

# Gender Mainstreaming in Digital Government Research

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*Abstract: Gender mainstreaming continues to be a core approach towards the progress and acceleration of gender equality in institutions, societies and even research. Researchers and institutions nowadays try to seek opportunities for change by suggesting gender integration in organizations, projects, and research in all fields of study. This article provides a reflection on gender mainstreaming in research and approaches to its integration in research projects and programs related to digital government. It explores the need for a gender approach in digital government research, challenges to its adoption and outlines the opportunities of integrating gender in research of digital governance for the ultimate goal of achieving gender equality.*

*Keywords: gender mainstreaming, digital government, research, SDG 5, gender integration*

## Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is an approach, strategy, and/or a method of achieving the goal of gender equality as established in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) (UNSDGs, 2020). It has been internationally recognized as a force for equal opportunities and rights for both men and women (Parpart, 2014; UNSDGs, 2020) and the concept has been described by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as “the process of making assessments of any planned action – legislation, policies or programs – of men and women, in all areas and at all levels. It is also an approach for making men’s and women’s concerns and experiences a significant aspect of the design and implementation of policies, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of programs in all political and socio-economic spheres to allow for equal benefit, and to ensure inequality is not perpetuated in the process. Thus, the ultimate goal for the implementation of gender mainstreaming in any institute or government entity should be the achievement of gender equality” (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1997). To meet such a goal, the strategic approach should concern the integration of gender in the internal workings of an institution with a comprehensive and systematic implementation of gender mainstreaming (EIGE, 2021).

Persistent debates abound on the idea that gender mainstreaming goes beyond the integration of gender equality in the policies and programs of any institution (Council of Europe, 2021; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). As a contested concept, practice, and a global equality norm (Krook & True, 2012), it involves the reinvention, restructuring, and rebranding of a significant aspect of feminism or the contemporary feminist theories (Walby, 2005; Zalewski, 2010). As a form

of theory, it employs the revision of key concepts to have an in-depth understanding of a gendered world, rather than the formation of a separatist theory (Zalewski, 2010). Thus, for theory development, it is commonly regarded as a new system of gendered political and strategic approaches within a gendered world. In terms of practice, it is the promotion of gender equality and the improved effectiveness of policies through a gendered analysis of norms, cultures, processes, and outcomes (Walby, 2005).

To aid the acceleration of the attainment of gender equality by institutions and the global community, institutions have called for the incorporation of gender equality into the 'mainstream' of activities rather than regarding the concept as an 'optional' activity (UN Women, 2015). Hence, it should be taken critically and relevant especially in the integration process to understand how gender as a social construct and other intercepting variables shape inequalities. The gender mainstreaming approach pursues the institutionalization of equality through embedding gender-sensitive practices and norms in the mainstream structure and process of activities within an institution. Therefore, it is meant to be implemented depending on the institutional level and the type of activities carried out within the institution. The idea is to ensure that most projects and activities are gender-transformative (UNU, 2016), targeting SDG 5. Significantly, gender equality is integral to sustainable development in various cross-cutting contexts that necessitates consolidated efforts to address it as both significant and a mainstreamed lens which can be applied to all research, policymaking, and programs.

This work approaches gender mainstreaming integration in research projects and programs related to digital government from the experience and viewpoint of the authors. It is a reflection on the importance of having a gender mainstreaming approach to gender directed at research institutions or single researchers that focus their work on digital government. Some of the aspects presented result from a case study on the authors' research institute focused on understanding the standpoint on gender mainstreaming (Makpor & Carvalho, 2021). The rest of the document is structured as follows: section 2 provides an overview on why all digital government research should have a gender approach. What are the main challenges to this approach are addressed in section 3 and a repositioning of the gender practice in section 4. How to implement and include gender in digital government research is discussed in section 5. The article closes with a final discussion and conclusion.

## Why should digital government research have a gender approach?

All country members of the United Nations (UN) have committed to the achievement of the SDGs through all possible means. Particularly for SDG 5, this implies that closing the gap between women and men, girls and boys, is the ultimate global practice for member states and national institutions.

