Gender mainstreaming has been defined as “the (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” (Council of Europe, 1998, p. 10). Originating in development assistance programmes and policies, the idea of mainstreaming was taken up within the U.N. following the United Nations Third World Conference on Women in 1985 and was adopted as a strategic objective by the U.N. in the Platform for Action agreed at Beijing in 1995. The recognition awarded to mainstreaming in the Platform for Action served both to reflect growing interest in the idea of mainstreaming and to encourage states and international organisations which had not already done so to adopt their own mainstreaming strategies and policies. It also signalled the widespread acceptance in the international community of the concept of mainstreaming as a ‘new’ approach to gender equality.

Mainstreaming has focused attention on the policy-making sphere and many governments have undertaken a political commitment to consider the potential gender impact of policies while those policies are still under development. The European Commission, for instance, sought:

The systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of women and men in all policies and with a view to promoting equality between women and men and mobilising all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account, at the planning stage, their effect on the respective situation of women and men. (European Commission, 1996, p. 2)

Acting out these political commitments to mainstreaming has often meant the adoption of new bureaucratic practices, with policies being screened for their gender impact, gender impact assessments being required and monitoring or evaluation procedures being put in place (see e.g. Council of Europe, 1998). Occasionally the commitment to mainstreaming has been translated into a legal norm. In the E.U., for instance, the E.C. Treaty itself has been amended to incorporate a legally-binding
commitment to mainstreaming,\(^1\) and mainstreaming has also become a requirement of the Structural Funds regulations governing the distribution of E.U. regeneration funds\(^2\) and the Employment Guidelines, which seek to co-ordinate Member State approaches to employment and training issues.\(^3\) Moving to the regional level, in Northern Ireland all public authorities are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between different groups, including men and women and are required to produce for approval Equality Plans for submission to the Equality Commission.\(^4\)

In many contexts, mainstreaming has been interpreted as requiring change in the way policy is made and/or change in who participates in this process. This perceived need for change has opened windows of opportunity for feminist groups, women’s policy actors within institutions and other social groups committed to the advancement of equality politics and policies. Though the results have been patchy, this aspect of mainstreaming raises questions about presence and representation of women in social institutions alongside broader questions of governance.

In the light of these developments, this Special Issue seeks to explore the concept of mainstreaming and its potential as a policy-making tool in the E.U. public policy context. Despite its popularity with governments, there is much about mainstreaming which remains uncertain. It is far from easy to determine how mainstreaming strategies might interact with other equality and non-discrimination laws, strategies and polices. To what extent they are complementary and to what extent they result in contradictory pressures on policy-makers? The institutional implications of adopting mainstreaming policies and the institutional requirements for successful mainstreaming are unclear. Above all it is debatable whether mainstreaming policies can overcome the limitations of established equal opportunity and positive discrimination strategies, and if so under what conditions. And implicit in all this lies a philosophical question about the meaning of equality which in turn prompts us to ask the questions ‘what is good mainstreaming?’ and ‘how will we know when it is working?’

To investigate these questions, the contributors to this Special Issue have mapped mainstreaming onto established debates and critiques of law and policy-making in a variety of academic disciplines and institutional contexts, and have considered its political implications in the

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\(^1\) Article 3(2) EC, introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam.
\(^3\) See http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg05/empl&esf/empl09/joint-en.htm