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Abstract

Gender mainstreaming has the ambition to promote policy learning. The specific problem that is the focus of this article centres on the conditions for learning as part of gender mainstreaming in public procurement processes. The article is based on a case study of an occupational health project in a municipality in northern Sweden where gender mainstreaming was included in public procurement as part of the initiative. The main question asked is: can public procurement be an instrument for policy learning in gender mainstreaming? The results show that policy learning was part of the process for both the contractor and the suppliers. The municipality and the suppliers also to some extent engaged in co-learning and joint development work. The article discusses some limitations and problems that were encountered. The results showed that the relevant question was not only whether policy learning can occur but what kind of learning is possible and necessary for the envisioned policy outcomes in terms of gender mainstreaming. The study highlights the dilemmas encountered in public procurement processes and their consequences for policy learning. The study also contributes to an understanding of the application, and outcomes, of gender mainstreaming in different contexts.

Introduction

Private suppliers of public services have become increasingly important in Sweden and elsewhere. In Sweden alone, annual public procurement amounts to approximately 500 billion Swedish kronor (Swedish Competition Authority). In Sweden, it has been argued that a gender perspective should be applied to public services performed not only by public, but also, by private actors. This makes public procurement an interesting policy instrument for gender equality politics. One example is the Swedish government's investigation of gender mainstreaming a few years back, which concluded that: "All civil services that are publicly funded should be gender mainstreamed, regardless of supplier. This requirement should therefore be included in contracts under the law" (SOU, 2007:15: 70). Still, there are very few studies of the practical application of social considerations in public procurement and even fewer exploring the suitability of the implementation of gender mainstreaming strategies through procurement processes.

Gender mainstreaming, together with specific initiatives, has been the main strategy for national gender equality politics in Sweden since the mid 1990s. Today there is a comprehensive national strategy for gender mainstreaming with efforts to strengthen and develop it at central, regional and local levels, as described in the overall gender equality strategy 2011–2014 (Skr, 2011/12: 3). There are several definitions of gender mainstreaming strategy. According to one often-cited definition, gender mainstreaming is the:

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[...](re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making. (The Council of Europe's Group 1998:15)

Gender mainstreaming is believed by many to have a "transformative potential" in the striving towards a more gender equal society (see Verloo, 2005 for a discussion). Jahan explains how gender mainstreaming aims at transformation processes that entail a change of policy. The transformation achieved by gender mainstreaming means:

[...] prioritising gender objectives among competing issues, reorienting the mainstream political agenda by rethinking and re-articulating policy ends and means from a gender perspective. (Jahan, 1995: 13)

In doing so, "women not only become part of the mainstream, they also reorient the nature of the mainstream" (Jahan, 1995: 13). Gender mainstreaming thus entails finding "new" solutions to "old" problems in the realm of common policy areas. The transformation of mainstream policy areas implies that policy learning is an important outcome of gender mainstreaming, the argument being that in order for a transformation of mainstream policies to occur, policy learning has to take place. In this article it is discussed whether policy learning in line with the ambitions of the gender mainstreaming strategy can be achieved through public procurement. To be more precise, policy learning is understood in this article as "a relatively enduring alteration of thought or behavioural intentions that are concerned with the attainment (or revision) of the precepts of a policy belief system" (Sabatier, 1993: 19), but also recognising the fact that "changes in thinking" do not always lead to or always preclude a "change in policy" (Kemp and Weehuizen, 2005: 3).

Sweden is often portrayed as one of the world's most gender-equal countries, and important societal actors, including the government, have actively promoted change in many areas. There are, however, still many remaining problems from a gender perspective, such as inequalities in working life, health conditions, an unequal share of family responsibilities and the prevalence of violence against women, which are in many respects similar to those of other countries. Gender-based inequalities persist both in Sweden and elsewhere (Hearn, 2012). A powerful illustration of this is provided by the United Nations in its estimation that women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10 per cent of the world's income, and own one per cent of the world's property (Lorber, 2005; Frisby, Maguire & Reid, 2009). The work to realise gender equality objectives has furthermore been slow and the development uneven across policy areas (Hearn, 2012). In order to solve the often complex and interlinked problems causing gender inequality, a popular political strategy in many countries around the world from the 1990s onwards has been gender mainstreaming (Walby, 2011). The main idea underlying the gender mainstreaming strategy is to ensure that a gender perspective is present, not just in a few, but in all policy processes, and thus improve "mainstream" policies so that they will become more attuned