The proposal to have a gender approach in all research on digital government can be understood by researchers and institute managers that are aware of the contribution their work, more or less

directly, has on advancing government and governance practices, policy definition and implementation, practical application of solutions, and consequently, affecting the achievement of all SDGs. For SDG 5, research in e-government and digital transformation provides a high-level overview of key issues, identifies key practices, and presents gaps in data as they relate to gender and information and telecommunications technologies (ICTs).

It is not possible to exclude ICTs as a valuable resource to pursue such an objective. As stated by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2021), ICTs are a vehicle to accelerate the progress of achieving the SDGs. Beyond institutional momentum, with adequate ICT infrastructure, services and skills, all individuals, organizations, and businesses can successfully participate in the digital economy. Thus, leading to increase in economic-wellbeing and healthy competitiveness that directly contribute to SDG 5.

Therefore, research institutions, centres, groups, and projects that direct their attention to digital government should be concerned with the implementation of gender mainstreaming across activities and procedures.

## Challenges to having a gender approach

Gender intensive research is more closely related with areas such as sociology, political science, education, geography, humanities, and business management (Abreu & Grinevich, 2017; Barone & Assirelli, 2020; Mann & DiPrete, 2013). The latter areas, although associated with digital government research, are not comprehensive for the topic since it integrates a broad array of domains from the social sciences to engineering. Gender focused research is only a small part of the interests researchers explore when studying digital government. This would be the first and primary challenge to gender mainstreaming leaving all those involved questioning how gender can still be incorporated and championed when the goal of research is far from gender.

For those that do not have resources dedicated to gender studies, it may feel as a side work from the day-to-day activities to address the topic. Some of the constraints are related to project objectives not having gender orientation, resources allocated to projects are exhausted not leaving availability to pursue a gender approach, time management aspects that do not leave the required time to integrate gender in results, and in some cases, the clients' objectives and demands are not aligned with gender concerns, limiting, or blocking the possibility for a gender approach to research.

Researchers' experience and cultural environment also plays an extensive part in gender mainstreaming research. Personal and professional experience may pose a challenge in the motivation and willingness to pursue gender actions. These cultural and personal factors affect the position from which each individual looks at gender mainstreaming. It is therefore relevant to formalize in each research centre, institute or department, policies and plans for gender mainstreaming across the organization.

The last challenge is associated with not being an expert in gender sensitive research. This may also be viewed as a limitation due to the lack of theoretical background or ignorance on different

approaches that link gender to other fields of knowledge. Researchers may feel restrained and uncomfortable to use gender approaches, fearful that they can have a biased or uninformed position.

## Repositioning gender in practice

Nowadays, the gradual elimination of gender inequalities is being embedded in most organizational settings and mandates. Organizations are beginning to discover mainstream situations that call for change both internally and externally for the successful promotion of gender equality (Krook & True, 2012; Waylen, 2014). For example, through gender analysis, gender can be repositioned both in organizations and in research on the basis of suggesting strategies and approaches for the proper elimination of inequalities that could lead to transformative change. This must also be accompanied by measures and procedures for the promotion of attitudinal change, contextual sensitivity, as well as the systemic use of research and other thoroughgoing use of gender data.

Consequently, the introduction of the accountability strategy for gender mainstreaming in planning and reporting systems is another significant approach towards repositioning gender in practice and in research. Many tools and development initiatives have been development across the entire UN system (IANWGE, 2021) and UNU (UNU Gender Action Plan, 2020) that played an important role in seeing that gender is well represented in the activities, programs, and policies of institutions. Lastly, through e-governance programmes essentializing gender equity and equality becomes relevant both for institutions and research. Thus, different kinds of alliances and cooperative arrangements between institutions, governments, businesses, and society are therefore represented making room for gender dimensions to be expressed.

## How to implement gender in research

The purpose of this section is to present a general but comprehensive set of tools, actions, and mechanisms to have in place or implement that facilitate gender mainstreaming adoption in research projects for digital government. It is divided into five general points that cover all project phases and research preparation.

