the rural women's units. Before turning to the Australian example, however, the following section provides a more detailed conceptual understanding of gender mainstreaming.

**Theorizing Gender Mainstreaming**

In theorizing gender mainstreaming, Walby points out that it is one of three recognizable shifts in policy relating to women (1997). The first is a policy of equal treatment and generally relates to such issues as equal pay. In Australia, the Sexual Discrimination Act is an example of equal treatment being introduced through legislation. However, as Rees (2001) and Crompton and Le Feuvre (2000) argue, equal treatment is flawed, as it does not necessarily lead to equal outcome and is blind to the unequal position women and men hold in relation to the labor market. Women's caretaking and domestic responsibilities, for example, have meant equal treatment can lead to their disadvantage. Rees notes that equal treatment takes men as the norm and thus sees women as flawed or inadequate. Further, the discourse of equality has often viewed women as a problem to be addressed (Crompton and Le Feuvre 2000). Nonetheless, it is important to note that equal treatment principles are a necessary but insufficient means of ensuring equality for women.

Positive action represents the second shift identified by Walby and is indicated by measures introduced to positively favor women (1997). Initiatives introduced to allow positive discrimination include offering leadership training for women, providing childcare facilities, introducing
“family friendly” hours and, of importance to Australian rural women, establishing rural women’s units tasked to address women’s needs. Positive action is designed to offer women the opportunity to catch up to men (Crompton and Le Feuvre 2000) and, through a gradual process of incremental growth, to achieve equality of outcome. However as both Rees [2001] and Bhatta [2001] note, relying on incremental change does not work. As Rees persuasively argues, positive action provides the mechanisms to allow women to operate in male-dominated cultures without actually challenging that culture (2001). Women are expected to fit into a culture and systems that have been framed around a masculine point of reference, in organizations overwhelmingly dominated by men, and around an agenda that has been developed without consultation or respect for women’s positions. This is the system in which the rural women’s units currently operate. It is little wonder that they operate as a voice of resistance, are often ignored or trivialized, and are constantly challenged to work in a system where the language, processes, and culture treats women as secondary and dispensable.

This is where Walby’s third shift becomes important (1997). In the European Union [EU], UN, and international environment, gender mainstreaming has become the critical phase designed to address the problems associated with positive action. Yet, in the EU there is some dispute as to what gender mainstreaming actually represents [Rees 2001]. For some it is simply doing gender impact assessments on all departmental policies and practices to assess the impacts of these on women. This approach is termed by some as the integrationist approach [Beveridge, Nott, and Stephen 2000; Bhatta 2001]. A second, more thorough and more radical approach is the agenda-setting approach [Beveridge, Nott, and Stephen 2000; Bhatta 2001], an approach that shifts the focus of attention away from women to the institution itself (Rees 2001; Crompton and Le Feuvre 2000). Under this approach, the very objectives of the department/organization are brought into question along with the priorities, strategies, structures, and processes. The very systems and institutions through which policy is formulated are completely overhauled. As Rees suggests, it means asking, how does this organization advantage men [2001]? Depending on the answer, the system is recast to ensure that women and men have equal access to, and treatment by, the institution itself. In order to achieve this goal, as Rees notes, gender statistics, monitoring of programs for gender bias, evaluation of programs, and gender-impact assessments are important tools for the reconstructed institution (2001). As Crompton and Le Feuvre (2000), Bhatta (2001), and Rees (2001), drawing on Schunter-Kleeman (1999) argue, the result is that organizations are no longer engaged in trying to change women to fit the system. Rather they are changing the system to incorporate women.
Australia’s Support for Gender Mainstreaming

