

Breaking down Barriers



What can disability mainstreaming learn from three decades of gender mainstreaming?

● Introduction

In the field of international development, mainstreaming - the process of embedding a specific focus, such as gender or disability, into policy-making and practice - has been widely recognized as a powerful strategy for promoting equity. By ensuring that the needs and perspectives of marginalized groups are integrated into every stage of development programs, mainstreaming aims to transform how governments, NGOs, and development agencies address inequality. However, as the development sector increasingly prioritizes

disability inclusion, there is much to learn from the successes and shortcomings of gender mainstreaming.

Gender mainstreaming, introduced at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, was heralded as a transformative strategy for combating gender inequality. It sought to integrate gender perspectives into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs, with the ultimate goal of >>



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'Breaking down Barriers' was initiated by Liliane Foundation to contribute to more effective and evidence-based policies and programmes in the field of disability inclusive development. It does so by bringing together civil society organisations and researchers from the Netherlands, Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Zambia.

see the
strength in
every child



Sayantani Sardar. PHOTO: JVS - JAN VIKAS SAMITI

achieving gender equality. While this approach generated significant enthusiasm and led to important gains, it also encountered major challenges that limited its effectiveness, particularly in international development contexts.

As we strive to mainstream disability into global development efforts, it is crucial to reflect on these lessons. What worked, what didn't, and why? How can these insights help development practitioners design disability inclusion strategies that are not only ambitious but also impactful? This brief draws on the experiences of gender mainstreaming to provide practical recommendations for disability mainstreaming in the international development sector.¹ By examining key challenges and offering actionable solutions, it aims to help practitioners in the field of disability inclusive development to avoid common pitfalls and achieve meaningful change.

¹ This experience is based on the DPRN project “On Track with Gender” (see for report: <https://www.bibalex.org/Search4Dev/files/325371/156983.pdf>) and diverse publications among which: IDS Bulletin special issue 2004 by Cornwall et al., Development & Change special issue 2007 by Cornwall et al., Gender & Development special issue 2005 by Sweetman & Porter. The special issue of Journal of International Development on gender mainstreaming by van Eerdewijk and Davids 2014. And T. Davids, A. Eerdewijk (2016) The smothering of feminist knowledge: Gender mainstreaming articulated through neoliberal governmentalities.DOI:10.1057/978-1-137-48685-1_5Corpus ID: 152203400.

● The promise of gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming emerged as a strategy to address systemic inequality by integrating gender perspectives into every aspect of policy and practice. Advocates envisioned it as a way to ensure that men and women benefit equally from development efforts and that gender inequality is not perpetuated. As defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1997:

“Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programs, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation

of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated.”

This strategy, introduced at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in 1995, was a milestone in global efforts for gender equity. Its introduction was hailed as a breakthrough, sparking excitement and high expectations among feminists and women's movements worldwide. The ambitious promise of gender mainstreaming lay in its potential to transform not just policies, but the underlying power structures in society.

● Challenges and lessons

Gender mainstreaming encountered numerous challenges that undermined its effectiveness. These challenges offer invaluable lessons for disability mainstreaming (see table 1).

Table 1 | Challenges and lessons: gender to disability mainstreaming

CHALLENGE	LESSON FOR DISABILITY MAINSTREAMING
LACK OF CLEAR GOALS	Define specific, contextually relevant objectives for disability mainstreaming
NEGLECT OF INTERNAL CHANGE	Start with internal organizational transformation ensuring the organization has internalized key beliefs and values
RELIANCE ON INDIVIDUAL CHAMPIONS	Embed responsibility for disability inclusion across the organization
SINGLE-AXIS APPROACHES	Use an intersectional lens to address overlapping inequalities for inclusive interventions



CHALLENGE 1 | WHY CLEAR GOALS MATTER FOR DISABILITY INCLUSION

In gender mainstreaming, a major pitfall was the absence of a shared understanding of its objectives. Policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders often interpreted the concept differently. For some, it was a tool to improve the quality of policies by considering gender dynamics, while for others, it was a mechanism to radically transform societal power relations. This lack of consensus created significant ambiguity. The absence of clarity about whether gender mainstreaming was a technical policy tool or a transformative agenda led to inconsistent implementation. Without defined benchmarks or shared frameworks, it was challenging to measure progress or hold stakeholders accountable.

