

Is there life after gender mainstreaming?

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In the world of feminist activism, the time is ripe for reflection and review. We need to ask why change is not happening, what works, and what is next. This article points to the fact that while women have made many gains in the last decade, policies that successfully promote women's empowerment and gender equality are not institutionalised in the day-to-day routines of State, nor in international development agencies. We argue for changes which re-delineate who does what, what counts, who gets what, and who decides. We also argue for changes in the institutions that mediate resources, and women's access, voice, and influence. We outline key challenges, as well as ways to envision change and strengthen the capacity of State and development organisations to deliver better on women's rights.

In the last decade, efforts to make the development 'mainstream' work for women have resulted in impressive gains as well as staggering failures. In the wake of Beijing Plus Ten,¹ numerous reviews document the strategic partnerships forged between the women's movement and policy reformers in the process of putting equity and women's rights at the heart of development debates (UNRISD 2005; Millennium Project Gender Task Force on Education and Gender Equality 2005). Women have made striking gains in getting elected to local and national governance bodies, and entering public institutions; girls' access to primary education has improved sharply; and women are entering the labour force in increasing numbers.

Under the banner of gender mainstreaming in institutional practice, there are numerous examples of positive outcomes for women's lives, beyond policy measures.

They include bringing women to the discussion table during the Burundi peace process; strengthening or establishing organisations and networks to promote gender equality in mainstream agencies; mainstreaming gender issues into law reform processes in Botswana (including national policy regarding HIV/AIDS); gaining greater visibility for women's work through the census in Nepal, India, and Pakistan; and protecting widows and orphans from dispossession on the death of the male 'owner', by supporting primary-justice mediation processes in Malawi. In Rwanda, where women were systematically raped and murdered during the civil war, women have gained 49 per cent of the seats in parliament and formed local women's councils elected solely by women.

The problem is that these examples are not the norm. Practices that successfully promote women's empowerment and gender

equality are not institutionalised into the day-to-day routines of State and international development agencies.

More important are the myriad, insidious ways in which the mainstream resists women's perspectives and women's rights. Economic orthodoxy promoting unmanaged, export-led growth through competitive market capitalism, free trade, and fiscal austerity — including the drastic reduction of government social spending — has hurt poor women most (Elson 2005). Governance reforms have not forced States to address their accountability failures when it comes to women's access to resources and services. For the most part, institutional reform still means fiscal and administrative reforms rather than making systems work better for the poor, including women.

In South Africa, where Gender at Work² has organised numerous consultations over the past three years, the unease generated by the gap between promise and reality is palpable. Feminist activists speak of the fundamental difficulty in shifting the paradigm of patriarchy within which they operate, and the resultant high fall-out and burn-out. They tell us that they have only managed to chip away at how power is exercised — there is no major shift here. They point to the enormous contradictions they see between good gender equity policies and high numbers of women in positions of power, and some of the highest levels of violence against women in the world. In India (where Gender at Work is also active) social justice activists point to the rise in the power of the State and right-wing politics, and an accompanying decrease in commitment to human rights principles.

At the level of formal institutions, whether they are trade unions, NGOs, women's organisations, community-based organisations, State bureaucracies, or corporate structures, not much has changed either. Organisational structures tend to reinforce the power of a few, who, for the most part, are unwilling to give up the privileges of power. Even when power is

shared, decision making remains in the hands of a small number of senior people who, in our experience, are less and less interested in gender equality. Moreover, management discourse dominates institutional life. The strength of traditional management theory, and organisational development thinking and practice, is to focus on efficiency and results. Its weakness, particularly as applied to social-change organisations in many Southern contexts, is that it does not explicitly deal with power dynamics or cultural change. Such theory, therefore, cannot help organisations to develop strategic objectives derived from a nuanced analysis of relational and material hierarchies, or bring about outcomes that change those inequalities.

In the world of feminist activism, it is time to take stock and ask why change is not happening, what works, and what does not work. This rethink is happening at a time of unprecedented militarisation globally which has demoted and marginalised work on women's rights. At the same time we are seeing an equally unprecedented mobilisation of citizens against war, and against the negative effects of globalisation, as well as *for* social justice. Campaigns such as the Global Call for Action Against Poverty (GCAP), led by citizen action groups, are focusing attention on accountability of global institutions, and new terms of trade and development. But by and large, these global movements and their grounding notions of citizenship and accountability are gender-blind.