Australia’s response to the Beijing conference has been complicated by a federal election of the conservative Howard government in 1996 and its re-election in 1998, 2001, and 2004. It is clear from this government’s policy initiatives in the areas of child care, taxation policy, and family policy that it supports a particularly conservative view of women’s role in society. Howard uses discourse to reinforce his appeal to do away with “special interest” groups and to govern for “mainstream Australia” (Johnson 2000). This rhetoric has allowed his government to push gender equality off the agenda. Its failure to sign the CEDAW optional protocol or to introduce legislation in support of maternity allowances for working mothers despite strong representation from the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and women’s groups, indicates the Howard government is not focused on gender-equality measures. Further, following its 2004 re-election, Howard acted swiftly to remove the Office of the Status of Women from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (and hence from access to cabinet documents) to the Department of Family and Community Services and changed its name to the Office for Women. This move signals to women’s groups that advice on the gender implications of policy is no longer welcome and that addressing women’s status beyond their family role is no longer a priority. It is therefore clear that the federal government lacks the political will to implement gender mainstreaming.

The Australian government’s reports to the United Nations on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have been slow in recent years. In fact, the fourth and fifth reports were presented as a joint submission in 2003 (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). In this report, the government notes that it has developed a “package of information resources (checklists and guides) and established a Gender Mainstreaming Help Line service for government agencies to assist them in integrating gender into their policies, programmes and services” (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, 10). Despite the paucity of this response, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women’s Issues, Kay Patterson, noted in a speech to the Women’s Human Rights workshop in 2004 that the government has used the Beijing “Platform for Action” and Australia’s “Beijing +5 Action Plan, 2001–2005” (Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women n.d.) “to enhance its efforts towards achieving equality for women in Australia and around the world” (Patterson 2004). More tellingly, AusAID, the Australian government’s overseas aid program, notes that the introduction of the gender mainstreaming policy “marks a shift in Australia’s approach to development from an exclusive focus on women and their specific needs to a broader approach that considers the gender roles, needs and opportunities available to both men and women” (2002, 5).
It is clear that the language of gender mainstreaming is understood in the context of international aid work programs. What is also clear is that political rhetoric does not translate to departmental levels inside the country.

Supporting this view is research conducted in Australia by Donaghy with senior bureaucrats, ex-public servants, and gender analysts, which indicates that the implementation of gender mainstreaming falls far short of the ideal (2003). She notes that while public servants should be familiar with the gender mainstreaming strategy, understand its importance, and know that the (former) Office for the Status of Women is the key resource, that this is not the case. In fact, she notes there have been major cutbacks in women's policy expertise and many women's units have been abolished, undermining any capacity to implement gender mainstreaming. Further, she notes "the overwhelming majority of senior bureaucrats interviewed did not know what gender mainstreaming was, or even whether the government had a strategy in this area" and that the term had been coopted to justify the abolition of women's units (2003, 8–9).

Australian research reveals that there are chasms between the new rhetoric of gender mainstreaming and the reality of departmental intransigence. As a result, it would appear that, in Australia at least, the new policy focus has led to significant disadvantage for grassroots women.

**Australian Rural Women's Experience**

**Rural Women's Status**

There are more than 70,000 Australian women who self-identify as farmers or farm managers [RIRDC and DPIE 1998] making them a significant part of the agricultural workforce. The activism of rural women is driven by an awareness of their significant economic contributions to agriculture through their on- and off-farm income-generating activities, and their understanding of the critical role they play in enabling their partners to remain farmers, a position rarely acknowledged in main-stream agricultural discourse. For example, work commissioned by the Rural Women's Unit in the then Department of Primary Industries and Energy reveals that Australian women contribute 48 percent of real farm income through their work on and off the farm [RIRDC and DPIE 1998]. Despite this, women occupy approximately 5 to 8 percent of agricultural leadership positions in Australia's largest farming organizations [RIRDC and DPIE 1998; Alston 2000]. This disparity causes considerable angst for agriculturally based women.

New grassroots women's community groups established during the 1990s such as Australian Women in Agriculture and the Foundation
for Australian Agricultural Women, called on governments across the country to make rural women visible, to raise their profile, and to allow rural women access to decision-making bodies where crucial industry decisions were being made in their absence (Alston 1996). Working with and through the departmental women’s units, this movement of activist women and their organizations has been termed the Australian Women in Agriculture movement (Leipins 1998).

