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A Holistic Approach to Gender Equality and Social Justice

By Michel Friedman
and Ray Gordezky

Introduction

Gender equality and women’s rights has been cited in conferences such as the Beijing +5 as a critical element to development efforts and peace building. Despite considerable energy invested to further social justice and achievement of major gains for women through policy reforms and in policy and workplace practices, positive outcomes for women’s lives are far from the norm. We’ve found two reasons for the lack of more progress. One is that insufficient attention has been given to factors holding inequality in place, such as cultural norms that maintain the gendered division of labor, the restrictions on women owning land, or customs that condone violence against women. The second reason for lack of progress is the predominance of approaches that give preference to rationality and the mind over the body.

For more than fifteen years, our colleagues and we have developed and evolved the Organization Strengthening Program (OSP) (Rao & Kelleher, 2005; Kelleher, 2009). The purpose of the OSP is to address women’s rights, gender equality, and social justice issues with a multi-factorial (individual, organizational, and societal) and holistic (head, heart, and hands) organization development program.

Working with civil society organizations in Asia and Africa we have created an approach to organization development and gender equality with the following elements:

- » individual psychology and consciousness of women and men

- » women’s access to resources
- » cultural beliefs and practices in which women and men live and work—both inside organizations and within the fabric of communities
- » formal systems, policies, and structures shaping organization and community governance

To date, over twenty-six civil society organizations and community-based organizations have developed substantial gains for women’s voices and participation within their organizations and communities in India and South Africa (Friedman & Meer, 2007). Programs are currently being carried out in South Africa, India, Morocco, Albania, Nepal, and Rwanda. We recently completed a program in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda and another in Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Sudan.

The program has resulted in women and men being able to imagine and act on what was felt to be impossible—to create greater gender equality. For instance, in India, organizational partners worked on issues ranging from children’s rights to indigenous people’s advocacy. In South Africa, organizations are working together on projects, such as anti-poverty programs, community greening, anti-privatization, and farm workers’ rights. Within isolated communities in Tanzania and impoverished areas of India, women and men have worked together to eliminate discriminatory practices that condone physical abuse of women and made it impossible for women to own land.

In this paper we will describe key

elements of the OSP, illustrate its impact with a case study from work carried out in Ethiopia, and conclude with some questions for those undertaking to scale-up societal change initiatives.

The Organization Strengthening Program

The OSP is intended to address gender inequality through practices informed by organization development, action learning, capacity building, Ken Wilber's Integral Model (1996), and feminist theories of change.

