

Making Institutions Work for Women

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ABSTRACT *Aruna Rao looks at how change is happening through the daily grind of gender equality activists. She argues that in order to achieve basic development objectives we need both better delivery and better accountability for a range services to women – not just education and health, but also agricultural extension, land registration and property protection, regulation of labour markets, and safety. She also argues that institutional insiders and outsiders need to support each others' different but complementary roles as change agents.*

KEYWORDS *gender equality; policy; institutional reform; organizations; conditionalities*

Introduction

The danger of insidious insider/outsider stereotyping undermines potential for making organizations work for women – and men. In one fairytale, gender equality activists working in cramped institutional spaces to make change happen for women are cast as the ugly stepsisters to the sexy, kick-ass, glamour girls of the global feminist movement. The flip side of this story is that of capable, dedicated feminists making a real difference inside institutions while strident ideologues do nothing but criticize what's wrong, alienating rather than building, and never lifting a finger to practice what they preach. Neither image is fair; both are damaging. Insiders need outsiders to create pressure for change. Outsiders need insiders to make real progress for gender equality.

Internal activists live in gender units, women's cells, programme and project offices in ministries, trade unions, international agencies, and a range of civil society organizations. They forage for resources amidst bureaucracies that make money disappear into vaguely formulated policy goals. They termite their way into organizational agendas. They are under threat of burial under mountains of paper requiring them to gender mainstream using a rights-based approach and show measurable results in neat little boxes. They try to entice higher profile colleagues to take gender mainstreaming seriously but they lose precious time in endless coordination meetings. Armed with the conviction that they know what makes a difference and that they can make a difference, the best of them fight the long hard battles from the trenches while quietly strengthening women to organize and demand their rights. Yet they get little airtime and even less support. Instead, they are denigrated as sell-outs by the radical feminist fringe.¹

Unsung heroines making noise

No wonder that these unsung heroines (and some heroes), mainstreaming divas, and ostensible institutional sell-outs, gathered in unexpected numbers at the first session at the AWID Forum on gender mainstreaming to share both their contents and discontents. They are the first to acknowledge that what has *not* been achieved is remarkable despite some real gains for women in education, employment, and governance. While the intention of gender mainstreaming is transformation, it has been chewed up and spit out by development bureaucracies in forms that feminists would barely recognize. We have long known that development bureaucracies excel in reductionism and control, not in promoting revolution and creativity so that should not surprise us. What is particularly worrying, however, is the pernicious misunderstanding that gender mainstreaming is different from women's empowerment work resulting in the withdrawal of funds for the latter in the name of mainstreaming. In a discouraging example of this confusion, Kusakabe notes that provincial gender focal points in the Cambodian Ministry of Women's Affairs are not very clear about what they should do *vis-à-vis* their colleagues in other government ministries regarding gender mainstreaming but their most successful work – direct projects addressing violence against women and anti-trafficking – is considered least important by their own Women's Ministry (Kusakabe, 2005).

Much of the current re-think in feminist circles is focused on questions such as what is the contribution of feminism to justice and social change in a context shaped by economic orthodoxies, religious fundamentalism, unilateral political action, and terrorism. That is the right political question, but we are also concerned with the more down to earth unfinished business of making systems work for women now.

Making it work

In an overview on gender mainstreaming in international development institutions, Moser points out that while most institutions have put gender

mainstreaming policies in place, implementation is inconsistent and most importantly the outcomes in terms of gender equality remain largely unknown (Moser and Moser, 2005). This speaks both to the fuzziness of our analysis and intentions and to the lack of adequate ways of measuring progress. As we have stated elsewhere (Rao and Kelleher, 2005), there are different levels to this, starting with difficulties on obtaining sex-disaggregated data to a lack of tracking mechanisms that can notice relative contributions to different goals in a particular project. But more fundamentally we need to find better ways to measure the intangibles that are at the root of social change of any sort – the change in consciousness of women and men, the change in community norms, or the change in attitudes. Incremental change must be perceived and understood as valued results knowing that gender equality is a long-term goal.²

Understanding that a key dimension of the feminist project is redesigning the architecture of human relationships helps us understand why this work is so difficult and why it takes so much time. Radical feminists would say that working on women's empowerment within institutions simply tinkers at the margins of patriarchy and dulls the political edge of the movement. There is of course truth in that. But if we are tinkering, can we at least get that right? Can we gender mainstreaming divas explain the persistent neglect of addressing systemic change to deliver development benefits to women by practitioners, policy makers, and donors alike? Poor implementation and lack of accountability consistently sink the good intentions of gender equality policies. It is commonly known for example, that when ordinary women go to get services from public, private, or informal systems they are often ignored or worse, they are abused. These persistent deficits operate across sectors and issues ranging from land registration and fair policing to securing maintenance payments, healthcare delivery, decent teaching in schools, or access to water. And yet, when we talk of social contracts or cultural change we do not extend the conversation to the systems and mechanisms that translate intention to outcomes. Even the minimalist and mundane MDGs require

effective institutional delivery systems. At best we call for more committed leadership and resources and more of whatever did not work too well the last time, most often better analysis and planning. Moreover, even if the intention and focus is there, often the devil is in the institutional details. In the Indian state of Karnataka, the NGO Grama Vikas is working with families to register land in the name of women. The stumbling block is not men's attitudes; it is that changing land registration is made both difficult and expensive by the state. So, while families have co-registered homesteads in women's names – a far less expensive transaction – the land re-registration is pending. The budgetary allocation by the state to fund land registration in women's name was discovered by the NGO after considerable digging but by then the officer in charge had sent back the allocation unannounced and therefore unspent.

