Gender at Work E-discussion on

Gender & Organizational Change - Summary[1]

4 May 2012

1. Introduction:

The first edition of *Gender at Work* -- published in 1999 and edited by Aruna Rao, Rieky Stuart and David Kelleher – posited that organizations were critical sites of change on the path to gender equality and that confronting the 'deep structures' that perpetuated gender discrimination in organizations was crucial to enabling progress.

Thirteen years later, Gender at Work's e-discussion on gender and organizational change created a platform for its associates and other colleagues to reflect on remaining and new sets of challenges and opportunities for organizations committed to advancing gender equality in their policies and programs. This brief attempts to summarize the key points from this discussion, highlighting those pertinent to updating the 1999 volume. The summary can, in no way, do justice to the richness of the eight days of discussion.

E-discussion at a glance:

The purpose of the e-discussion was to provide a space for individuals from the different institutions that are mandated to support gender equality to put forward framing questions, experiences and evidence about what works and what impedes institutional support to advance gender equality and women's empowerment.

The e-discussion took place **from 12 to 20th March, 2012**

Forty-six colleagues signed on and 34 colleagues posted 95 contributions during the e-discussion

2. Context and complexity meet politics and power

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[1] The text of this summary is taken directly from the contributions of the thirty-four individuals who participated in the e-discussion. Since many ideas were echoed using different words – and to preserve the confidentiality of the e-discussion -- we have avoided attributing phrases and comments to specific individuals. A full list of participants is included in Annex 1 at the end of this summary.

Progress on gender equality is often cited in terms of numerical gains. As the recent *World Development Report*[2] and other global assessments have shown, there are visible changes in the numbers of girls with access to education, in women's workforce participation, and in controlling family size/access to birth control. There has been a proliferation of new or stronger global and national norms, laws and constitutions guaranteeing women's human rights. There are growing numbers of women in leadership in many countries, from Parliaments and government ministries to heads of multilateral organizations. New generations of gender equality policies in multilateral, bilateral and international NGOs, as well as at national level, have improved indicators to measure women's empowerment.

These numerical changes are inadequate but not inconsequential. They are kaleidoscopic, creating new political space for change while, at the same time, often failing to challenge the dominant paradigms that perpetuate gender inequality, such as neo-liberal economic policies or the military industrial complex. They lead us to the prospect of a statistical success, but an ethical and ideological failure.

Gender sensitive policies and laws create space - and we certainly need them. Without the struggles that women and men have engaged in to achieve them, many of us could not do the kind of work that we do. But the limitations of the 'numbers game' have led us to search for ways to facilitate deeper transformations. We need to create spaces for women and men feminists to deepen a theory of change or an ideology that is able to reinvent the capitalist, hierarchical, and patriarchal assumptions that undergird our organizations and institutions.

Organizations are both a problem and a solution in the ongoing challenge of advancing gender equality. Recognizing that distinct ideological and structural contexts shape the opportunities and demands facing the organizations we work with, participants in the e-discussion highlighted that work with organizations requires:

- o A big picture view of gender equality as it intersects with class, caste, race, sexuality, nationality, neo-liberal economic models and the politics of post-colonial North-South agenda setting.
- o Attention to the way that sexuality and reproduction play out in shaping women's and men's voice, participation and influence.
- o Transformation of the current structuring of an economic system that devalues and marginalizes most reproductive labour and is not organized

[2] World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development,   The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, Washington, D.C. 2011

around affirming life.

o An understanding of the dominant practices and sites of power that have made gender relations 'real' and therefore governable over the past twenty years. 'Truths' about women's situation and about gender relations have been generated through research and knowledge that are acceptable to the development mainstream. Do we use the categories that governmentalities set up to generate a politics of change or resist the categories to produce subversive knowledges that defy re-inscription in the mainstream?

3. Refining and Expanding our Perspectives on Gender and Organizational Change

Much of the work on gender equality in organizations has focused on engaging in processes to develop gender equality policies, strategies and scorecards; on training staff and strengthening leadership commitment; and – more recently – on advocating for quotas and mandatory percentages of budgets for gender equality and womens' rights. Many participants in the e-discussion, acknowledging that there is both conceptual diversity and confusion in this work, offered differing views on some of the key concepts underpinning the e-discussion, including:

3a. On gender equality:

o Gender equality is a 'moving target'. Because gender equality goals are inherently hard to fix and because gendered power is all over the place (and the links between identities, behaviours, symbols and institutions are constantly changing and being fixed temporarily), flexible strategies are required.

o At the same time, lack of clarity may be a plausible explanation for the permissive approach found in most agencies – it's OK if you pay attention to gender equality issues, but there are few consequences for failing to do so.

o We conflate women's interests (as human beings with multiple identities, who are not inherently more interested in social justice than men) with women's gender interests (in challenging gender inequality as a part of achieving social justice) at our peril.