to gender equality objectives. The implementation of this strategy should be carried out by the actors normally involved in policy-making and not only performed by gender experts or as specific gender equality initiatives. Gender mainstreaming can be said to be a “meta-instrument” (Jacquot, 2010: 124) and a mechanism for coordinating existing policy instruments to make them more effective (Halpern et al., 2008). It is thus aimed at rationalising other policy instruments, but is also a policy in itself (Jacquot, 2010: 124). Despite the popularity of gender mainstreaming, which has seen a rapid spread and adoption both in Sweden and internationally, it is a widely contested concept (Walby, 2011; 2005). Theorists of gender mainstreaming suggest that the strategy may lead to co-optation by the dominant discourse within an organisation and thus no transformation of the current agenda; others have argued that it provides an opportunity to change existing inequalities by addressing their root causes (Walby, 2005). Studies conducted in Sweden have revealed problems such as weak steering and support for gender mainstreaming and also a lack of understanding of how to relate a gender perspective to specific policy areas, as well as a general lack of interest in the matter (Rönblom, 2011; Sainsbury & Bergqvist, 2009; Wittbom, 2009).

There are several reasons for studying gender mainstreaming in the realm of public procurement. One is because gender mainstreaming is understood here as a meta-instrument that will vary according to the specifics of its application. It is important to study these variations because the context of implementation has a great impact on the outcomes of equality policies but is seldom taken into account (Connell, 2006a,b; Callerstig, 2014). The context, in terms of both the policy field and the policy instruments used can give important information about the feasibility of different equality strategies in different settings. Another reason is that the area of public contracting, where public procurement is one instrument, is an increasingly important area for governments to realise equality objectives. Nevertheless, the application of gender equality objectives through public procurement remains underdeveloped and under-researched (Ahlberg & Bruun, 2010).

The discussion in this article draws on a case study of gender mainstreaming in public procurement as a result of an occupational healthcare initiative in a municipality in northern Sweden. The main question asked is: can public procurement be an instrument for policy learning in gender mainstreaming? In the case study the following questions are discussed: How was gender mainstreaming implemented in the procurement process in the initiative? Was policy learning an outcome of the implementation process? What factors impacted on the process and outcomes and why?

Methodology

The results to be discussed below are based on a case study undertaken between 2010 and 2011 of public procurement in Krokoms Municipality, which was introduced due to an ESF-funded project with the aim of reducing workplace-related

health problems among the municipality's employees. The case study was conducted using an interactive research approach. In interactive research, the creation of a joint learning process between researchers and practitioners is a central feature (Svensson, Ellström & Brulin, 2007). The main purpose is to generate new knowledge and to contribute to theory development. It is also considered to contribute to the development of the practical work, which is seen mainly as the practitioners' responsibility. What is important is the perception of practitioners as being interested in, capable of and able to contribute to creating a deeper understanding of what is being studied. The idea is that, while the practitioners work practically to "solve" the problem, the researcher works to gain new knowledge in order to develop theories and abstract models (ibid.). Practitioners can be involved in most parts of the research process and the organisation of joint analysis seminars is a common method in interactive research and a way to facilitate the knowledge and learning process (Halvarsson & Öhman, 2009; Callerstig, 2014).

In the case study discussed in this article, practitioners were engaged in all phases of the research process. These persons were all involved in and had different functions in the municipal project studied. They were asked to participate in the research and are referred to below as the participants. The aim was to establish a joint learning process on public procurement as a way for the municipality to make the suppliers integrate a gender perspective into their services. Initially, what could be seen as an important practical question was discussed with the project leader and project coordinator. This was expressed as how a gender perspective could be included as a "demand" in the procurement process in a way that would help to bring about changes in how health issues were addressed by the suppliers. Who should be interviewed was also discussed. All in all, eleven semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1997) were conducted with managers and employees from the municipality, the project leader and project coordinator, municipal co-workers, a gender expert from the ESF (European Social Fund) who was counselling the project, a gender researcher who was contracted as an evaluator, and with private suppliers of healthcare. The interviews focused on the conditions of the procurement process, what had been the outcomes of the project and why. The interviews were recorded and partly transcribed. Each one lasted approximately an hour. Central documents, such as the project application and procurement documents, have also been used to inform the analysis.

After the interviews were finished, the participants were sent a summary of the results and were invited to an analysis and reflection seminar. At the seminar the results were presented along with the analysis and the theoretical models used. The results were discussed with the purpose both to reflect upon the results and to "play around" with alternative future strategies as part of the learning agenda (Nentwich, 2009; Callerstig & Lindholm, 2011). The participants were asked to reflect upon the results (described further below) and what was needed to reach the anticipated change. They were asked to do so in relation to their role as a contractor with the aim of discussing the practical implications of the find-

ings. The seminar lasted approximately three hours and the discussion was recorded and used in the further analysis.