**Preparedness:** It is important that research institutes and centres provide researchers with a set of tools that help to implement a gender approach. Examples of tools include a gender policy to guide the integration of gender in projects and research, a gender action plan that promotes accountability, and defines steps and goals regarding gender mainstreaming, as well as a gender sensitive language dictionary. Some recommended tools and resources can be found in institutions' websites and repositories such as the UN, OECD, EuroStrat, (EIGE, 2022; OECD, 2015; IANWGE, 2021), etc. Besides the aforementioned tools, all research institutes should focus on promoting a gender-aware culture and fostering gender mainstreaming practices in management, recruitment, administrative and external activities.

Parity and equality of opportunities: One of the simplest opportunities to implement a gender approach is to advocate for gender parity and equality. To have an equal number of men and women in the team and to give equal opportunities and the same weight in the decision-making process is a step towards the contribution of gender mainstreaming. Parity can also be implemented when selecting research interviewees, participants, constituting focus groups, workshops, or brainstorming activities. It can be taken into consideration in any aspect of the research process (EIGI, 2021, 2022).

Methodological approach: The more certain way to ensure gender is included in research projects and programs is to make it explicit in the approach to be followed. A gender-based analysis or gender impact assessment can be considered. This implies that the establishment of the research objectives considers and makes explicit the gender approach which forces researchers to make it part of the analysis or results discussion.

Gender data: It may be possible to understand different perspectives for various topics, from policy making to technology, by using gender disaggregated data (EIGI, 2022; UNESCO & Schlegel, 2015). Indicators of performance for the different genders can also be employed. This is easier to carry through in more social sciences disciplines than in pure technological research; however, it should be integrated whenever possible.

Reporting: Reinforcing the internal approach in external communication makes clear the position of institutes and researchers. The use of gender sensitive language in reports, publications, and public communications is a means of promoting gender mainstreaming in research dissemination that can be achieved by resorting to writing and speech. Another aspect of public dissemination where gender concerns can be taken under consideration is in the choice of images to be used. Ideally portraying gender diversity or being balanced in terms of representation.

## Discussion

The peculiarities of research often make it imperative for certain specific actions to be implemented towards integrating gender, as most research still shows a vast under-representation of women especially in the ICT sector and the digital governance space (ITU, 2021). Gender integration in research is significant not only for parity and fairness but also for addressing existing gender gaps (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022).

Incorporating mechanisms and dimensions of gender in research helps to understand and shape both technology and governance in the context of ICTs. Fundamentally, the waves of gender inequalities are still influenced by the level of gender equality component that is present both in digital governance and research. This therefore calls for the integration of gender dimensions in all aspects of research and digital governance.

As generally highlighted by researchers and academia, women and men are not equally taking part in and fully benefiting from digital opportunities. In fact, the hurdles of gender inequalities curtail the ability of women and girls to fully benefit from the opportunities offered by digital

governance. Gender mainstreaming can therefore necessitate and bring to recognition through integration, the need for equality, and inclusion in this regard.

## Conclusion

This work considers gender mainstreaming and its relevance to research in digital government by emphasising its use in the integration process and how these shape inequalities both in digital governance and in research. Gender mainstreaming and its implications for e-governance/digital governance research are not widely studied. Thus, gender is not receiving proper attention in the digital government studies. The authors consider several challenges that are transversal to digital government research and the adoption of gender in the research process. Significantly, making gender a silo and the perception of it as “special interest” and not fundamental, compromises research. This can generate bias and incomplete data in some cases, as well as fail in helping researchers fill critical knowledge, evidence, and practice gaps that exist.

Some solutions are presented for researchers' consideration. The paper concludes with the authors' opinion that there is a lack of gender integration in research and digital government studies. A more attentive and comprehensive perspective on gender mainstreaming is needed that includes the discussion of gender by researchers in all fields including ICTs. More so, there is a need for consistent research and investigation in these areas.

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