A key question is whether we can examine gender equality on its own, without fundamentally taking on other forms of power inequality such as class or race which have strong interconnections with gender?

3b. On change:

The change process has its own life and it is full of complexity and subjectivity, often not delivering what we expected. We have to clarify our assumptions about

how change occurs, what changes we expect to inspire, motivate or produce in each particular situation.

Change can be contagious or like a 'butterfly' effect. There is no linear causality. You can't know in advance precisely what issues will emerge, what capacities for action exist, or what impact the butterfly's wings will have. Change can start with education, with economics, or with political participation and will influence change in the other areas. Once the status quo changes, both women and men will defend it as the 'new normal.'

Organizational requirements often reduce change to targets and indicators in logframes, running counter to how we understand that change happens. Participants acknowledged that there has to be a long history of invisible change to lead to any sustainable change. Questions were raised about whether the gradualist approach preferred in most organizations was effective. Perhaps we should demand radical change immediately and follow this with gradual shifting of organizational culture. Participants also noted examples of communities that have mobilized around controversial issues, generating extreme violence that unleashes a 'power' that is hugely transformative. What does this mean for work on gender and organizational change?

3c. Differing views of organizations

Bureaucracy itself is among the greatest human rights challenges we face. The multifaceted work of untangling discriminatory norms and gender power relations doesn't sit well with most types of organizations – they rarely create and sustain spaces for experimentation with partners on the ground and collective reflection and learning which is at the heart of working with complexity. The inclusive goals of an organization don't necessarily result in inclusive relationships inside in the face of a bureaucratic mindset.

One route to failure is to think that bureaucratic solutions alone can solve the problem without addressing the questions of power and politics as essential to transformative change. Our challenge is to find the processes that liberate the soul of the organization.

4. Using the master's tools – practice that advances gender equality

With overall consensus that transformation must be the goal of our work on gender and organizational change, a key area of focus was – paraphrasing Audre Lorde – how the masters' tools can be used to dismantle the master's house?

The challenges are great. Factors that facilitate organizations to transform to become life-affirming and live-giving include closing the distance between the organization and the community it serves; boundaries that are somewhat fluid or porous which easily allow partnerships to be forged with relevant stakeholders for

experimentation; and learning with a focus on results and accountability.

For large development bureaucracies and governments, the distance from their constituencies is quite large and the heavy burden of routinization and systemization especially at the center makes it hard to internally generate transformation. We need to assist bureaucracies to move away from being monoliths to being loosely coupled systems, facilitating transformations that profoundly affect the individuals involved and change what the organization values and the way it works.

Some of the "master's tools" where we are seeing promising new and existing approaches generating change include:

4a. Understanding gender equality as "mission critical"

Organizations tackle their exclusionary practices – including gender inequality -- when they come to the realization that these practices and underlying discriminatory values inhibit them from achieving their goals. For organizations that see social justice or transformation as their purpose, this questioning may lead them to a paradigm shift. Examples include feminist organizations or human rights organizations for who gender action learning leads them to fundamentally revise their understanding of their role in the world and their intervention strategies.

But what of organizations whose missions are not, overtly, committed to social justice? One example given was the U.S. military's efforts in the 1980s to address overt racism among the rank and file. The U.S. military is an inherently patriarchal organization that exists to protect US global dominance but they tackled internal racism when they realized that it undermined their effectiveness in the field.

Exploring the distinction between the paradigm shift that some groups and organizations experience when deeply exploring the nature of gender power relations as compared to the inadequate but not inconsequential changes that one sees in organizations that take a more mechanistic (gender mainstreaming) approach to help them accomplish other goals may reveal significant differences about what strategies are most effective under different circumstances.