Moreover, while 'citizens' are mobilising, the infrastructure and resources for supporting women's activism to challenge gender power relations in the home, communities, organisations, markets, and the State are being dismantled. The architecture of organisational structure, process, policy, and funding to support women's empowerment and gender equality is being eroded also at international and national levels. At the same time, new aid modalities such as budgetary supports and Sector Wide

Approaches (SWAPs) may make it more possible to cheat on gender equality goals. Gender concerns are falling through the cracks. Institutional change, capacity building, political partnerships, and women's organising are being marginalised in what is, increasingly, a bean-counting approach to development deliverables.

Gender mainstreaming — wedged between a rock and hard place?

Gender mainstreaming is grounded in feminist theoretical frameworks, and its appeal to 'femocrats' and to gender activists was its promise of transformation. But gender mainstreaming has been caught between a rock and a hard place. At a macro level, it is operating in a policy environment which is increasingly hostile towards justice and equity, and which is further feminising poverty. At a meso level of organisations, gender mainstreaming has become a random collection of diverse strategies and activities, all ostensibly concerned with moving forward a gender equality agenda, but often not working in ways we would have hoped. At this level there is still active resistance to the value of women's rights and gender equality goals. Furthermore, where allies exist, their hands are tied by policy priorities, poor infrastructure, and decreased funding levels. Finally, at a micro level, first-generation development objectives are enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While the MDGs do incorporate measurable indicators for women's empowerment, there are a number of difficulties. First, they narrow the agenda dangerously (by not including violence against women, for example); second, many governments have not mainstreamed gender equality into the MDGs (other than the one focused on gender equality); finally, focusing on MDGs has pre-empted support for women's organisations and women's organising — the vanguard of the political fight.

The need for political strategising at multiple levels, and deeper, institutional change, highlights the inadequacy of previous strategies. But it is unclear what the new solutions are. Most feminist activists and analysts acknowledge the need for new approaches that address the discrimination brought about by macro-economic policies in employment, wages, and food security. New approaches must also support welfare services that structure opportunities for women, that hold systems accountable, and that allow for learning on the part of women and men. Those approaches are being formulated. They range from calls for a new social contract (Sen 2004), to the creation of innovatively managed market approaches (Elson 2005); and from calls for the transformation of institutions and organisations (Goetz and Hassim 2003; Rao and Kelleher 2002; Millennium Project Gender Task Force on Education and Gender Equality 2005), to a re-energised and re-politicised women's movement. All approaches to bringing about gender equality must have a political component. This is because gender relations exist within a force field of power relations, and power is used to maintain existing privilege. In the remainder of this article we will elaborate on the dimensions of institutional change.

What are we trying to change?

Our understanding of how to work towards gender equality is that we need to change inequitable social systems and institutions. Generally, people now speak of 'institutional change' as the requirement for addressing the root causes of gender inequality. This means changing the rules of the game. These are the stated and unstated rules that determine who gets what, who does what, and who decides (Goetz 1997; North 1990; Rao and Kelleher 2002). These rules can be formal, such as constitutions, laws, policies, and school curricula; or informal, such as cultural arrangements and