Building an enabling environment

Policies are statement of intent, they are not reflections of reality. States and governmental delivery systems do not make change happen. They can, however, build an enabling environment for justice and equity. But even then, they have to be prodded, negotiated with, and held accountable. That is the job of civil society organizations. If that job is not done, even the most progressive of intentions will falter on the bedrock of patriarchy, and business as usual. In Bolivia, the Law of Popular Participation rolled out in 1994 instituted democratic municipal government on a nationwide basis for the first time and devolved 20 per cent of the national tax revenue to the local level. For women, the real gain is that the LPP gives explicit legislative entitlement to participate in decision-making processes. As Clisby (2005) explains, where it worked such as in Entre Rios, it did so because a dynamic was created by women's organizations, a powerful indigenous people's organization, and gender specialists from the Ministry of Human Development working at the municipal or sub-secretariat level together with NGOs whereby many traditional relationships of ethnic and gender oppression were seriously publicly questioned and human rights work carried out.

However, in many other places, 'the preexisting structures which deprived women on *de facto* political power' were not changed.

We need to focus on reform of existing institutional structures and developing alternatives to those that now exist. This means making public and private service delivery systems work for women and finding new institutional solutions for systems that cannot be fixed and for new issues that defy traditional solutions. This requires institutional change that drives equitable resource allocation, catalyses new means of monitoring and measuring the performance of service providers, produces attitudinal and behavioural change in service providers, and results in concrete benefits for women. How do incentive systems change? What is the impact of an empowered and vocal clientele demanding accountability? How do complaints mechanisms put in place by committed leaders change behaviour? How do gender-sensitive performance measures work? What is making services available for women in ways that do not abuse them, do not exclude them, and do not reinforce gender-biased norms? How are things done when they are done well?

Moving forward

A key element in changing institutions involves strengthening external constituencies' ability to hold institutions to account. One example of this is popular auditing of public accounts – an experiment started by MKSS (a non-party political movement in Rajasthan, India), which focused on public works projects. The MKSS spearheaded a national right to information campaign enabling citizen's access to most non-defense-related documents held by the government including records of expenditures. The main tools of spending analysis and audit used by MKSS are public hearings held in villages. Meticulous and extensive work happens before these public hearings comparing stated expenditure with evidence of actual spending. At the hearings held in the village squares and town markets, relevant details of questionable work are raised by the assembly. Relevant testimony is invited by MKSS to tell people if their experience fits with the official recorded version or

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not. For example, mainly the female workers on public works programmes are asked if they were paid rupees 50 per day as stated in the employment register signed by the foreman. Local officials are invited to attend and defend themselves or account for discrepancies. The MKSS had also successfully campaigned for state laws to create mandatory legal procedures for investigating corruption and institutionalizing the public hearing audit method at the village assembly level.

Some tricky questions

But holding up the mirror to institutions is only part of the picture. We must also hold up the mirror to ourselves. Civil society organizations including women's organizations that claim to be at the forefront of the equality and justice struggle are sometimes themselves some of the worst examples of institutionalized patriarchy and inequity. How can such civil society organizations talk of citizenship and democracy and be allies in the struggle for social justice for men *and* women? How can women's and feminist organizations that have few alternative models of effective organizing and leadership models to offer expect to lead this fight?³

A focus on making systems work for women is particularly timely now in the context of the MDGs combined with increased aid levels often packaged through new aid modalities that can easily obscure a specific focus on gender equality and women's rights even while they specify greater governance conditionalities of better aid effectiveness, accountability, and service delivery efficiency. To achieve basic development objectives, we need both better delivery and better accountability for a range of services to women – not just education and health, but also agricultural extension, land registration and property

protection, regulation of labour markets, and safety.

The complex process of turning policy into practice and intentions into outcomes requires both effective institutional insiders and strategic external critics. From the inside out, it requires shifting opportunity structures in institutional environments toward equality of women's agency, changing incentives and capacity in global, state, and community agencies to respond to women including delivering on services and on rights. From the outside in, it requires strengthening women's awareness of their own agency, voice and mobilization, and their influence over institutions, and their ability to hold them to account. However, neither the top-down process of changing the opportunity structure nor the bottom-up process of mobilization and empowerment happen in a vacuum. This struggle happens within a context where civil society organizations, political parties, and trade unions operate in ways that are crucial to mobilization, but often less than helpful when it comes to *women's* rights, and where informal institutions – ideology and culture maintained by unequal power relations – also operate in ways that constrain some actions and make others possible. Thus, to move from tinkering to making significant change happen, we need to understand the confluence of the opportunity structure provided by the state, the empowerment of women and their organizations, and formal and informal institutions that mediate both access and benefits. And we need to both support institutional insiders and hold them to account not only for changing systems but also for gender equality. Neither the feminist glamour girls nor the mainstreaming divas can make sustainable change happen on their own. If we can find ways to support each other and build on each others' strengths and energies, we will have found the fulcrum that will upset the *status quo*.

Notes

- 1 For an insightful analysis of the need to support these agents see Goetz (2004). For a scathing critique of gender mainstreaming see McFadden (2004).
- 2 For conceptual tools to aid in designing measuring instruments and processes, see Rao and Kelleher (2005); and Making the Case produced by the Women's Funding Network.

- 3 Tools to aid in building strong organizations exist such as Smart Growth that is aimed at enabling women's organizations to benchmark overall life stage and key organizational capacities over time and plan strategically for moving forward.

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