In the study, the interactive method was helpful in analysing the results and finding potential explanations for them from different perspectives, which is a way to achieve both internal and external validity (Yin, 2006). The interactive method is also a well-recognised approach in feminist research and has been used in feminist implementation research (Callerstig, 2014). Interactive research can act as a “consciousness raising tool”, and can assist in a more democratic form of knowledge production (Gunnarsson, 2006, 2007). Interactive research can also serve to counteract the internalisation of oppression and personal blame for a situation. The focus can instead be shifted to the broader societal forces constraining the lives of individuals. This can lead to an examination of the connections between behaviour, gender and social structures (Frisby, Maguire & Reid, 2009). The municipal project leader, who was contacted after the analysis and reflection seminar, said that the interactive approach had indeed been helpful in the continuing work by providing new perspectives and opportunities to learn about gender in public procurement processes, and also in understanding how gender operates within organisations such as the municipality and the contracted private companies. Before discussing the results of the study it is important to say a few words about gender mainstreaming and public procurement.

Public procurement and social objectives

From a policy perspective, efforts to mainstream gender into public procurement can be understood as being part of a wider aim to realise social objectives through public procurement, often referred to as SRPP (Socially Responsible Public Procurement). The use of public contracts to achieve social outcomes has a long history and has developed simultaneously with the modern welfare state. As early as 1840, state contracts in the United States included rules on restricted working hours. In Europe, a regulation on equal pay was introduced in 1891 in England (McCrudden, 2004). Equal treatment and equality between women and men have been included in public procurement policies since the 1960s (McCrudden, 2004, 2007). In the EU, specific legislation and recommendations for SRPP have been put forward. One of the advantages commonly cited is that social considerations in procurement contribute to social and labour law enforcement and related national and international policy; it is a means to encourage socially conscious markets and demonstrates socially responsible governance. It encourages the integration of various social groups and ensures the efficient use of public expenditure (European Commission, 2010).

Demands for the inclusion of a gender perspective have been met only to a small extent in Sweden despite generally good provisions in the legal framework (SALAR, 2012; Callerstig & Jalakas, 2012; Ahlberg & Bruun, 2010). In Sweden, SRPP has been developed far more in relation to environmental aspects than social aspects as a whole (SOU, 2011:73).

Social considerations in public procurement can be met in different ways; it can be demands related to the *suppliers*, such as requirements for competence on social issues or that suppliers work with social issues such as equal opportunities for their employees. It can also focus on the *procurement process* itself, such as ensuring diversity and non-discrimination from the supplier's perspective, or it can focus on social considerations in the production and delivery of *goods or services* through the contract. In Swedish law on public procurement (LOU, LUF), there are specific provisions stating that contracting authorities should take into account environmental and social considerations in their procurement processes when warranted. Government authorities that spend above certain financial levels are also legally obliged to apply so-called "anti-discrimination conditions" in contracts.

SRPP as a steering instrument towards social objectives has been discussed by Frostenson and Sjöström in a review of previous research (SOU, 2013: 12). They conclude that it requires the contracting authority to have the capacity and competence to engage in the process. Specific problems can include increased costs and problems of conflicting priorities as well as the need to ensure that the supplier keeps up with the demands of the contract. Also the capacity to actively engage in collaborative processes has been found to be important.

Policy learning, public procurement and gender mainstreaming

The specific problem focused upon in this article is centred on the conditions for policy learning as part of the implementation of gender mainstreaming through procurement processes.

When a new policy goal is introduced into an organisation, readymade solutions seldom accompany the work. Rather, the actors involved have to learn how to "solve" the problems in focus (Schofield, 2004). This means that in one sense learning is always a part of the implementation process and that operationalisation of a policy generally requires learning in order to find the necessary solutions to the problems it presents.

Learning in relation to gender mainstreaming is needed in order to integrate a gender perspective into mainstream policies and organisations which might lack such a perspective or be perceived as gender neutral. Prior research has convincingly shown that organisations, including those in the public sector, are seldom gender neutral, but often gendered in many respects (Hearn & Parkin, 2003; Calás & Smircich, 2006; Stivers, 2002). The gendered nature of organisations has important implications for understanding how they function and, specifically, for the way in which such processes create gendered outcomes, both for employees and also in terms of the services provided, such as in occupational health services. Joan Acker describes gender as a fundamental element of organisations that is "present in [its] processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distribution of power" (Acker, 1992: 567). Sometimes this "presence" is open and overt and sometimes deeply hidden in processes and decisions that seem at first to have nothing to do with gender. Gender is not merely something that