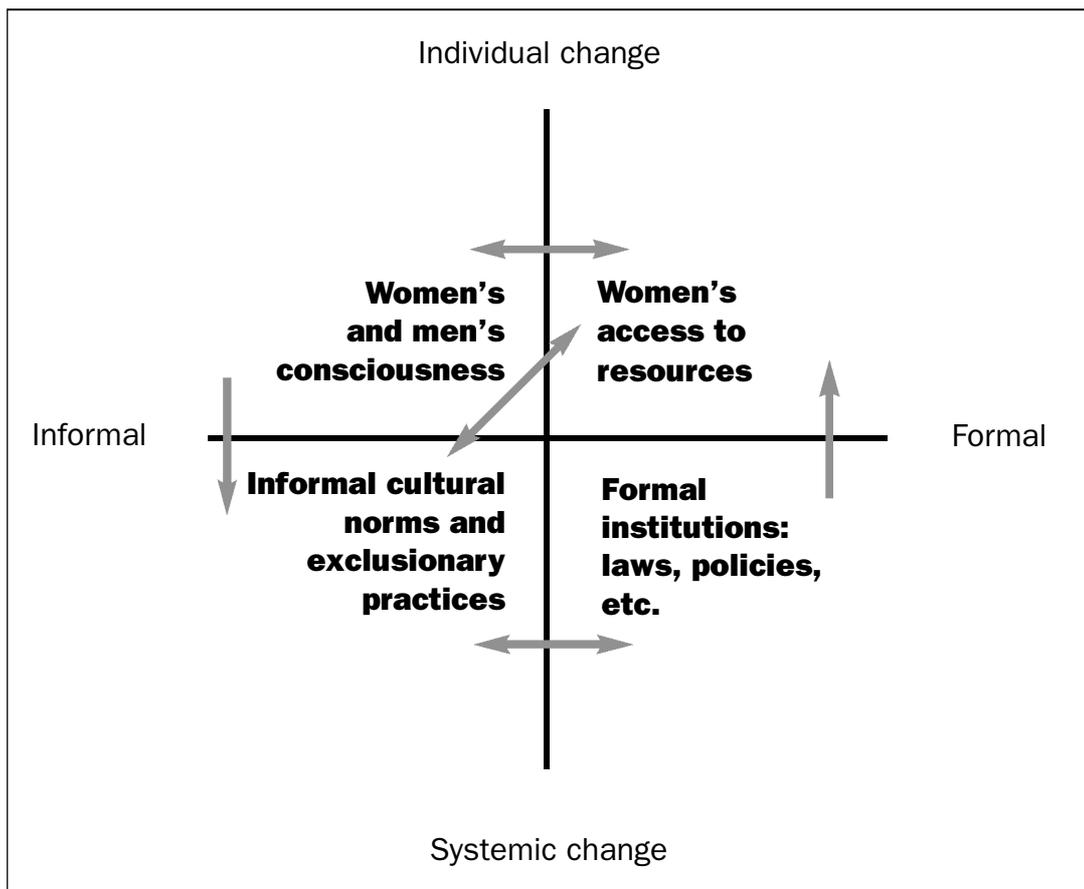
norms regarding who is responsible for household chores, who goes to the market, who decides on the education of children, or who is expected to speak at a village council meeting. It also means changing organisations which, in their programmes, policies, structures, and ways of working, discriminate against women or other marginalised groups.

Different organisations have focused on one or other of the four areas listed below. Some organisations, for example, work on legal and policy change, while others focus on changing material conditions. In order to bring about gender equality, change must occur both at the personal level and at the social level. It must occur in formal and

informal relations. This gives us the following four clusters which impact on each other:

- women’s and men’s individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness, commitment);
- women’s objective condition (rights and resources, access to health services and safety, opportunities for a voice);
- informal norms, such as inequitable ideologies, and cultural and religious practices;
- formal institutions, such as laws and policies.

Figure 1: What are we trying to change?



Often we assume that change at one level will lead to change at the others. For example, women who have started and maintained micro businesses often report being more self-confident. However, we also know, for example, that it is possible to have material resources but no influence; and that it is possible to be 'economically empowered' but not free from violence. Sustainable change requires *institutional* change, which involves the clusters of informal norms and formal institutions at the bottom of the diagram. But how does institutional change happen? And most importantly, what is the role of development organisations in that change process? The organisations that support those interventions also exist in the same force field of power. This means that they will require capacities not only to *want* to intervene in a significant way, but also to be *able* to intervene. Typically, it will require an ongoing change process to build and maintain these capacities.

Figure 1 may be helpful in the following ways. First, in an abbreviated way, it shows the whole universe of changes that might be contemplated to enhance gender equality. This can serve as an outline to document how these clusters appear in a particular context. Second, it allows change agents to make strategic choices as to where and how to intervene. Finally, it points to the fact that changes in resources, capacity, and knowledge are necessary, but not sufficient, for sustainable change. Ultimately, changes of formal and particularly informal institutions are required.³

What are some of the key challenges of institutional change?

As we reflect on lessons from experience, and contemplate where we go from here, we see four key challenges.

Challenges of institutional change on the ground

Programme and project evaluations point to the difficulty of moving from individual change and learning to social change. They describe the problem of socio-cultural acceptance of ideas of gender equality, the lack of capacity of implementing partners, and the difficulties of attitudinal and behavioural changes at the individual and institutional levels.