The Political Landscape

Australian agriculture is undertaken in all six Australian states and two territories. While all states and territories are held by Labor governments, at the federal level a conservative coalition government was elected under Prime Minister John Howard in 1996.

Adding to the complexity for rural women, however, is that the junior coalition party is the rurally based National Party, which has been under threat from popularist movements of the far right. To shore up its appeal in rural areas, it has resorted to adopting a number of initiatives that are attractive to its rural constituency, including initiatives for rural women. As a result, rural women’s units have been created in the Departments of Agriculture, Forests, and Fisheries and in Transport and Regional Services. From 1999 until 2005, the Minister for Transport and Regional Services was John Anderson, also the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the National Party. He created a regional women’s advisory council of rural women appointed to advise him directly on policy. It is important to note that these initiatives have been developed at a time when women’s units and “femocrat” positions in other departments are being dismantled (see Sawyer 1999).

The “Femocrats”

The key points in the Australian story concerning support for gender equality are the activism of grassroots community women, the work of departmental femocrats, the establishment of the rural women’s units, and the recent change in policy direction to gender mainstreaming. From the 1980s, Australia led the way in introducing women into bureaucracies in various departments to ensure gender equality in policy outcomes and to work for the advancement of women. This strategy is a typical positive action as described by Walby (1997). These women, usually located in women’s units, became known as “femocrats,” a term defined by Eisenstein as “a cohort of feminist women who became bureaucrats in a quest for social change . . . [who] helped change the gender landscape of their country” (Eisenstein 1996, xi). They provided a model to the world of bureaucrats in government departments working to bring about cultural
change, to raise women’s issues, and to assess the gender implications of policy at the highest levels.

It is little wonder that, when Australian rural women in the 1980s and 1990s lobbied against the discrimination they were experiencing, the femocrat model was the one adopted by departments of agriculture to address these issues. Following a significant downturn in commodity prices and long periods of drought that resulted, not only in many families leaving agriculture, but also a rise in the numbers of women in farm families working off-farm to support their families, women demanded attention to their situation and invisibility.

**Adopting the Femocrat Model—Positive Action for Women in Australian States**

The genesis for the Australian Women in Agriculture movement occurred in Victoria through the appointment of two part-time women’s officers in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs in 1986. The head of the national Office of the Status of Women in 1984 was Anne Summers. In that year, she organized a process called the Women’s Budget where federal departments were required to report on the amount of money spent on women. Following the success of this process in highlighting gender-equality issues at the federal level, it was introduced into the Victorian State departments in 1986 by Victorian Premier John Cain. As a result, the Victorian Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs was forced to report that out of a budget of $50 million, it had spent $100 on women (Eisenstein 1996). The appointment of the women’s officers followed this embarrassing admission. A critical role was also played by female Labor members of the Victorian parliament at the time such as Joan Kirner, Kay Setches, and Caroline Hogg. These women took a keen interest in raising the profile of rural women, developing a healthy liaison with the women’s officers, and supporting their activist approach in addressing a rural women’s agenda.

As a direct result of the work of the women’s officers, and in concert with activist women in the Victorian community, the Australian Women in Agriculture group was formally established in 1992. One of their first tasks was to hold the first International Women in Agriculture conference in Melbourne in 1994. This conference brought over 850 women from 34 countries to Australia in a lively conference described by the then Governor-General, Bill Hayden, in his opening speech as the largest agricultural conference ever held in the country (Women in Agriculture International Conference Committee 1994). This conference stamped Australian Women in Agriculture on the map as a powerful lobbying group with energy and commitment to the cause of advancing women.
Following the conference, the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women was founded as a philanthropic organization to advance women in agriculture and their communities. Together with the more conservative Country Women's Association, established in 1922 and with a long history of activist work for rural women and families, the Australian Women in Agriculture and Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women formed the core of the nongovernment grassroots arm of the Women in Agriculture movement. These organizations work with activist women, academics, and feminists. I am one of several academics who has worked closely with the movement assisting to articulate a discourse of gender equality.

