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URRUTIA ELEJALDE

Corporate Social Responsibility & Gender Equity: A Mainstreaming Perspective

Abstract:

A distinguishing characteristic of the current phase of globalization is that economic activity is global in scope and organization. Falling barriers to trade and investment and advances in communication technologies and management systems made it possible to locate production processes in different countries. According to some political or academic discourses, free trade principle rests on the premise that the expansion of trade benefits everyone through comparative advantages and an increased economic growth rate that promotes development and reduces social injustice. However, the reality is incessantly disproving this argument: many corporations continue to move their production processes to developing countries in order to take advantage of more favourable social and environmental policies. And despite stated intentions of many corporations to recognize social issues, the realities of trade agreements, lobbying efforts, free trade zones, and general market pressures to remain competitive in the global market present consistent challenges. Moreover, inequalities of power, access, position and condition between global labour market actors as well as gender inequities in public and private responsibilities, make it such that commercial and economic policies impact women and men in disproportionately different ways.

Given the absence of a global enforcement mechanism and the regulation deficit of many developing countries, pressures have led many corporations to develop Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies and a variety of monitoring mechanisms. CSR implies a commitment and responsibility on the part of businesses to incorporate the need of many stakeholders into their strategic plans and to redefine their role in order to contribute to poverty reduction, to promote sustainable development and act under a human rights ethic and philosophy. CSR can be most simply understood as activity which recognizes the social imperatives of business success and which addresses its social externalities. It combines technical processes of allocating, measuring and reporting social performance with political processes of redefining rights and responsibilities, particularly through different forms of stakeholder engagement. CSR's significance for wider societies can be best understood, first, in the context of the growing social imprint of business, particularly multinational corporations. Secondly, it can be understood by the growing extent to which, with the implicit or explicit encouragement of government, business is assuming greater responsibility for what might in other eras have been described as public policy.

At the end of the last century, the focus of feminist academic and policy discourse shifted to a post-feminist rhetoric of "*gender equality and equity*". The 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, for example, framed its rather ambitious global women's agenda in terms of gender equality and equity without reference to feminism. In recent years, as the business world has grown increasingly conscious of CSR, the moral claims of economic and social justice for women have been obscured and incorporated into a broader agenda of wide-ranging issues such as diversity, integrity, transparency, child labour, poverty and the environment. While these CSR issues are indeed urgent and pressing, the lack of focus on the structural, systemic gender bias in the prevailing CSR models burdens women with disadvantage.

The concept of gender equality has been developed to mean (more than equal incomes) an equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. It also means accepting and valuing equally the differences between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society. A new approach to achieving gender equality is *gender mainstreaming* (GM) which is: the (re)organization, improvement, development and

evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making. GM, by contrast, turns the attention away from individuals and their rights (equal treatment) and from groups and their special needs and disadvantages (positive action), and focuses instead upon the systems and structures that give rise to those special needs and disadvantages in the first place. Beyond the legal approach and the best practice, GM adds a broader, long-term approach to gender equality combining putting women's equality on policy agendas with auditing and analysis of policy impacts to record progress in addressing gender inequalities and if they are being re-produced. Within corporations, GM demands that the issue of gender equality be applied to all mainstream policy processes and impact analyses, such that awareness of gender equality is embedded in their structure and culture.

This paper seeks to review the potential incorporation of gender equality issues within the emerging field of CSR from a mainstreaming perspective. It argues that: the principles of gender equity constitute compelling moral claims; prevailing models of business and corporate culture are unjust because they are structurally and systemically biased to create advantages for men and disadvantages for women; and businesses and corporations are moral agents with the duty to adopt gender equity as a priority of CSR. In contrast, we investigate the potential of CSR as a vehicle for encouraging gender equality in business.

More precisely, the first part of this paper introduces gender mainstreaming and considers its potential relationship with CSR. The second section investigates the extent to which gender equality in the workplace has been mainstreamed in CSR, and also checks whether gender equity issues are a higher priority of corporations' agendas. We argue that this has been limited, despite some rare successful initiatives, because it has generally been considered in CSR without a "*mainstreaming*" approach. We examine this limitation with reference to social auditing as a main related CSR mechanism. In other terms, this research is a self-reflective inquiry and conclusions are basically made by reviewing the findings of more than forty social compliance audits personally performed during the last five years in many developing countries on behalf of many American and European corporations. The paper concludes with some suggestions of initiatives which might be developed to incorporate a gendered dimension into a more comprehensive notion of CSR. Meantime, the implications of research findings and suggestions for future investigation in this field are presented.

Keywords: CSR - gender mainstreaming - gender equality - social audits - corporations