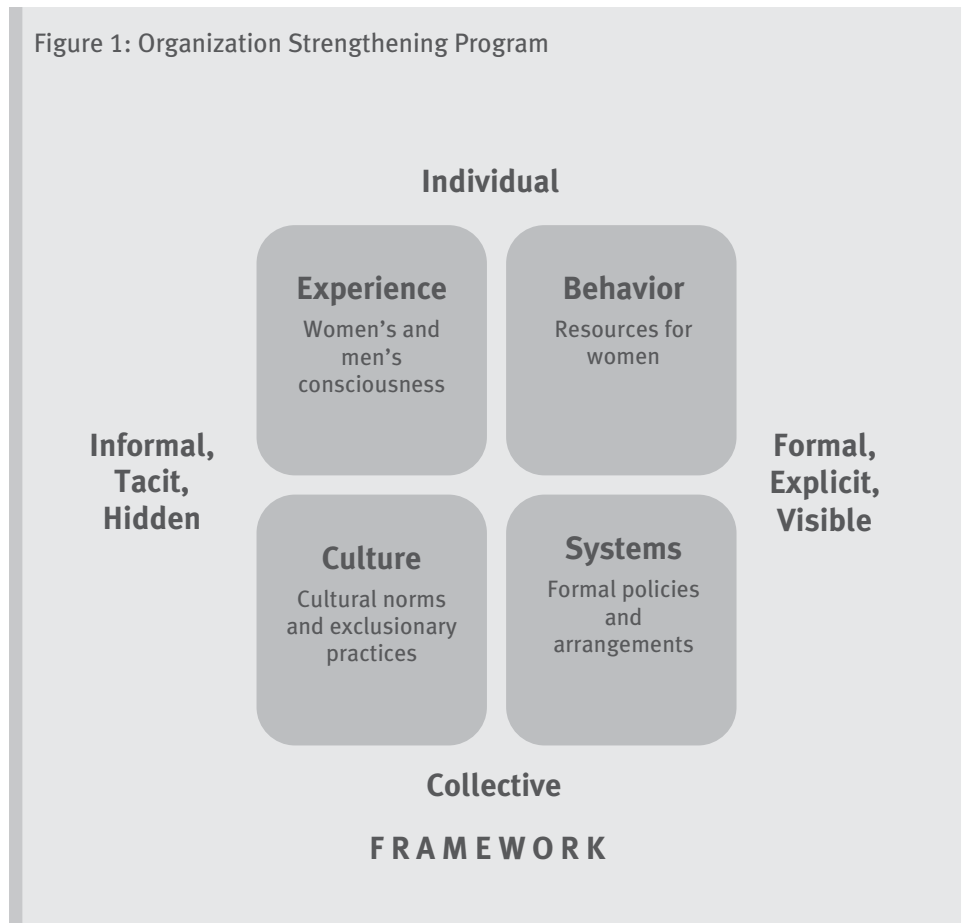
Rather than offer best practices or prescriptive solutions, the OSP invites organizations to create their own path toward greater gender equality and social justice. The program is typically an 18-month process, during which learning and group accountability are fostered through peer-learning workshops and on-the-ground consulting support. The program components, described below, include Hearing Our Story, three Peer Learning Workshops held approximately six months apart, and a writing workshop. One-to-one consultations with participating organizations take place between peer-learning workshops to support the organization's change initiatives. During the program, partner organizations strategically analyze what inhibits women's full participation in their communities and organizations and craft organizational change projects. Facilitation teams typically consist of three consultants. Two are usually local and skilled in gender equality. The third is typically from outside, i.e., Canada or South Africa, who brings organization development practices and skills.

Hearing Our Stories: The program begins with a two-day workshop for an OSP facilitation team and a three-member organization change team at the organization's office. This meeting invites participants to experience and reflect upon how gendered realities are an integral part of everyday organizational life.

During this meeting, using storytelling and collages, the participants reflect on:

- » the organization's history, culture, and

Figure 1: Organization Strengthening Program



- » programs; and how women and men live within their organization
- » how women and men live in the communities they serve
- » ideas for projects they might initiate to improve gender relations either inside their organization or in a community in which they operate

In addition, participants are introduced to two key practices underlying the OSP practices. The first is derived from the OSP Framework, a deceptively simple four-quadrant model based on Ken Wilber's Integral Model, which enables organizations to quickly assess where they put their attention and energy (Wilber, 1996; Rao & Kelleher, 2009; Hochachka, 2009).

The Framework distinguishes two polarities: 1) individual and collective experience; and 2) hidden and visible experience. Constructing a matrix by combining the two polarities produces four quadrants, or lenses, that guide exploration of complex issues (see Figure 1). Many proposed solutions to gender inequality focus on only one quadrant, or perhaps two. Our hypothesis is that interventions

will be more comprehensive, effective, and sustainable when change efforts focus on all four quadrants.

The Experience Quadrant concerns the invisible, or interior, aspects of individual consciousness. It focuses on women's and men's knowledge of and commitment to change toward equality and women's rights, and willingness to take action to empower women. The Behaviour Quadrant is the external view, what we can see and measure of individual consciousness. It focuses on women's access to resources such as health, education, or leadership positions. The Systems Quadrant is about the institutional and collective aspects of consciousness. It concerns formal arrangements, including laws, policies, strategies, and budgets. Finally, the Culture Quadrant concerns the interior of collective experience. It focuses on traditions, norms, and practices that shape how women and men are treated by each other and their communities, such as how women are excluded from exercising their rights even when constitutions or laws mandate equality.