Meanwhile, the 1994 International Women in Agriculture conference, its agenda, and the publicity generated captured the attention of governments across the country. Women's units were established in some state departments of agriculture following the Victorian model. These units, or rural women's networks as many were called, have acted to link rural community women to the policy process.

Moving to National Positive Action

Following the rapid development of state organizational structures, the growth of Australian Women in Agriculture, and the loud calls from women in agriculture across the country for more support for women, I was approached to organize and coordinate the first National Rural Women's Forum in 1995. This forum had the explicit aim of giving a national focus to the piecemeal and rapid developments occurring around the country. The forum, held in the federal Parliament House in Canberra, brought together representatives of community groups, departments of agriculture, women's units, and government representatives—all part of the burgeoning Women in Agriculture movement. A National Agenda for Women resulted from these discussions (Alston 1995). This document outlined 27 recommendations for government, industry, and community groups to overcome the invisibility of rural women, to give them greater recognition, and to increase their representation. As a direct result of this forum, the federal government also established a Rural Women's Unit located in the then Department of Primary Industries and Energy [now Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests] and was the first women's unit dedicated to rural women's issues at the federal level. This unit was to work with the state rural women's units and with rural women's community groups to address the Rural Women's Agenda.

The Rural Women's Unit held another successful forum in 1997, again bringing together representatives of women's groups, departmental representatives, and others to work on developing the women's agenda. Following this forum, the unit developed a National Action Plan for Women and
called on the states to develop their own state plans. These plans outline strategies for improving the status of rural women. The Rural Women’s Unit works effectively to link state bodies through the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management (SCARM) process. Regular meetings are held with state and federal representatives of women’s units working on a rural women’s agenda. In 1999, following a departmental reshuffle, another unit, the Regional and Rural Women’s Unit, was established in the federal Department of Transport and Regional Services.

The most recent development in the Women in Agriculture movement has been a June 2002 announcement of the successful tenderers for the Rural Secretariat funded by the Office of the Status of Women (OSW) [now the reduced Office for Women]. A new coalition of groups, the National Rural Women’s Coalition, has successfully tendered to establish this secretariat and gives advice to the Office for Women on rural women’s issues. This is the first departmental initiative for rural women that has effectively moved beyond a focus on women in agriculture. As such, it gives a broader and non-industry-based definition of “rural women.” Nevertheless, the Rural Women's Coalition includes key agricultural women’s organizations, such as the Country Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women, and the newly formed Women in Seafood group, the Australian Local Government Women’s Association, as well as the Isolated Children’s and Parent’s Association, the Rural Health Alliance, and Indigenous Women’s representatives.

**Women’s Units—Organizational Ghettos**

The political activism of grassroots community women has seen these developments occur over a relatively short period of time. It is arguable that the Australian Women in Agriculture movement has been so effective because of the relations developed among community women, corporate women, researchers, politicians, and feminists in the rural women’s units. These relationships have allowed the development of strong links inside and outside the bureaucracies. However, the work of the units has been critical in raising the profile of rural women, allowing the development of a rural women’s voice, and giving a point of contact for that voice to be heard in government spheres. It would appear that the units have been a success in providing “positive action” (Rees 2001) for rural women.

However as was clear at Beijing, positive action for women does not significantly impact gender inequality, and significant changes have not occurred in bureaucracies or departments. When we assess the institutions through which the Australian rural women’s units function, it is important to note that organizations are not gender neutral. Organizations are profoundly gendered, and operate to reinforce and maintain
gender divisions in society (Savage and Witz 1992). Still (1995) notes that organizations incorporate male managerial cultural elements and that women are “organisational migrants” (Still 1993, 153) in a masculine world. For femocrats entering the male-dominated domain of agricultural organizations, the culture has been doubly repressive.