Challenges of clarity

A number of analysts have recently pointed out how a lack of clarity endangers implementation of gender mainstreaming strategies (Hannan 2003; Subrahmanian 2004). However, the most pernicious misunderstanding is the separation of gender mainstreaming from women's empowerment work. In the name of mainstreaming resources are being withdrawn from projects focused on women's empowerment. Although much work needs to be done with both men and women, we cannot reduce commitment to programming that focuses on women, because that is where crucial progress towards gender equality is being made.

Challenges of organisational change

The lack of senior-management support; lack of accountability; lack of knowledge and skills among senior staff on gender issues; marginalised, under-qualified, and under-resourced theme groups and specialists are all problems present in organisations mandated to mainstream gender concerns in development.

Challenges of measurement

At one level, there are ongoing difficulties in obtaining sex-disaggregated data. At another level, there is a lack of tracking mechanisms for the relative contributions that a particular project might make to different goals. For example, in a sanitation project, how much of the project budget can be said to be responding to the needs of

women? Answering this would require a social-impact analysis at the design stage of the project, and a sophisticated tracking mechanism. At a deeper level, however, is the problem of measuring the intangibles that are at the root of social change of any sort. This is the change in consciousness of women and men, the change in community norms, or the change in attitudes. Incremental changes must be perceived and understood as valued results, knowing that gender equality is a long-term goal.

Beyond mainstreaming to institutional transformation

If there is to be life after mainstreaming, our experience teaches us that it will require transformation at the institutional level. We must come to ideas like empowerment, citizenship, and rights with new eyes and a more overtly political analysis.

Transformation of gender relations requires access to, and control over, material and symbolic resources. It also requires changes in deep-seated values and relationships that are held in place by power and privilege. Transformation is, fundamentally, a political and personal process. Sen (1999) says that institutions limit or enhance poor people's right to freedom, freedom of choice, and action. Without a critical understanding of how institutions need to change to allow different social groups to secure their entitlements and access opportunities for socio-economic mobility, development goals cannot be achieved. From the perspective of poor people, institutions are in crisis and a strategy of change must: '(i) start with the poor people's realities; (ii) invest in organisational capacity of the poor; (iii) change social norms; and (iv) support development entrepreneurs' (Narayan 1999, 223).

Feminist thinking about empowerment directly engages with resources, power, ideology, and institutions (Batliwala 1996).

This implies a symbiotic relationship between power and ideology, which gains expression and perpetuation through structures of all kinds — judicial, economic, social, and political. Empowerment in this framework therefore means a transformation in power relations. Specifically, it means control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, intangible); control over ideology (beliefs, values, attitudes); and changes in the institutions and structures that support unequal power relations.

Notions of citizenship, like institutions, are inextricably bound up with relations of power. 'Like power relations, citizenship rights are not fixed, but are objects of struggle to be defended, reinterpreted and extended' (Meer 2004, 32). The negotiation is around societal positions that discriminate against women, and gender roles (including the public/private divide that acts to contain women and their agency primarily within the private sphere, while opening men's agency to the public sphere). It is also around unequal power formed on the basis of class, caste, ethnicity, and other key markers of identity. Not only that: the negotiation is also a challenge to ideas that frame how we see the world and how we act.

Similarly, claiming rights is a political process, played out as struggles between the interests, power, and knowledge of differently positioned actors. A rights-based approach to development argues that all people are entitled to universal human rights, and development should be oriented to meeting those rights. A rights perspective politicises needs (Ferguson 1999). While a needs-based approach identifies the resource requirements of particular groups, a rights-based approach provides the means of strengthening people's claims to those resources. The challenge of the rights-based approach is 'in maintaining equal emphasis on the need to build both citizens' capabilities to articulate rights *and* the capabilities of political-economic institutions to respond and be held to account' (Jones

and Gaventa 2002, 26). For individuals and groups, demanding accountability requires a sense that they have a right to do so (claiming that political space), and mechanisms through which their demands can be made and responded to. On the other side, accountability (according to the UNDP *Human Development Report 2000*) is judged by whether appropriate policies have been implemented and progress achieved.