individuals bring with them into organisations, it is continually enacted in daily operations and practices (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This means that existing, often unreflected, gender processes that are produced and reproduced on an everyday basis need to be made visible and challenged to enable any transformation of policy. For this, policy learning needs to take place. The relation between learning and transformation has been explained by Kemp and Weehuizen (2005) as the relation between a “change of thinking” and a “change in doing”, but these authors argue that the relationship between them is not a simple rational development where changes in thinking always lead to or always preclude a “change in doing” (Kemp & Weehuizen, 2005: 3). In organisations, a “change in doing” might be restricted in several ways. We know from prior research that some problems are particularly common in gender equality initiatives, such as: gender equality objectives are seldom prioritised in an organisation, there is often a lack of support from management as well as a general lack of resources, existing gender regimes might hinder implementation and the work is largely driven by enthusiasts (Callerstig, 2012, 2014). In addition, lack of awareness about the way in which we all “do” gender in our everyday actions is widespread (Andersson et al., 2009). Gender equality, in addition, is in itself a complex policy issue and it is often difficult to find one sole cause of gender inequality, which in turn places greater demands on the implementation process. In reviews of previous research, two prominent themes frequently recur and emerge as central. They are the vagueness of, and ambiguities inherent in, gender equality objectives and, secondly, the conflicts surrounding gender equality work, including resistance from both managers and co-workers (Mergaert, 2012; Callerstig, 2014).

The learning necessary for gender mainstreaming includes adjusting and correcting current policy processes and practices in line with existing rules and regulations on gender equality, known as “adaptive” learning (Ellström, Ekholm & Ellström, 2008; Ellström, 2010). But very often in gender mainstreaming, where the solution to a problem is not known, actors need to reflect upon and develop new solutions, also known as “innovative” or “developmental” learning, which would entail a more profound change (Ellström, Ekholm & Ellström, 2008; Ellström, 2010). Based on a study of gender mainstreaming initiatives within the Swedish education sector from 2012, Anna Fogelberg Eriksson concludes that gender mainstreaming can lead to policy innovations because the integration of a gender perspective into mainstream policies can lead to new ways of addressing existing inequalities (Fogelberg Eriksson, 2012). Another finding was that, even though a gender perspective can be a driving force for innovation, at the same time it “cannot, in and of itself, generate innovations in organizations” (ibid.: 286). The most important factors were found to be: building a body of knowledge; time; a conscious organisation of the developmental work; management support; and additional and earmarked financial resources. These factors are commonly reported in the literature on achieving conscious change in organisations, not only those restricted to gender issues but also more generally (ibid.). The concept of individual and organisational learning readiness

has been used to explain patterns of learning in different organisations. Traditional linear and mechanistic models of implementation have been criticised for their lack of reflection or development-oriented learning, especially when applied to new and complex problems (Adler et al., 2004). A change process based on feedback and learning loops is instead thought to function better in social settings, where people's participation creates the conditions necessary for development work. It is mainly the creative, innovative, expansive, exploratory and developmental learning that have been emphasised as improving change processes (Ellström, 2010; Elkjaer, 2001; Engeström, 1996; March, 1991; Dewey, 1989), even though adaptive learning also needs to be balanced (Ellström, Ekholm & Ellström, 2008).

In adaptive learning, the focus is on "the mastery of certain specific tasks, problems, methods or ways of working – for example learning a particular way of working in accordance with prevailing routines in an organisation" (Ellström, Ekholm & Ellström, 2008: 85) and this is important in relation to the formation of competencies for handling routine problems that recur frequently. The second type of learning, called innovative learning, happens when "individuals or groups within an organisation begin to question established definitions of the problems and tasks at hand, and act to develop new ways of coping with the duties and often complex problems involved in the job" (ibid.). In the analysis- and reflection seminar, a model was presented to display these two approaches in relation to public procurement (table 1, below).

Table 1. Two approaches to learning and public procurement

	Developmental perspective	Adaptive perspective
<i>learning</i>	developmental or innovative learning	adaptive learning
<i>principle</i>	development logic -thought and reflection -alternative thinking, experimentation and risk taking -tolerance of diversity, uncertainty and misinterpretations	production logic -effective action based on routines and rules -solve problems through the application of given rules / routines -consistency and like-minded, stability and security
<i>approach</i>	open, proactive	driven/steered, reactive
<i>problem</i>	complex, uncertain	"high causality", established
<i>objective</i>	effect oriented	outcome oriented
<i>means</i>	communication, collaboration	provision and requirements, sanctions

Source: Developed from Ellström, Ekholm & Ellström (2008)

Prior research has shown that public procurement can stimulate learning and change processes in different ways in line with the conditions for adaptive and innovative learning. It can be a means to push for innovation when a contracting authority with the necessary competences is able to force innovation on the part of the supplier or even "involve themselves in co-invention; pushing suppliers to innovate in order to keep up with user requirements" (Uyarra & Flanagan, 2010:

130). The required provision or the demand side of innovation has increasingly been recognised as an important part of innovation processes (Fontana & Guerzoni, 2008). Procurement as such can serve as an incentive and in various ways promote learning and change. Procurement can influence innovation processes, for example, by supporting a larger market for a product or service, or by supporting the development of new standards for products, processes and services or by encouraging greater innovation propensity in the market more generally (ibid.). Depending on what needs to be procured and the degree of knowledge specialisation required by the supplier, it is possible to distinguish between different kinds of contracts, where the most experimental is characterised by its complexity and the fact that it requires a specialist. Based on these conditions for different types of procurement, four different relationships between purchasers and suppliers have been identified. Based on the first scenario, the procurement process can run as a completely collaborative process from start to finish; alternatively, the procurement relationship can be characterised by close cooperation in which the work includes a regular exchange of information. It is also common that a supervisory relationship functions in procurement in which the purchaser has a control function and the supplier works more independently; the supplier is then seen as wholly responsible for the outcome. The last case is a distant relation, at “arm’s length”, in which no further contact between the parties takes place after the contract is signed, one example being the procurement of office supplies (Uyarra & Flanagan, 2010). In the following section, the results of the study will be outlined and discussed in relation to the questions on policy learning as part of gender mainstreaming and public procurement processes.

Krokom Municipality and the pilot model for occupational safety and health work

For a long time, Krokom Municipality had had problems with poor health among municipal employees. In 2007, the municipality had a sick leave rate of 10.5%, which was well above the national average of 7.2%. The severity of the problem led the politicians and municipal leaders to take the decision to deal with it in 2008. This led to a project application to develop a pilot model for occupational health and safety work that might later also serve as a model for municipalities across the county of Jämtland. The project aimed to introduce new methods and processes that would enable an optimal return to work for long-term sick and ultimately prevent new long-term sickness from occurring. As part of the project, a new model for regulating a gender perspective in contracts with healthcare suppliers was developed and put into action. Due to the requirement to work with gender mainstreaming that the ESF demands of projects that receive funding in Sweden, a gender analysis was conducted when the project application was made. The result of this analysis showed that a gender perspective was important for the objectives of the project because women’s rates of sick-leave were twice as high as those of men. The total sick leave in 2007 for women was 11.9% and for men, 5.8% (Application to the ESF, 2008).

The overall aim of the new project was to develop a model for business-related occupational health services tailored to the new rehabilitation chain. Part of the project was also devoted to increasing the competence of municipal managers in order to improve purchases of the services needed for both prevention and rehabilitation. A new occupational health coordinator was also to be employed to serve as the link between external suppliers of occupational health and safety services and managers in the municipality. Three major programmes were planned to be launched in relation to the project; a rehabilitation programme, a rehabilitation and readjustment programme and a leadership development programme. All of these were to be contracted through public procurement processes. An ongoing evaluation conducted by researchers with gender competence from a nearby university was arranged (see Olofsdotter & Sjöstedt Landén, 2014 for a description of the results). A project leader with, among other qualifications, previous experience of gender and organisational development work was hired to lead the work as well as a project coordinator who had previously worked in the municipality. Overall, the project had a budget of 12.8 million Swedish kroner and operated between 2009 and 2011 (Application to the ESF, 2008).

The procurement process and outcomes

The following account of the project is largely based on the interviews. Based on the results of the initial statistical analysis it was decided to include a strong focus on a gender perspective when implementing the new model. As a consequence, demands were made in the procurement of the three main programmes (rehabilitation, rehabilitation and adjustment and leadership training) that a gender perspective would be integrated into the services provided. The tenders were drafted and advertised. A few bids were received. One of the service suppliers was not considered to meet the gender requirement. This led to an appeal against the decision by the company, which was later ruled against in court, the argument being that the requirement to integrate a gender perspective was justified for the contract. The court also concluded that to exactly specify the criteria for a gender perspective in advance is virtually impossible and that the assessment of the bids received must therefore to some extent be subjective (County Administrative Court of Jämtland, judgment 09-08-19, case 351-09 E).

The remaining bids were assessed based on the established evaluation criteria (of which a gender perspective in the service provided was one). The three suppliers with whom the municipality eventually signed contracts for the different programmes were judged to have met the requirements differently, and qualified as, respectively: “only barely passed” (supplier 2), “satisfactory” (supplier 1) and “good” (supplier 3). After the contracts were signed, the suppliers set out to work with the programmes. In addition, it soon became obvious to the project leader and programme coordinator that there were great differences in the suppliers’ ways of working with gender issues. This was confirmed by the evaluating researchers, who reported problems to the project management with both suppliers 1 and 2 (Olofsdotter & Sjöstedt Landén, 2014). A dialogue was then

initiated with the suppliers, with different results. The supplier who initially was assessed as having a high degree of uncertainty regarding a gender perspective and just barely passed the requirements (supplier 2), was open to cooperation and dialogue and gradually took onboard the criticism and developed a new approach.