The ambiguity in goals meant that gender mainstreaming efforts often prioritized surface-level changes - such as increasing the number of women in leadership positions - without addressing deeper structural inequalities. A singular focus on women proved insufficient, as it overlooked the broader power dynamics at play, including the need to engage men or challenge heteronormative norms. This fragmented approach resulted in some projects delivering tangible benefits for women, while others merely ticked boxes without achieving meaningful impact. As a result, gender mainstreaming frequently fell short of its transformative promise, leaving systemic power imbalances intact.

Disability mainstreaming faces similar challenges if its goals are not clearly defined. Ambiguity around whether the focus is on equitable resource distribution, improved accessibility, or dismantling societal ableism can result in fragmented efforts. For example, a narrow focus on persons with disabilities might overlook the broader societal dynamics, including the roles of able-bodied individuals in fostering inclusion. However, defining

clear goals should not be mistaken for imposing universal objectives. Goals are only meaningful if they account for the diverse ways in which disability is understood and experienced across different cultural contexts. A culturally sensitive approach ensures that disability mainstreaming efforts address both systemic barriers and localized needs, fostering more impactful and inclusive outcomes.



CHALLENGE 2: START CHANGE WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION

Gender mainstreaming often concentrated on external results - ensuring gender-sensitive policies and programs for beneficiaries - while neglecting internal organizational dynamics. This process, termed “externalization,” assumed that meaningful change would occur primarily at the programmatic level. However, many organizations failed to examine their own internal structures, cultures, and power dynamics. For instance, while promoting gender equity externally, organizations often lacked gender-balanced leadership or inclusive workplace policies, undermining their credibility and effectiveness.

The externalization of gender mainstreaming created a disconnect between rhetoric and practice. Staff at the implementation level often lacked the resources, training, or organizational support to meaningfully integrate gender perspectives into

their work. Additionally, middle management - the “missing middle” - frequently resisted or deprioritized gender mainstreaming due to competing institutional pressures. This weakened the impact of gender mainstreaming efforts, as organizations struggled to model the values they espoused.

Disability mainstreaming must therefore begin with internal organizational change to avoid the pitfalls of externalization. Organizations that fail to address internal barriers - such as inaccessible workplaces, lack of representation of persons with disabilities in leadership roles, or biases in hiring - will struggle to lead by example. This disconnect undermines the credibility of their external initiatives and can result in superficial compliance rather than genuine inclusion.

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Workshop with youth in Tanzania. PHOTO: KCBRP - KARAGWE CBR PROGRAM



CHALLENGE 3: DON'T LEAVE IT ALL TO ONE PERSON

Gender mainstreaming often relied heavily on individual gender experts or focal points to drive systemic change. These individuals were tasked with integrating gender perspectives across entire organizations or sectors, often without sufficient resources, authority, or institutional support. This “individualization” of responsibility created unrealistic expectations and placed immense pressure on a small number of staff members, while other team members remained disengaged from the mainstreaming agenda.

By isolating responsibility for gender mainstreaming within specific roles, organizations failed to embed gender perspectives into their broader operations. Gender experts often became overburdened and faced resistance or indifference

from colleagues who did not view gender mainstreaming as their responsibility. This limited the reach and impact of gender mainstreaming efforts, as systemic change requires buy-in and collaboration across all levels of an organization.

Disability mainstreaming risks falling into the same trap if responsibility is concentrated in the hands of a few disability champions or experts. This approach can lead to burnout among those individuals and insufficient engagement from the wider organization. Effective disability mainstreaming requires collective responsibility, where all staff members understand and contribute to inclusion efforts. Without this shared ownership, efforts to mainstream disability may remain superficial and unsustainable.