**Using the Language of Gender Mainstreaming—Moving Away from Gender Equality**

With gender mainstreaming rural women’s units have become particularly vulnerable. Already the unit in Agriculture, Forests, and Fisheries has been subsumed into the larger Rural Industries Section and any reference to women has been all but deleted. At state levels, there are also moves to remove or change the units in favor of mainstreaming. However, the lack of discussion about what mainstreaming entails and the abandonment of some of the rural women’s units suggests that at best this represents a failure on the part of conservative politicians and male-dominated departments to understand the complexities of gender mainstreaming. At worst, it suggests that the opportunity is being taken to remove attention to gender equality and women’s empowerment altogether.

Ironically, the approach now championed in the UN is drawn from the Australian experience, and yet, in Australia under a more conservative regime, the approach has been largely abandoned. There has been a discursive shift from equality issues to market primacy and from public service to public management (Thomson 2001). Since 1996, for example, the federal Office of the Status of Women (now Office for Women) has been stripped of its gender-auditing role and, since 2004, has been significantly downgraded. Any semblance of committed attention to gender equality has been lost.

The tensions at national and state levels between community women and femocrats on the one hand, and departments and politicians on the other, are evident. The Australian case demonstrates that grassroots women continue to call for gender equality and women’s empowerment. At the same time, policy has moved from support within departments of agriculture for women’s units to a rhetorical championing of gender mainstreaming. Yet, I feel that the lack of resourcing given to gender mainstreaming and the failure even to define what it means, suggests the international discourse has been coopted to allow a sweeping away of the apparatus supporting gender equality and women’s empowerment. Research with heads of Australia’s rural women’s units in 2002 allows an exploration of the resourcing, focus, impact on departmental culture, and climate within these departments to provide an understanding of the attention given to gender mainstreaming.
The Study

My engagement in the Women in Agriculture movement both as a rural woman and an academic suggests both strengths and weaknesses for this work. Strengths include the ready access to key players in the rural women’s units and a lived understanding of the issues associated with being an Australian rural woman. These strengths indicate weaknesses may lie in a certain bias in collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. I am aware of a need for reflexivity in the research situation around these issues and address this by principally representing as an academic and a researcher, by maintaining confidentiality, and by reporting data faithfully. My role as an insider/outside (Naples 2003) has nonetheless allowed a framing of knowledge and concerns around a discourse of gender equality.

A survey of the departmental femocrats, members of the SCARM Rural Women’s working group [a national group auspiced by the federal government and bringing together all state and federal rural women’s units heads], was conducted during 2002. Representatives include the two federal departmental rural women’s units in Agriculture, Forests, and Fisheries (DAFFA) and Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS). At the state level, representatives include the four dedicated women’s units in New South Wales, Victoria, western Australia, and Queensland located in primary industry-related portfolios. Tasmania also has a Women in Agriculture Project Officer located in the primary industries department, while in South Australia the Rural Affairs Unit does some work related to women’s issues. In all, the sample comprised heads of the eight units. However, one unit was represented by a new worker, as well as one who had recently moved on, so the final sample was nine. All respondents were female and they were employed at senior management levels.

All representatives were surveyed with a mailed questionnaire in 2002. The questionnaire comprises open-ended questions about their work roles and gender-equality issues but also included quantitative questions about the length of establishment and their staffing and funding arrangements. Several respondents included extra handwritten comments on their surveys and some followed up with telephone calls to further discuss the survey and the attitude of departments to their work and to gender equality.