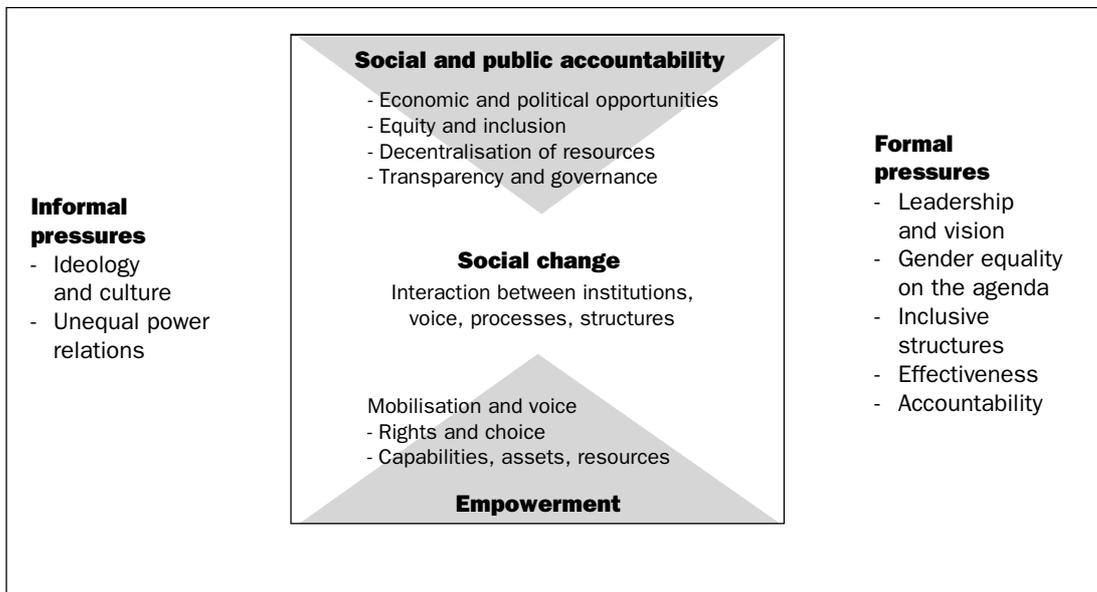
Transformation: the role of development agencies

We think that transformative goals exist uneasily within large development organisations, as they are likely to be overcome by technical considerations more amenable to administrative practice. The key questions are: given the uneasy relationship between transformation and large organisations,

how can we strengthen the capacity of State and development bureaucracies to deliver on their operational mandates? And how can we shift organisational practice to focus better on equity and inclusion?

In order to strengthen the project of transformation, we need to disaggregate the range of strategies and activities that are dumped in the gender mainstreaming bag (such as policy reform, advocacy, capacity building, analytical frameworks, programme development, monitoring systems) and analyse their gains and their failures (Subrahmanian 2004). This should also help us to think strategically about what these institutions are well placed to do. At the same time, measurement systems need to be developed that can capture the full range of gender equality outcomes, both tangible and intangible.

Figure 2: Dynamics between top-down and bottom-up forces of change



Our change strategies should envision *institutional* change. This does not mean reducing programmes such as those focused on education or women's entrepreneurship. It means seeing these not as ends in themselves, but as means to equality. Institutional change requires political activity to translate education or improved health care into equality. One important idea is that of working on both demand and supply sides of the institutional change equation. By the supply side, we mean shifting opportunity structures towards equality for women; changing incentives and capacity in global, State, and community agencies to respond to women. This includes delivering on services and on rights. On the demand side, we mean strengthening women's awareness of their own agency, voice, and mobilisation; their influence over institutions; and their ability to hold them to account.

Organisational deep structure

Organisational change needs to go far beyond policy adoption and large-scale processing of staff through gender training workshops. It is clear that, like any other complex skill, the evolution of knowledge and values (particularly for men) is a long process, requiring practice. Gender theme groups and specialists need to be better resourced, but more importantly, they need to be part of decision making. Even when senior managers agree that gender is important, gender equality still has to displace other important values in decision making. Only by ensuring a strong voice for gender equality advocates in decision making will gender concerns be represented in the day-to-day discussion of competing needs and values that are at the heart of development work. Numerous analysts have emphasised the importance of strong leadership and accountability structures, including performance appraisal and better