The second supplier faced with criticism was supplier 1, who had been deemed satisfactory in the evaluation but according to the project management and researchers alike did not deliver services with any gender perspective at all. When faced with criticism, supplier 1 responded that it was unjustified and was not prepared to make any changes. A meeting was later held between the project manager, the municipal director and the head of the company, who agreed to submit an additional document on how they would work in the future. At the end of the case study, there was still no agreement about how to solve the problems in the programme and the project management was holding discussions with the procurement office in the municipality about the legal basis for terminating the contract.

The third supplier, who had been assessed as “good” in the initial assessment of the bids, performed very well. This company had previous personal experience of working with the municipality’s project manager and they had a close collaboration throughout the implementation of the programme.

Another difference was that the pre-conditions for working with a gender dimension in the three programmes were uneven. In the area of traditional rehabilitation and readjustment activities, less is known about the relevance of gender, there have been few specific methodologies or approaches developed and little research in the area. The third supplier was delivering leadership training, and a lot more is known about gender issues in this area. The similarities and differences as well as the outcome of the different contracted companies’ work with gender perspectives in the programmes are outlined in table 2.

Table 2. Suppliers, services and the involvement of the contractor

	Supplier 1 Rehabilitation	Supplier 2 rehabilitation/readjustment	Supplier 3 leadership training
Level of gender awareness in policy area	low	low	good
Complexity of problem	high	high	high
Initial assessment	satisfactory	just barely passed	good
Gender knowledge at supplier	low	low	good
Collaboration and progress	low	good	good
Dialogue between contractor and supplier	substantial	medium	substantial
Involvement of contractor in development of service	medium	low	substantial
Outcome (year 1)	limited	satisfactory	good

How then can the different behaviours and responses of the service suppliers be understood and how did the contracting party, the municipality, reason about the process?

Putting a gender perspective into practice

The problems of putting a gender perspective into practice in the programmes were described in the interviews as substantial, both for the supplier and the contractor. The municipality had a hard time describing both the requirements and the criteria that the eligible service suppliers would be evaluated upon in the final selection process. The service supplier had difficulties in understanding how to integrate gender into the specific service provided. One interviewee expressed the dilemma in the following way:

Is it us that cannot express ourselves in a clear way or is it them who do not understand what we mean? (Municipality co-worker)

As discussed earlier, relations with the suppliers were marked both by the common, the near and the controlling relationship and also differed during the course of the process. It also differed in relation to how open the contractor and the supplier were towards working together (see table 2). The project manager stressed the balance and joint collaboration that were needed.

It must be in terms of a good conversation and not only be moral high horses. You have to live together. It's like a relationship between a consultant and client, there should be a distance but not too far. (Project manager)

The many and different advantages of making demands for gender mainstreaming through the procurement process were put forward in all the interviews. One was that the requirements had led to tangible results in the suppliers' work. The opportunities to support the integration of gender into the services through procurement were described as good but both resource-intensive and time-consuming. Requirements are seen as important given that gender is understood as a difficult issue to address and that there is, if not outspoken opposition, then often a lack of awareness. Also, even when there is awareness there is often a lack of understanding about how to deal with gender-related problems. The fact that gender equality objectives can be ignored more often than other issues was also stressed by some interviewees. Requirements were therefore seen as important since they create a strong incentive for action, but it was stressed that they have to be linked to monitoring and sanctions. This point was emphasised as a central lesson taken from the project by one manager:

It won't go as intended, if we don't do it as stated! (Municipal manager on the project's dissemination conference)

Legitimacy and credibility as key aspects were also stressed by several interviewees. One example was that it is important to work with a gender perspective yourself when making demands or offering services to others. The project

also resulted in a growing awareness that it is important to understand what you are demanding, as one respondent explains:

We were in total opposition. When it comes to gender and equality I don't have the knowledge, facts or words to get around this "defence". It will easily descend to the level of a children's fight [sandlådenivå] – "you're not doing what you should" – "yes, we are" – "no, you're not." (Municipality co-worker)

There was general agreement among the interviewees that the municipality learned how to make better demands when their own knowledge increased. One supplier explains:

The demands have become more precise along the way and the commissioning skills have become better. (Supplier)

The requirements should not be too precise, however, because the need for flexibility and openness in the process of implementation. Some of the interviewees said that this is because the circumstances of the work may change. Also, there is still little practical work or research in some areas on which to build strict requirements, according to several respondents.