Rural Women’s Units—A Snapshot

Table 1 indicates the units and their establishment date. Within eight units there is the equivalent of 22 full-time staff across Australia working on rural/industry/agricultural women’s issues. Of the many thousands of hours of departmental time devoted to agricultural matters spent
Table 1
Rural Women’s Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Date Established</th>
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<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>1986</td>
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<td>NSW</td>
<td>1992</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Forests, and Fisheries</td>
<td>1995</td>
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<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>Queensland</td>
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<td>Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services</td>
<td>1999</td>
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Note: South Australia did not establish a dedicated women’s unit but did allocate staff to work on a women’s agenda in the 1990s.

across the whole of Australia, a total of 790 hours per week are spent on a women’s agenda. There has been little staff increase in the units over the short period they have been in operation. Apart from salaries, in the five units that declared a budget, a total operating budget of $568,000, of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent in agricultural departments, is spent per annum on women’s issues; the lowest in Tasmania ($8,000) and the highest in Transport and Regional Services ($200,000). Although this demonstrates a significant increase since the Victorian department’s contribution of $100 in 1986, it still falls far short of gender equality in departmental resource allocation. While it could be argued that the remaining departmental budget is being spent on both men and women, it is clear from the comments from women’s unit heads that many departmental personnel do not view women as clients.

Demonstrating that the units are largely focused on positive actions rather than gender mainstreaming, the mission statements of the units reveal a commitment to assisting women’s participation. In essence, the units are focused on providing equal opportunities and positive action for women largely, at least in their mission statements, ignoring attention to gender mainstreaming and the culture in which the units are based (Rees 2001).

The stated catalyst for the development of the units was overwhelmingly community women’s activism (DAFFA, NSW, Victoria, Tasmania). Although in western Australia prompting by the Minister for Women was a catalyst for development, and in both western Australia and Queensland,
the Action Plan process instigated by DAFFA was also a catalyst. There have, however, been some changes in focus with two units (Queensland and DAFFA) moving to incorporate work with young people, Victoria including a stronger emphasis on community development and policy, and Tasmania receiving secretarial support.

**Departmental Resistances**

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to comment on their relations with other sections of the department, and it is here that the extent of organizational cultural resistance is hinted at and the need for gender mainstreaming is made evident. Only one of the nine respondents felt that their unit's relationship with the rest of the department in which it is located was "successful." Others felt it was "sometimes difficult," "tense," "steadily improving," "slowly influencing," there was a "need to leverage," or the department was only paying "lip service" to gender equality.

The resistance of, or support for, gender equality is strongly influenced from the top of an organization. Respondents were asked to comment on their relations with their minister. Of importance is that five felt that this relationship was strong or positive, one was "less than engaged" (a view reflected in the unit's falling position in the organization), and one felt that the support of the minister was dependent on the unit presenting women as dependent on men.

The strongest allies nominated by the unit respondents are those in their department's senior executive positions who support their work, the relevant minister, the nongovernment women's organizations, the national broadcaster (the ABC), and some industry groups. The weakest allies nominated are rural and remote communities with particular views of women, middle managers in the departments, and some very influential agricultural industry groups. The resistance of these groups to gender equality means that any attempts by the unit staff to move toward gender mainstreaming within their departments is actively resisted.

**Positive Actions**

Asked about their most successful strategies for implementing positive changes for women, most units nominated their interactions with grassroots community women either through formal arrangements, such as departmental advisory bodies, or informal partnerships with women's organizations. Other successful strategies nominated are women's Gatherings (conference-style gatherings of women organized along feminist principles), newsletters, and the Action Plans that guide their work. In listing their key achievements, most nominated their Action Plans
and newsletters, other publications, research initiatives, obtaining scholarships for women to enter leadership training, the state and national Rural Women’s Awards, their conferences and Gatherings, celebrations of women’s achievements and the “positive changes in women.” These comments reveal that the units focus squarely on women’s disadvantage rather than gender mainstreaming across their departments.

Asked about the prospects for the units, four felt they would continue as usual into the future providing positive action for women, two were very pessimistic about their future, and three expressed strong concerns about their future budgetary allocation. The mood of pessimism of some and the difficulties of working with a resistant organizational culture was best captured by one respondent who felt that in five years’ time she would “hopefully be gone, cultural change has been achieved. JOKE!”