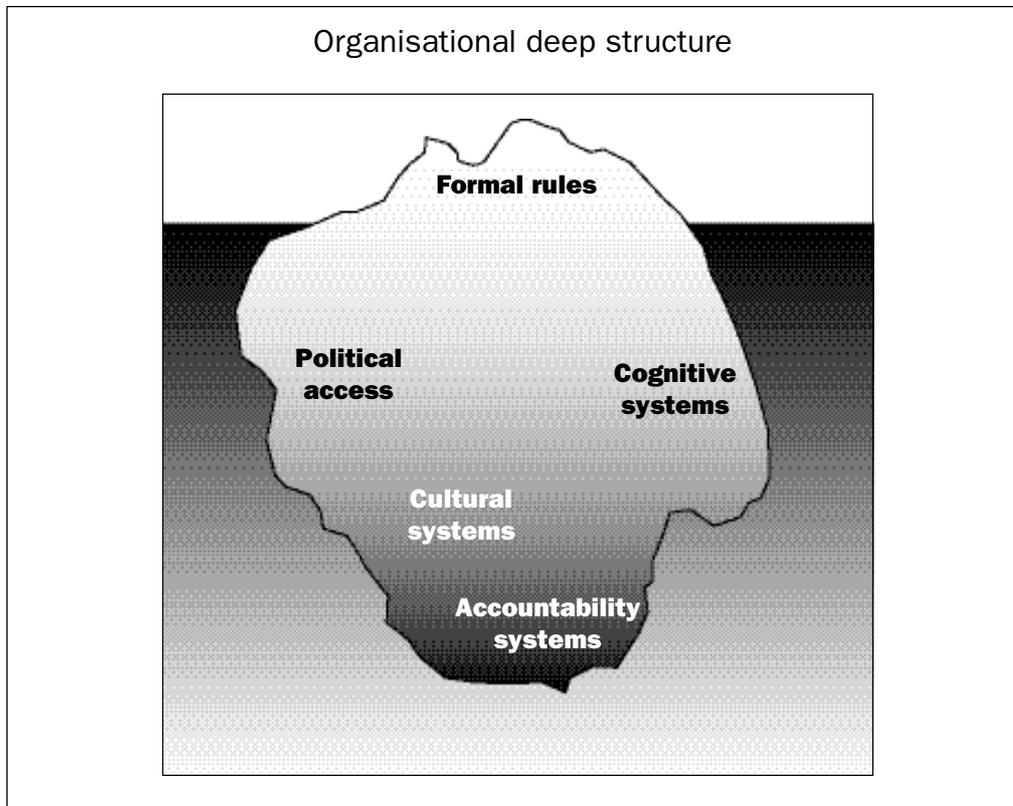
monitoring. While we would agree that these are needed, 30 years of research and practice in the private sector shows that these 'command and control' strategies are not enough for significant organisational change.

In our work, we have described the 'deep structure' of organisations. Like the unconscious mind of individuals, this is largely unexamined, but constrains some behaviour and makes other behaviour more likely (Rao *et al.* 1999). The deep structure is the collection of taken-for-granted values, and ways of thinking and working, that underlie decision making and action. (See Figure 3.) Power hides the fact that organisations are gendered at very deep levels. More specifically, women are prevented from challenging institutions by four inter-related factors:

- **political access:** there are neither systems nor actors who can put women's perspectives and interests on the agenda;
- **accountability systems:** organisational resources are steered towards quantitative targets that are often only distantly related to institutional change for gender equality;
- **cultural systems:** the work/family divide perpetuated by most organisations prevents women from being full participants in those organisations, as women continue to bear the responsibility for the care of children and old people;
- **cognitive structures:** work itself is seen mostly within existing, gender-biased norms and understandings.

It should not come as a surprise to learn that the deep structure of most organisations is profoundly gender biased, and acts as a brake on work for gender equality. For example, one aspect of the deep structure is the separation between work and family. As Joan Acker pointed out, a key assumption in large organisations is that work is completely separate from the rest of life, and

Figure 3: The iceberg of organisational structure



the organisation has first claim on the worker. From this follows the idea of the 'ideal worker', dedicated to the organisation, unhampered by familial demands, and...*male* (Acker 1990). Another aspect of the deep structure is the image of heroic individualism. As organisations were originally peopled by men, they are, not surprisingly, designed and maintained in ways that express men's identity. Heroic individualism can lead to a focus on winning, and noticeable achievement. This contrasts with the largely process-oriented, and sometimes long-term, business of understanding gender relations in a particular context, and acting for equality. In addition, given stereotypical gender roles, heroes tend to be men, further contributing to the idea of men as the ideal workers and women as 'other'.