CHALLENGE 4: LOOK BEYOND SINGLE-ISSUE SOLUTIONS

Gender mainstreaming often relied on a single-axis approach, treating gender as an isolated issue rather than addressing its intersections with other forms of inequality, such as race, class, and disability. This narrow focus frequently overlooked the diverse experiences of marginalized groups within the gender category. For instance, programs designed to support women's economic empowerment often failed to consider the specific barriers faced by women of color, rural women, or women with disabilities, resulting in exclusionary or ineffective interventions.

A further limitation of this approach was its failure to recognize that gender norms and inequalities are relational. Programs targeting women's empowerment in isolation, without engaging men, ignored the role of men and broader social structures in shaping these inequalities. By neglecting to involve other identities, masculinity and men as allies in challenging and transforming unequal systems, such programs risked reinforcing power dynamics or even provoking backlash, ultimately undermining their goals.

In gender mainstreaming, the single-axis approach often led to essentialism—the assumption that all women share universal experiences and needs. This oversimplification reinforced stereotypes and left many marginalized groups invisible within gender mainstreaming efforts. Initiatives that focused on increasing women's access to education, for example, frequently overlooked the cultural,

economic, and social barriers faced by specific subgroups of women. These efforts also failed to address the relational dynamics of gender, ignoring how interactions between women, men, other identities, communities, and institutions shape opportunities and obstacles. Without engaging all stakeholders in transforming societal attitudes and systems, such initiatives risked perpetuating the very inequalities they sought to address.

Similarly, disability mainstreaming must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and recognize the diversity within the disability community. People with different disabilities face unique opportunities and challenges. Additionally, disability intersects with other aspects of identity, such as gender, age, urban or rural living, and socioeconomic status, making an intersectional approach essential for achieving true inclusion. Programs that focus solely on disability without addressing these intersections risk excluding or disadvantaging certain groups. For instance, an employment program for persons with disabilities may fail to consider the unique challenges faced by women with disabilities, such as caregiving responsibilities or gender-based discrimination. To be inclusive and effective, disability mainstreaming must adopt an intersectional lens and engage able-bodied allies to dismantle systemic barriers and transform societal attitudes.

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Boris Sunjoh Sahnyky. PHOTO: CBCHS - CAMEROON BAPTIST CONVENTION HEALTH SERVICES



Workshop in Burkina Faso. PHOTO: ODDS - ORGANISATION DUPONT POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT SOCIAL

● **Conclusions and recommendations**

The experiences of gender mainstreaming in international development provide valuable insights for disability mainstreaming. Despite its transformative potential, gender mainstreaming often failed to achieve deep structural change due to unclear goals, externalization, reliance on individual champions, and superficial implementation. These challenges must be actively addressed to ensure that disability mainstreaming avoids similar pitfalls and delivers real systemic change.

Disability mainstreaming must go beyond policy inclusion and visibility metrics to fundamentally reshape structures, practices, and decision-making processes. This requires clear transformative goals, institutional accountability, and sustained leadership commitment. The following recommendations outline practical actions to embed disability inclusion meaningfully and sustainably.

1. SET CLEAR, TRANSFORMATIVE GOALS

One of the biggest challenges in gender mainstreaming was the lack of a shared understanding of what mainstreaming should achieve. Without clear goals, efforts were often fragmented or reduced to procedural compliance. Disability mainstreaming must avoid this ambiguity by defining ambitious, measurable objectives that tackle ableism, stigma, and systemic exclusion - not just accessibility improvements.

- Define disability inclusion as a structural change process, not just a visibility or accessibility exercise. Goals must address power dynamics, participation, and leadership representation - not just surface-level compliance.
- Engage persons with disabilities in setting benchmarks, ensuring mainstreaming efforts reflect real needs and priorities.
- Move beyond compliance-driven indicators by tracking structural shifts in power, participation, and leadership.