That the contracting authorities must possess expertise in the field of gender but also in public procurement matters was highlighted by several interviewees. This is because they need to be able to evaluate the bids received and general procurement experts might not be so helpful in this respect, partly because of conflicting interests.

We have a procurement office that makes sure that everything is done right, but there it is an extreme one-sided focus on quantity, that you should choose the least expensive. (Municipality co-worker)

The necessity for different types of expertise is explained by another respondent:

I am an expert on rehabilitation, I am not a gender expert. You need a gender expert. (Municipality co-worker)

A general problem is that gender often needs to be addressed as a qualitative issue and it is more difficult to handle qualitative demands in a procurement process. The project coordinator explains:

Most important is that you can make demands that conform with what you want delivered. When talking about these areas, as a contractor, quantitative measures are often more suitable. Quality is elusive and troubling when making these choices. (Project coordinator)

The concern that it is difficult to determine how knowledgeable a supplier is solely based on written statements was also raised by most interviewees. One suggestion is to request references to ensure that there is substance to the supplier's descriptions. There is a fear that some suppliers might have someone who knows what to write in the bid but then it may turn out to be a problem in the actual delivery of services. Another suggestion was to organise meetings between the contractor and the service supplier to describe and discuss the condi-

tions made. It is also important to monitor the process continuously and not just run a final evaluation. According to one respondent:

You can have an evaluation but then it is too late. You have to have a hand in the process all along. (Gender expert)

The fact that there are very few suppliers in general in the area of occupational health services also made the “competition” between suppliers superficial according to several interviewees and in reality there would not be many companies to “select” from. As one interviewee put it:

You have to choose the least bad! (Municipality co-worker)

The importance of treating everyone equally was raised in the interviews, which may be a problem in relation to the requirements. If you “help” someone, this would mean that you have not made the same demands on everyone.

One problem, highlighted by several interviewees, is that in order to be able to contract a supplier then you must be knowledgeable in the area and also receive internal support from the organisation. Framework contracts are problematic in this respect according to some interviewees. By introducing an occupational health coordinator, the municipality has tried to overcome the problem of “bad” contracts. Instead of relying on the supplier’s knowledge, there have also been efforts to increase awareness in the organisation and managers may contact the coordinator to receive support.

After the interviews, participants were invited to a joint analysis and reflection seminar. Together with the invitation, they were sent a summary of the results and the preliminary analysis together with a few questions to reflect upon. These asked whether they recognised the results and they were requested to reflect upon how to balance the need to control and demand results simultaneously with enabling space for innovative learning and collaboration in the procurement process. In the seminar a model for adaptive and innovative learning was displayed (see table 1) and discussed in relation to the results from the interviews and outcomes of the procurement processes.

The discussion in the analysis seminar centred on how to balance the need for adaptive and innovative learning with the requirements of the procurement process. Participants argued that it is important to set up a “list” of requirements that are believed to be “bottom-line” or simply musts in terms of gender equality. This could include, for example, having both women and men as trainers in leadership courses or including work–life balance measures when working with rehabilitation and readjustment programmes. Here it was believed that the municipality had more of a controlling and in some cases advisory function. In other parts of the procurement process, the requirements had to allow for more process-oriented working methods where both the problems and the solutions were more diffuse. Here, the participants also considered it necessary for the municipality to become more closely involved in the development process and to collaborate with the supplier.

Reflections and implications

In this section, it is time to return to the question posed initially: can public procurement be an instrument for policy learning in gender mainstreaming? In the case study, the following questions were asked: How was gender mainstreaming implemented in the procurement process in the initiative? Was policy learning an outcome of the implementation process? What factors impacted on the process and outcomes and why?

Policy learning did occur in the case of Krokom, for the contractor, both in terms of how to work with gender mainstreaming in procurement processes more generally and in terms of applying a gender perspective in occupational health policies. Learning also occurred as an important outcome of the procurement process for the contracted suppliers. In two instances, the municipality and the supplier also engaged to some extent in co-learning and joint development work. The study shows some of the limitations or problems encountered. Fogelberg Eriksson's (2012) clear statement that "innovation does not happen by itself" also proved true here; for innovative learning and organisational change to take place, certain factors are important. The factors that were highlighted in the interviews and in the seminar discussions are in line with earlier research on public procurement as a steering instrument for social outcomes and gender mainstreaming as a strategy for policy learning, as discussed earlier. In the following section some final reflections will be made on the implications of these findings.

The case study in Krokom Municipality shows that public procurement which demands gender competence and the integration of a gender perspective into services can lead to policy learning. One interesting finding was that the procurement process affected not only the supplier but also the contractor. Based on the outcomes, the learning in the project studied was related to:

- better adaptation to requirements and regulations,
- increased awareness and knowledge of the contracting authority,
- increased knowledge and development of existing services by the supplier,
- increased cooperation between private and public actors in order to improve services.