The Framework helps organizations

more fully address the complexity of long-standing social and cultural issues. They use it by exploring unexamined assumptions individuals hold, as well as the cultural biases and traditions reinforced by organization and community culture.

The second practice underlying the OSP is the use of physical movement. Our hypothesis is that given the high incidence of violence against women and other forms of trauma from living in poverty and under repressive governments, not addressing the trauma and how it is carried in the body perpetuates helplessness and fear of taking action. A body grown numb from trauma demobilizes the person, withers her spirit. The practices we use interweave a mixture of Tai Chi, meditation, finger holds (holding each finger for a few minutes by wrapping the opposite hand around each of the fingers), singing, and dancing to work with the physical energy of the group. These Capacitar Practices developed by Patricia Cane as part of a popular education framework (Freire, 1970) were initially intended for use with poor communities needing to heal from various traumas (political, economic, environmental, wars, and so on) (Cane, 2005). The practices balance one's sense of self through movement and build personal strength to help women and men address years of powerlessness. These simple and powerful practices enhance individual capacity for personal transformation, which in turn assists broader organizational and social transformations (Cane, 2005; Friedman, 2010).

The OSP then unfolds with three peer learning workshops, one-to-one consultations with organizations between peer-meetings, and a writing workshop at the end.

The First Peer Learning Workshop: The first peer-learning workshop brings together change teams from five to eight organizations (12–24 individuals). Participants learn how to use the OSP Framework as an analytical and action planning tool. Facilitators support each organization in developing plans for change projects. Through peer-learning meetings—small subgroups consisting of members from

2 to 3 organizations—participants challenge existing perceptions and encourage each other to develop perspectives on their own organizations, their proposed change project, and the communities they serve. Following the workshop, participants work for six to eight months to implement their change projects, supported by an OSP facilitator who visits them at their organizational setting.

The Second Peer Learning Workshop: During the second peer learning workshop, change teams share what they have done.

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Some teams have been unable to change anything. Other teams have altered and sharpened the focus of their change projects. All reflect on lessons learned, and get advice from their peers and the OSP facilitation team. Facilitators introduce concepts and processes for use in working with personal and organizational power, help participants deepen their peer-learning practice, and support the use of the OSP Framework to assess their organization and change project. Finally, change teams revise their projects based on their insights and advice received. During the next six months, change teams continue their work, supported by an OSP facilitator.

The Third Peer Learning Workshop: The third peer learning workshop invites participants to tell stories of their change process and to identify factors responsible for what they've changed. Where relevant, the facilitation team provides ideas to assist

participants in developing deeper insight and understanding of the issues that emerged during the change projects. Participants work together to develop a theory of change methods to assess their progress towards greater gender equality.

The Writing Workshop: Writing is a powerful means of undoing the silence built up from years of exclusion. Writing about experiences during the OSP helps participants discover a personal sense of power. Specifically, many women participating in the program have not been in the position

of expressing their thinking in a way that gets read and listened to. Writing practice begins during the first peer-learning where participants are encouraged to write, without editing, about their experiences, their learning, and their observations. This is private writing; only participants wishing to share their writings with others read to the group. The writing process develops with participants telling one another a story or two representing their most significant change experience during the program. Participants use their stories to identify what makes a compelling story, they work individually and in small groups to embellish, revise, and edit their stories. The workshop concludes with a final reading of the stories.

ADMAS Case Study

The following case study provides a brief description of how we used the OSP with

ADMAS in 2007. ADMAS was one of six organizations from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somaliland that participated in an OSP between 2007 and 2009 (Friedman & Kelleher, 2009). ADMAS is a network of seven founding community based organizations (CBOs) in Dire Dawe a town in Eastern Ethiopia. As of early 2007, the network had about 3000 members, two-thirds of whom were women. All their members are poor and represent the most disadvantaged segments of the local community. Membership is diverse, including people from different ethnic and religious groupings. The network employs about 25 finance officers, with a large portion of its activities undertaken by volunteers. Since its founding, ADMAS has expanded beyond the core activity of providing access to income (through savings and credit) to include access to legal and emotional support, information, and vocational training.