2. START WITH INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Gender mainstreaming often focused on external policies while failing to transform internal structures, leadership, and workplace culture. Disability mainstreaming must begin within organizations themselves, ensuring that institutions model inclusion in practice before expecting change elsewhere.

- Conduct internal accessibility and inclusion audits to remove physical, digital, and procedural barriers.
- Ensure leadership structures include persons with disabilities and that hiring and promotion processes foster inclusion.
- Ensure middle management is actively engaged in disability inclusion, bridging the gap between high-level commitments and day-to-day implementation.

3. FOSTER SHARED RESPONSIBILITY (BEYOND INDIVIDUAL CHAMPIONS)

A major weakness of gender mainstreaming was the over-reliance on individual gender champions, which led to burnout and a lack of institutional ownership. Disability mainstreaming should be embedded across departments and leadership levels, ensuring that inclusion is a collective effort, not an isolated responsibility.

- Establish cross-departmental disability inclusion committees, ensuring representation from all organizational levels.
- Integrate disability inclusion into performance reviews, strategy meetings, and funding priorities.
- Provide leadership training on disability inclusion, equipping decision-makers with the knowledge and tools to drive systemic change.

4. USE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES WITHOUT ERASING GROUP-SPECIFIC NEEDS

Gender mainstreaming often failed to recognize overlapping inequalities, treating gender as a stand-alone issue. Similarly, disability mainstreaming must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach that ignores the diverse experiences of people with disabilities based on gender, age, ethnicity, and other factors.

- Conduct intersectional assessments to identify barriers affecting specific disability sub-groups (e.g., women, young people, urban residents).
- Develop targeted interventions where necessary, ensuring that broad mainstreaming efforts do not overlook group-specific needs.
- Engage with diverse disability organizations, co-designing programs that reflect the experiences of multiple marginalized groups.



Drawing Workshop by Mack van Gageldonk at GS Gahanga Primary School.

PHOTO: NUDOR - NATIONAL UNION OF DISABILITIES' ORGANISATIONS OF RWANDA

5. INVEST IN CAPACITY BUILDING TO ENSURE SUSTAINED, MEANINGFUL INCLUSION

Mainstreaming efforts often rely on one-off training programs that do not lead to lasting change. To embed disability inclusion, organizations must commit to long-term capacity building that equips staff at all levels - not just disability focal points - with the skills to implement inclusive practices.

- Develop ongoing learning programs that address not just accessibility but also bias, stigma, and power dynamics.
- Encourage peer learning and cross-sector exchanges, ensuring organizations share best practices and innovations.
- Ensure capacity-building efforts include middle management, preventing resistance and ensuring practical implementation.

6. MONITOR AND EVALUATE FOR IMPACT, NOT JUST COMPLIANCE

Gender mainstreaming was often reduced to procedural checklists, with success measured by policy existence rather than real change. Disability mainstreaming must focus on measuring progress through lived experiences and structural outcomes.

- Develop impact-driven evaluation frameworks, assessing changes in representation, accessibility, and participation.
- Engage persons with disabilities in monitoring efforts, ensuring that evaluation processes reflect their priorities and realities
- Ensure evaluation processes detect and prevent 'performative inclusion' by tracking whether mainstreaming efforts lead to structural change - not just procedural compliance.

7. ADVOCATE FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE WHILE EMBEDDING INCLUSION IN ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