Generating power to change organisations

We believe that there is a web of five spheres in which power can be generated to move an organisation towards transformation.⁴ These five spheres are:

- politics;
- organisational politics;
- institutional culture;
- organisational process;
- programmatic interventions.

The political sphere

This is based on the assumption that because they live within gendered societies, few organisations will devote the time, energy, and resources to effective gender equality work unless pressured to do so. But is there a women's constituency that is exerting sufficient pressure for gender equality to be noticed by the organisation as an issue requiring attention? In some cases donors or boards of directors have been the source of some pressure, but local, political pressure has more potential for holding organisations accountable. The key skills required are organisation and advocacy. The pressure generated by this sphere may have many results, but they are dependent on work in the other spheres.

Organisational politics

This refers to the day-to-day bargaining that goes on between bureaucratic leaders as they struggle to make their particular views a reality. This sphere is about access of gender advocates to power, their bargaining ability, and skill in the use of power. Power is built from position, coalitions, clarity of analysis and purpose, and assets such as access to senior levels, and the ability to provide valued goods (information, technical expertise, material resources). The strong voice of an outside constituency is a tremendous asset, but far from all that is needed for a bureaucratic player. The outcome of bureaucratic 'victories' may be stronger policy, or increased resources, or even the evolution of an alternative organisational culture.

Institutional culture

Institutional culture is that collection of values, history, and ways of doing things that form the unstated rules of the game in an organisation. Most importantly, culture defines what is valued as being truly important in the organisation (often at odds with official mission statements). This sphere is important because of its capacity to make things happen as well as to block

them. Another way to describe culture is as organisational ideology: 'Ideology is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of perceiving and analyzing social reality — virtually, ways of thinking and perceiving' (Batliwala 1996, 2).

Culture then, can be a powerful ally in making work on gender equality a valued part of the organisation's work: the normal, the reasonable, 'just good development' (Rao *et al.* 1999). Similarly, culture can exclude — making the organisation difficult for women — and force a focus on 'harder', more 'real', outcomes (such as infrastructure projects). Cultures are generally changed by the influence of leaders, and by the understanding of others that the new directions are valuable.