Organization-Strengthening Program Activities

When Gender at Work began working with ADMAS in 2007, the network was already involved in building relationships between affiliated CBOs to facilitate sharing of experience and learning among their membership. The network would raise awareness among members to help them better understand their roles and responsibilities in changing the circumstances of poverty.

Before the OSP started, ADMAS members were addressing problematic, gender injustice related issues in the Dire Dawe area. For example, some of the association members were paying visits to families to encourage them to provide education for their daughters, who were regularly prevented from attending school. The Association was also working on the consequences of social injustice, but had been unable to challenge the root causes that underpin the injustice. ADMAS hoped the OSP would assist it to break through cycles of injustice, and address other factors that contribute to HIV, poverty, and violence.

At the Hearing the Stories workshop, the team said they wanted to focus on

addressing gender-based violence. Their initial thinking was to build a greater awareness of gender equality between women and men in the broader community, and to expand existing membership to better access credit and saving. Within the communities they serve, they proposed using a paralegal model, with external experts and women lawyers. They intended to take an advocacy focus, targeting policy makers and government to implement existing laws and policies with respect to women's property rights.

At the first peer-learning event, the ADMAS team showed a shift in awareness by articulating their goal as follows: to create a core group of change agents and a critical mass of individuals who believe in the need for, and take part in, raising awareness about gender equality. Their vision for their work after 5 years was that in parts of Dire Dawe there would be gender equality. Their vision for 18 months was seeing the core change agents transform themselves, their families, CBOs, and their neighbors.

The ADMAS strategy included face-to-face dialogue, employing great respect and understanding of diverse cultural factors. Initially they started with gender equality but changed their strategy to identifying the misconceptions and root causes of gender inequality. "We did this," said a change team member, "because Dire Dawe is a big city and is exposed to a number of media influences. People are already exposed to the issue of gender equality and it didn't work much in terms of changing the behavior of the people. So we shifted our strategy towards identifying the root causes and decided [to work] with people in changing their hearts and minds." Their activities included:

- » providing an educational forum in the seven CBO offices
- » facilitating learning forums for 245 members (35 members from each of the seven CBOs)
- » collecting and discussing traditional proverbs, folklores, stories, and songs that influence gender relations—classified into cultural, religious, and social norms

Ultimately, ADMAS trained 140 change agents (60 women and 40 men) and chose to give them freedom to facilitate change conversations in whatever way made sense to them. The network supported the change agents by facilitating monthly reflection and dialogue meetings during which change agents could discuss their experiences.

There were no formal guidelines to direct the change agent led conversations. Rather, they drew upon their initial in-depth and detailed reflections where they examined myths, proverbs, and misconceptions. They also used personal stories and inputs from religious leaders. It was assumed that after this depth of discussion the change agents would feel able to facilitate similar kinds of conversations in their communities. This assumption seems to have been borne out. The important point is that they were not obliged to conduct formal training sessions. They could have conversations anywhere and in whatever way would engage the people they were talking to. Some started with real-life problems—a husband beating a wife; others started with reflecting on stories that had been written about in a newspaper, a sister complaining she was unhappy with her husband and so on.

Organization-Strengthening Program Results

At the end of the program, the ADMAS change team reported changes they felt to be significant. Changes are organized according the four quadrants of the OSP Framework. Ideas in one quadrant are entangled in other quadrants; what's important is the conversation that gets generated by exploring the holistic nature of the change.