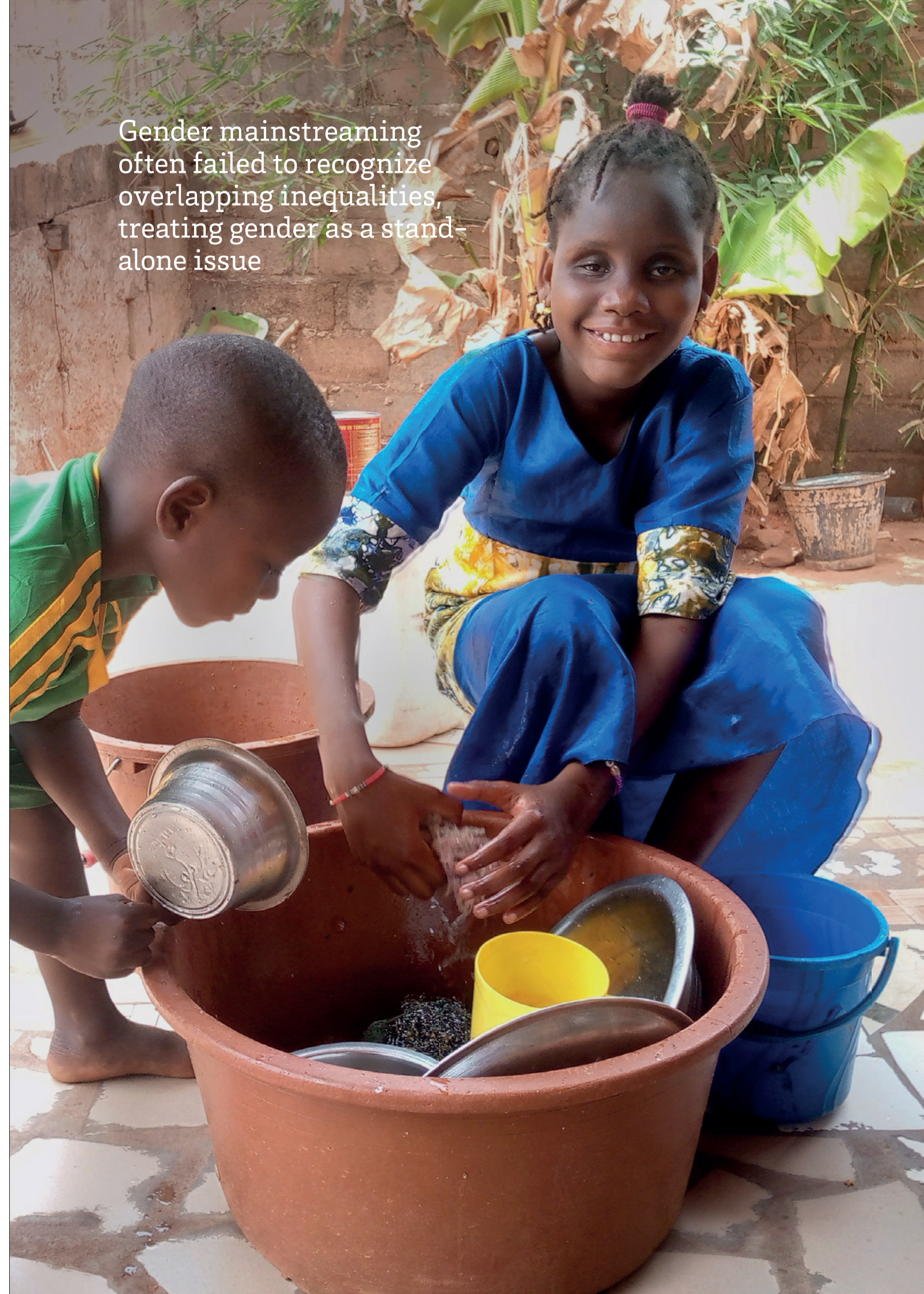
Many organizations support disability rights externally while failing to embed them internally in governance and leadership. For disability mainstreaming to be effective, it must be part of a long-term institutional strategy, rather than just an advocacy goal.

- Position disability inclusion as a strategy to challenge ableism as a power structure, embedding it into long-term planning, governance, and funding frameworks.
- Advocate for national and international policy shifts, aligning with broader disability rights movements.
- Build coalitions with other organizations, strengthening collective advocacy for systemic reform.



Ornella Topan – EI Project BF025. PHOTO: ODDS - ORGANISATION DUPONT POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT SOCIAL

Gender mainstreaming often failed to recognize overlapping inequalities, treating gender as a stand-alone issue



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