4b. Gender equality in the results-based management, evidence-based and mainstreaming regimes

Many of the organizations that we work with rely on practices whose relevance to advancing women's rights and gender equality have been the subject of hot debate, in particular: Results-based Management (RBM), building an evidence base, and gender mainstreaming. The trend is to harmonize and institutionalize policy and practice on these, even though we recognize that monocultures are weaker than diverse ecosystems. At the same time, one has to ask whether

everyone doing (and uniquely measuring) their own thing strengthens or weakens progress on gender equality. How do we combine the best of both worlds?

- o RBM can have a positive effect if its use for gender equality avoids mechanistic and formulaic approaches. The experience of working with Irish Aid provided one such example. Incorporating gender equality requirements into the Management for Development Results Framework of Irish Aid – including requiring gender disaggregated indicators and/or baselines – brought about a recognizable shift, including from gender training to more gender analysis and expectation of change. One contributor noted that "in 2.5 years, this approach has shown more change than the 10+ years that I previously supported the organization (intermittently) on gender mainstreaming".

- o Oxfam Novib's Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory (GMLT), working with roughly 30 CSOs in 9 countries since 2008, provided another example. In West Africa, for instance, a colleague noted that: "Most of the project coordinators are now women. We have two female managers for the first time. We have 2 crèches to take care of the children. We have 40% female involvement amongst project participants. There is now a general sense of gender awareness and sensitiveness in all the offices, there is a change of attitude." And in another initiative in Nigeria, where women were never involved in settling conflicts, "The women themselves gathered courage to contribute immensely…to the surprise of every male attendant. The rate of conflicts has since reduced significantly as a result of this development…"

These were, to some extent, unexpected results, tracked by using the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology to assess changes and transformation at multiple levels. From the Oxfam-Novib experience of using MSC, a reflection was that change happens when individuals begin to see themselves as gendered beings trapped within but not entirely prisoners of gendered institutions.

4c. Using reflective spaces to surface unintended consequences
The RBM regime -- coupled with MSC, action learning and feminist approaches to evaluation -- also provides opportunities to make visible unintended consequences that can challenge accepted notions of what works and demonstrate how quantifiable results may obscure more systemic threats to gender equality, particularly when conditions in the wider society and economy undermine social and gender justice. Participants offered many such examples, illustrating how important it is to make space for more reflective practice. For example:

- o One participant reported on how they used evaluation to show that women involved in a Saving and Credit group are more vulnerable as they are

exposed to unsafe working environments for prolonged hours each day. There is no change in their household responsibilities, they have to wake up earlier in the morning and sleep very late at night to fulfill the household responsibilities, their children are left with relatives or are being cared by younger girls (who are often trafficked for labor) and they are gaining very little from the investment.

o In another example, a programme to promote leadership of young women in trade unions, was successful in engaging the trade union leadership to encourage such participation. But as the young women became more vocal and more challenging, leadership accused them of being inflated with their own self importance, not understanding organizational protocols and being young and inexperienced, creating dangerous exposure for the women to increased sexual harassment from within the union.

o Finally, in South Africa, work on gender equality with a private sector company that provides services at clinics to people living with HIV raised a number of contradictions. The programme generated an increase in numbers of men who came to be tested at a clinic in a smallish rural town. They waited in line and when it came to their turn they pulled out guns and conducted a violent robbery. Clinic staff, fearful that it would happen again, instituted a policy to keep all the gates locked and only treat/ respond to men through the gates. This is not respectful, confidential or even efficient for all services and it completely undermines the work of the community-based enterprises who are busy encouraging men to go to be tested with partners and for themselves.

4d. The organization and the individual gender equality champion

Positive policy environments, new educational opportunities and access to decision making positions can create space for women to advance their interests but organizational cultures are transformed by individuals who have come to terms at some level with the deeply dissatisfying and damaging dynamics of unequal power relations in their own lives.

While there has been significant focus on securing leadership support and accountability for gender equality in mainstream organizations, the e-discussion highlighted two different dimensions to the issue of leadership: the willingness to transgress and the price to be paid for this.

Citing the example of the quota law in Kenya, one participant noted that the positive result was largely a consequence of personal effort on the part of women who demand and deserve to be recognized for what they bring to the table. There needs to be acknowledgement of the courage required by internal change agents to run amok of the unspoken rules that govern organizational power inequalities and vigilance to avoid internalizing the unequal power dynamics that change agents seek to overcome. And we need more in-depth understanding

about what sanctions organizations impose on members who question established hierarchies and how they navigate these constraints.