Asked to nominate two things they would not change, respondents nominated their relations with community women and their groups, their newsletters, and the results of their work with women that resulted in the “change in individual women—from mouse to butterfly.” Asked about two things they would change, most nominated the attitudes of male departmental colleagues and the rural perspective on women’s position in society; others expressed strong concerns about funding and the need for their own work to be valued within the department. Several expressed concern that their managers often did not recognize women as legitimate clients of the department and that “cultural change is so slow.” We are “repeating the message all the time,” suggested one respondent. “Women’s attitudes change but the environment in which they operate doesn’t,” wrote another. “We are not able to get women in agriculture seen as ‘core business,’” wrote another. Limited funding means that units cannot “resource and grow women’s industry groups.” The need for gender mainstreaming is evident in these comments that suggest departmental resistance to gender-equality principles and a failure to view women as legitimate clients of the departments. What is evident from these comments is that departments have not embraced gender mainstreaming despite ministerial and departmental rhetoric and, in fact, actively resist attempts by feminists to achieve gender equality.

Achievements for Women

The Labor government in power when the International Women in Agriculture conference was held in 1994 set a target of 50 percent representation of women on statutory boards and committees by the year 2000. A change in government at the national level saw the Liberal/National Party withdraw this commitment, opting instead for encouragement of women and a natural process of progression. The move away from equality targets has resulted in only limited achievement of equitable representation
women occupying between 5 to 8 percent of agricultural leadership positions only \cite{RIRDC and DPIE 1998; Alston 2000}, and there is little evidence of natural progression.

What, then, have the units achieved for women in agriculture and rural communities? There is no doubt that they have raised the profile of women, provided a voice for women into the policy arena, assisted individual women to achieve publicly, made strong links with women's organizations in the community, and generally ensured that women should not be ignored in the policy process. However, the agricultural femocrats also have found that resistance within their departments and the industries they serve is high and that attention to gender equality beyond the units is limited. Many bureaucrats merely tolerate the location of a women's unit, ghettoizing its work and often trivializing its requests. Similarly, many powerful and traditional farmer organizations do not view women as legitimate industry participants. The resulting culture in which the units operate suggests that a high personal cost ensues for the femocrats.

In commenting on her research with Australian femocrats in a wider policy context, Eisenstein notes “the experience of the femocrats replicated that of other contemporary women pioneers in previously male-dominated areas of work. They encountered hostility, ridicule, harassment and outright attempts to subvert and undercut them” \cite{1996, 206–7}. Femocrats working in areas affecting women in agriculture often experience resistance in the form of negative comments and a lack of attention to rural women's agenda \cite{Alston 2000}. The move to conservatism has resulted in some cases in the very questioning of the need for women's units in some departments and a withdrawal of support. Additionally, there has been a significant shift in language away from feminist concepts of equity and justice for women toward economic indicators of success. There is a backlash in many departments, and very quickly, a culture of devaluing and ignoring the potential input of women has been enacted. The voice of rural women in the machinery of government is still marginalized and remains a voice of resistance. Changes of government have proved how illusory the inroads of women can be.

Discussion

It is important first to note the limitations of the data presented in this study. Only key informants were surveyed, and they have largely presented their perceptions rather than significant issues of fact. Surveys with rural women may have shown quite different results. Nonetheless, as noted by delegates at the Beijing conference in 1995, this research clearly demonstrates that the positive-action strategies adopted by the rural women's units have been significant for rural women but have been
less successful in enacting gender-equality measures within departments more generally. Under the positive actions undertaken by rural women’s units, individual women have benefited in large measure, and the non-government organizations that form the core of the Women in Agriculture movement have gained a significant profile. However, government funding of nongovernment women’s organizations was withdrawn in 2002. The voluntary efforts of activist women cannot be sustained for long periods and activism will wilt in the long-term. The period of positive action during the 1990s has not changed the public profile of women in agriculture in any significant way. They are still underrepresented in agricultural leadership positions and senior executive positions despite their significant contributions to agriculture.