At the same time, the study highlights the complexity of the learning process in the framework of public procurement and gender mainstreaming and the need for:

- knowledge and know-how about gender issues for all parties involved,
- gender awareness, from both the contractor and supplier,
- credibility and legitimacy in the work with gender issues by the contractor,
- collaboration but with clear boundaries,
- clear objectives but with flexibility to change them,

- effective and applied sanctions,
- a situation with real competition among bidders.

Here it should be recognised that such conditions taken together represent an ideal situation which is probably not likely to be the reality to start with in most cases of gender mainstreaming and public procurement. The results also showed that the work is both time-consuming and resource-intensive for both the contractor and the supplier, which confirms earlier studies (Frostenson & Sjöström, 2013). Among the challenges was the difficulty of establishing a precise and pre-set list of requirements for the procurement process. The contractor's lack of knowledge about gender equality issues and, in one case, resistance to collaboration by the supplier, was a clear problem initially and was only partially resolved. The study highlights the dilemma of acting as the regulator and contractor and thus the need to act in a neutral manner and treat all suppliers equally, and on the other hand to be a flexible and engaged partner in the development work.

From the results of the study, it became apparent that the relevant question was not only whether policy learning *can* occur, but what *kind* of learning is possible in relation to the gender mainstreaming strategy? The question in the study was expanded into a discussion of whether public procurement can stimulate innovative learning on gender equality or whether it is mainly a re-active instrument to enforce laws and a better adaption to requirements, and thus mainly useful for adaptive learning. The results show that as public procurement represents a "hard" steering mechanism it can be used to enforce or push for adaptive learning amongst suppliers by making them comply with a given set of regulations. But it also shows that innovative learning requires a willing supplier, an active contractor and an open approach. Turning back to prior research on gender mainstreaming, the vagueness and ambiguities inherent in the objectives as well as the conflicts surrounding the implementation of gender policies are important issues to consider in order to understand the outcome. They are important not only in relation to the policy areas where gender mainstreaming is applied (such as occupational health) but also to the instruments in use (in this case public procurement). The conflicts that have been found in the implementation of gender mainstreaming might be argued to give public procurement an advantage in terms of its character as a regulative top-down policy measure, such as the opportunity it provides to enforce change and new solutions and regulate the market. On the other hand, high levels of ambiguity in terms of the problems and solutions addressed would demand what Uyarra and Flanagan (2010) describe as experimental procurement. This implies the need for innovation-oriented learning (Ellström, Ekholm & Ellström, 2008) in a bottom-up fashion built into the public procurement process. It is clear that the different types of relation that the contractor can have with a supplier are dependent on the type of procurement and to what degree it is perceived as experimental.

However, the low priority generally given to gender equality issues and the difficulties in understanding and thus complying with the requirements implies that it might be important to be active even in cases where more standardised

types of procurement are employed. One example is that the results of the study show that the supplier could write convincingly about gender in the bid but then in the delivery phase not manage to do the work; another is that the contractor and the supplier had different understandings of what the work would entail more precisely. When gender requirements are qualitative and when the supplier needs to engage in innovative processes because solutions do not yet exist, then close contact between the contractor and the supplier is inevitable. This was also visible in terms of the uncertainty about what gender mainstreaming should mean in relation to the service delivered, not only in terms of the suppliers' own knowledge or that of the contractors, but also in relation to the existing bulk of knowledge within the area of the service procured. In the area where a lot was already known about gender aspects and also where the knowledge and engagement of the supplier was the highest (leadership training), the service provided was considered to be of the highest standard. And vice versa, when existing knowledge on gender aspects was low and the contractor was uninterested and unmotivated the outcome was poor.

Public contractors can serve as an external incentive for change, by asking for new types of services (supporting the development of new markets) and by setting the necessary provisions in the contracts to create a suitable learning environment. They can support change and learning by placing demands and monitoring and assessing progress. But the study also shows that change and learning processes such as gender mainstreaming need both individual and organisational readiness for change, and an ability to change.

It is also clear that the specific context of the application of gender mainstreaming matters a great deal. Any oversimplification might risk blurring the fact that implementation designs for gender mainstreaming need to be attuned to their field of application and, more specifically, both to the policy area or issue *and* to the policy instruments used. This might not be so surprising if one sees gender mainstreaming as a meta-instrument. However, it precludes the development of universal gender mainstreaming tools to be applied to all policy areas and all policy instruments, besides very general ones. It shows that an analysis of the context of its application is needed before any implementation design.

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