The importance of creating space for reflective practice focused on leadership in organizations was affirmed by a number of the Gender at Work colleagues, including the need to grapple with "personal experience of relative power, privilege, exclusion."

5. Allies and agents of change – what's happening in our movements

Day-to-day practices in feminist organizations are critical to shifting the bureaucratic paradigm. Feminist organizations have achieved outstanding outcomes of real change in the enactment of laws and in the extension of social services, contributing significantly in improving people's lives. However, power relations, uncertain processes of decision-making and bureaucracies have left deep wounds of institutional pain and violence amongst many who have worked in women's organizations. Grassroots groups also reproduce bureaucratic systems and authoritarian power.

Women's organizations and movements are different from mixed organizations and our understandings and tools for assisting them to become transformative organizations need to evolve. We need space for honest dialogue to surface the power plays, hidden privileges and hierarchies within feminist organizations. The organizational change for gender equality toolbox and approaches seem to have evolved, for the most part, in the context of unitary organizations with an integrated leadership, decision-making system, and staff, even if the size and complexity of the entity varied. But what happens when we work with women's organizations and networks or movements with multiple constituency-based organizational members?

6. Transformative ideas and questions for the future

The e-discussion generated as many complex and "wicked" questions, as it did promising experiences and insightful observations on emerging effective practice. There were five sets of such questions.

- o *Emotions:* What is the link between unjust power relations and suppressed feelings that characterize every day life in organizations? Are feelings disallowed because they would immediately disrupt power relations? How can we maximize the benefits of a Weberian model based on ideals of non-discrimination and efficiency, but that sees us all as holistic women and men and gives us a language to articulate more clearly the role emotion does/should/shouldn't play in bureaucracies? In other words, how can we take this discussion out of the closet and subject it to feminist analysis in the light of day?
- o *Work-life balance and care:* Organizations need to be able to support life-giving work and life-giving relationships. Continuing to ignore this question enables the deepest of the deep structures and, ultimately, compromises

our work by creating small liberated zones while the rest of the world continues as before.

- o *Biting the hands that feed us*: Because our livelihood strategies are so dependent on the hierarchical institutions we work for (or who fund our work), it is hard to find the courage or incentives to question unequal organizational practices. How do we deal with the fact that a lot of our work is able to happen due to the funds that we get from the very bureaucracies and/or corporations whose policies and practices perpetuate gender discrimination and other types inequalities?

- o *Context:* Accepting that change is contextual and unpredictable, how might we seek to clarify how specific contexts (institutional, geographical, time, etc.) bring about or impede change, or generate what kind of change? Such a specific analysis might also help demystify the unpredictability of change

- o *Collective action:* What we have not yet seen is the movement from individual to collective thought on gender and organizational change. This is where one of the biggest blocks occurs. How do we seed more deeply participatory processes to facilitate transformation that profoundly affects the individuals involved and changes what the organization values and the way it works?

Finally, the work of organizational transformation requires both transformed individuals and transformed workplaces, compelling us to find the right balance of both head and heart.

Annex 1: Participants in the e-discussion

1. Andrea Lindores
2. Anita Gurumurthy
3. Anne Goldstein
4. Anouka van Eerdewijk
5. Aruna Rao
6. Caroline Sweetman
7. Catherine Gaynor
8. Chat Garcia
9. David Kelleher
10. Diana Rivington
11. Dorine Plantenga
12. Ellen Sprenger
13. Erica Kvapilova
14. Ezra Mbgori
15. Fazila Gany
16. Gagan Sethi
17. Geeta Mishra
18. Gloria Bonder
19. Hope Chigudu
20. Idelisse Malave
21. Ireen Dubel
22. Joanne Sandler
23. Jeanette Kloosterman
24. Jeremy Holland
25. Joanna Kerr
26. Laura Turquet
27. Mahlet Mariam
28. Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay
29. Malini Ghose
30. Michel Friedman
31. Nina Benjamin
32. Nisreen Alami
33. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda
34. Osnat Lubrani
35. Payal Dala
36. Praneeta Kapoor
37. Ray Gordezky
38. Rex Fyles
39. Rieky Stuart
40. Sarah Hendricks
41. Solange Rocha
42. Srilatha Batliwala
43. Susanna George

44. Tania Principe
45. Thelma Aawori
46. Tony Beck