The units have had negligible effect on departmental culture, corroborating the concerns expressed in the international forums from Mexico to Beijing. The move toward gender mainstreaming in these international forums was adopted for the very reasons identified in this article—positive actions have had little lasting success in changing the position of women. It is clear from this research that gender mainstreaming as defined by ECOSOC would be a significant move for femocrats and grassroots women as it would focus attention on departmental structures and processes and force a reappraisal of gender blind policy. However, the problem that this research reveals is that there is a lack of political will to support this move, limited understanding of gender mainstreaming, no attempt to resource its introduction, and significant departmental resistance to anything to do with gender equality or women’s empowerment. This research reveals entrenched sexism within departments of agriculture and a lack of endorsement of gender equality. For over a decade, rural women’s units have been tolerated within departments as their work has been marginalized and ghettoized. By comparison, gender mainstreaming represents a threat to existing male-dominated organizations and, if it is understood at all, is actively resisted.

In some Australian departments it would appear as if mainstreaming has been coopted as a useful dismissive device whereby departments can go back to business as usual. There is some concern expressed by women’s unit representatives that mainstreaming means getting rid of the irritant women’s units and paying lip service to the process of incorporating women by occasionally ensuring a woman is appointed to a board or committee. Gender mainstreaming becomes a very useful, internationally sanctioned vehicle for this dismissal of women.

Nonetheless, this research reveals that the role of femocrats is crucial if we are to have any change at all. Their role in linking women to the policy arena is well recognized. As Hannan notes, not only is there a need for positive actions for women, it is also important that budgets targeted
to women are not sucked back to the task of gender mainstreaming, leaving no dedicated women's budget (2003). Because of this it is important to retain the units and to enhance the mandate of femocrats, to extend their work beyond positive actions, and to operate as gender-equality experts. It is important that the women's units act as gender-expert units, tasked with overseeing gender mainstreaming within and outside organizational structures. This will require significantly enhanced resources.

Many femocrats recognize the way forward is complicated by conservatism and departmental inertia. There is some concern among femocrats that conservative governments and departmental hierarchies are suggesting that women "have had their turn," as stated in a personal comment on survey form. This attitude suggests a particular disregard for women as clients and citizens and overlooks an intransigent cultural milieu that devalues women.

**Where to Mainstreaming?**

This article has addressed gender mainstreaming through an examination of policy directed toward women's equality and empowerment in Australian departments of agriculture. It has been noted that international forums have called for a policy shift from a focus on women's disadvantage to a need for more comprehensive gender mainstreaming policies across organizations. It is clear that the move to gender mainstreaming has inherent dangers in nations where conservative governments hold sway as it allows a vehicle for dismantling dedicated gender-equality infrastructure. Research with heads of women's units in Australia shows the difficulties facing those charged with addressing gender inequality, the lack of understanding of gender mainstreaming within departments of agriculture, and a deeply entrenched antagonism toward gender equality.

Women's units established within departments of agriculture during the 1980s and 1990s have been successful in focusing attention on women, providing them with information and skills, and exposing their invisibility within agriculture. What they have not been able to change in significant measure is the profile of rural women in the public sphere. Women remain invisible within the agriculture industry despite their economic contributions and their activism. A move to gender mainstreaming would appear to be a positive initiative designed to address gender inequality and women's empowerment. However, what this research demonstrates is that there are huge gaps between rhetoric and action at national levels. Gender mainstreaming has provided internationally endorsed support to remove women's units without the establishment of organizations
charged with overseeing gender mainstreaming. It is clear that internationally sanctioned accountability measures are needed to hold national governments to their gender-equality commitments. Transnational organizations must ensure that in moving forward they are not leaving rural women behind.

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