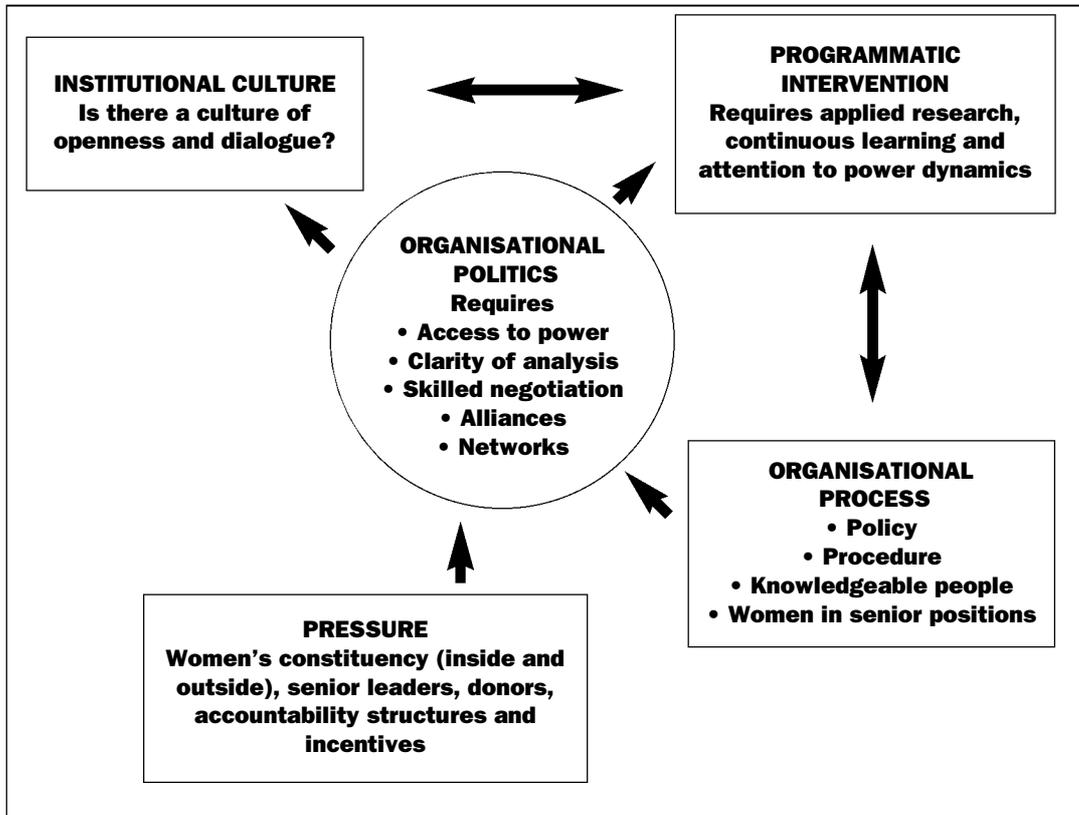
Organisational process

This is the vehicle that turns the intangibles of bureaucratic politics, organisational culture, and political pressure into organisational action. This happens through programmes, policies, and services. The question is whether there are sufficient resources, and sufficient skilled and knowledgeable people, to lead the process of learning and change. Ultimately, knowledge must be spread through the organisation, and gender equality must become part of the organisational skill set, along with other aspects of development. If resources and expertise are the grease of organisational process, then approval mechanisms that require gender analyses are the drivers. For example, some development agencies require a gender analysis and strategy as a component of all projects. Finally, because gender equality has never been achieved, organisational learning needs to be seen as a key capacity. This leads us to work on the ground.

Programmatic interventions

These constitute the last (and first) sphere of power. It is here that the work of the other spheres is validated. It is also here that the organisation delivers value or not. In the

Figure 4: The organisational likelihood of promoting gender equality



area of gender equality, what is of value is still contested. What used to be thought of as good practice is now challenged as insufficient. What this means is that this sphere must be energised by applied research, and by the development of new methodologies that can make a difference. These methodologies must also capture the attention and support of other parts of the organisation, as well as its partners.

Figure 4 shows some of the relationships between these spheres of power.

Even when the focus is at this level, however, we have reservations regarding the usefulness of organisational change strategies for making large organisations more interested in working towards gender equality. These strategies are helpful when managers feel strong and continued pressure

to change. But in many cases, in large multi-lateral organisations, the pressure for work on gender equality is intermittent and muted. The difficulty with governmental systems is similar: seldom is there significant pressure to take gender equality seriously, and many government officials are in any case isolated from the pressure.

Building knowledge for transformation and a 'politics of solidarity'

In this article, we have argued that life after mainstreaming must be focused on institutional transformation. This envisions changes not only in material conditions of women, but also change in the formal and

social structures which maintain inequality. Organisations must also be transformed, so that women's empowerment and gender equality are firmly on the agenda, and are supported by skilled, politically influential advocates. None of this will happen without the simultaneous creation of enabling environments (supply), and the mobilisation of women's groups for rights and access to power and resources (demand).

This vision is not the reality we now face. Our experience to date is telling us that there is a frightening lack of knowledge with which to accomplish the institutional changes we need. Parts of this knowledge do exist in the work of organisations in different parts of the world. We need to bring these pieces together, and forge a new set of understandings, which can guide our work beyond mainstreaming.

Finally, in these times of political and economic conservatism, gender advocates within development organisations, and feminists working in all kinds of spaces, need to come together to build what some have called 'a politics of solidarity'.⁵ This is needed to infuse our work with vision and energy. A politics of solidarity can help us to assess strategically how to advance this transforming agenda, particularly when different political and institutional arenas are not working in synergy with our understanding of social change.

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Gender at Work (www.gendematwork.org) exists to build knowledge and capacity on strategic change for women's empowerment, gender equality, and social inclusion. It was created in June 2001 by AWID, Women's Learning Partnership (WLP), CIVICUS, and United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM). It works with development organisations and focuses on the links between organisations, gender equality, and institutional change.

Notes

- 1 Beijing Plus Ten is the UN-led ten-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.
- 2 Gender at Work is a knowledge and capacity building organisation focusing on the links between gender equality, organisations, and institutional change. Gender at Work works with development and human rights practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.
- 3 This framework is adapted from the work of Ken Wilber.
- 4 This framework owes much to all the previous work in this field, but particularly to Graham Allison (1969) and Caren Levy (1996).
- 5 See for example Deniz Kandiyoti (2004).

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