Individual–Experience and Behavior

Quadrants: At the individual level, change team members shifted their awareness of themselves and their own capacity to achieve a desired goal. In particular, they shifted their goal from an expansive plan using external resources, books, women lawyers, and expert facilitators, to using their own skills and resources. In the

process they cultivated a much greater sense of independence and confidence, including the capacity to develop their own policies based on their lessons and experiences. The 140 plus change agents experienced changes at an individual level: in gaining access to new facilitation and leadership roles; and in their newfound confidence, competence, and ability to take initiative. Finally, change team members reported the role of Capacitar Practices was striking. From the first meeting, ADMAS members were enthusiastic about what they called the “sports.” Some of their members have integrated into their daily lives regular use of various Capacitar Practices. They maintain that these practices have helped them keep alive high levels of hope and well being, as well as an ability to let go of difficult and traumatic emotional experiences.

Systems Quadrants—In the Organization:

The change team’s shift from focusing on the Association lobbying external paralegal services (courts, law, justice) to developing a critical mass of change agents signifies a broadening in collective consciousness about what actions are possible, and their collective confidence in their ability to take successful action. Other organizational changes have included building stronger relationships in the broader community, increased capacity to work with diversity, an enhanced ability to hold reflective conversations where multiple perspectives can be heard and dissenting voices included, and meaning jointly arrived at without a need for agreements.

Although ADMAS always worked with difference and diversity (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Ethiopian, and Somali members), they reported they were now working very consciously with gender differences and diversity. For example, they use group norms to ensure that their change teams contain both women and men (teams started off with a majority of women, and now have more or less equal numbers of women and men). Both women and men are present when discussing gender difficulties, or misconceptions. Because different change agents work in the monthly peer-learning spaces, they are

building relationships and learning across different parts of the city and breaking down fragmentation and isolation between members from different CBOs. As one individual said:

We learned to be true to ourselves—when challenges appear we are able to open them up to dialogue and not always say “we know” and “must do it this way.” There is openness to listen to different opinions—if our [political] leaders were like this we would live in a different country. Both men and women are taking responsibility in leadership.

There is collective support for women members when men are abusive. For example, the community boycotted a man who took the money his wife had received from the credit program. Finally, women are increasingly being recognized and valued as leaders—both as facilitators of dialogic conversations as well as network leaders in their own right.

Most importantly, the nature of power and the relationship between the ADMAS board and its members in the various CBOs has been changed by the role change agents took on over the time of the OSP. Previously the network struggled to sustain an active and engaged membership; now the change agents have become much more committed, responsible, and engaged network members. By the end of the process ADMAS was working on a gender policy, which included guidance for their work with members, as well as a workplace policy that would outline women’s and men’s rights, organizational values, and a vision with respect to gender equality. It is worth noting here that the confidence gained from the process strongly influenced ADMAS’ desire and capacity to develop their own gender policy without requiring external help or needing to copy other organizations’ policy examples.

Cultural Quadrant—In the Community:

ADMAS is now recognized as a valuable player in the development sector; they are engaging more as an actor rather than receiver or beneficiary of other actors, such

as the Government Women’s Bureau. For example, this Bureau invited ADMAS to facilitate educational sessions for young people and citizens in the city. There’s a sense within ADMAS that organic growth has been unleashed and is unlikely to stop. The ADMAS team shared examples of norms being challenged and new norms created amongst the larger community membership. For example, entrenched practices between women and men are giving way—husbands are sharing domestic responsibilities, men are being less violent with their wives, women are acquiring property and other rights when

divorcing, and more parents are sending their daughters to school. Members are challenging and holding each other to account when they use derogatory terms and proverbs. They are encouraging each other to use more positive expressions and to engage with religious scripture more critically. There is collective support for women members when men are abusive. For example, the community boycotted a man who took the money his wife had received from the credit program. Finally, women are increasingly being recognized and valued as leaders—both as facilitators of dialogic conversations as well as network leaders in their own right.

By building on its own strengths and taking maximum advantage of its participation in the OSP, ADMAS has become a much more effective actor in the spheres of gender equality and social justice.

What Can Be Done to Scale Up and Sustain Progress on Gender Equality

The OSP challenges the meaning of gender equality as limited to gender audits and quantitative measures. This is a far from

The OSP challenges the meaning of gender equality as limited to gender audits and quantitative measures. This is a far from straightforward process, and a key question is: how sustainable and scalable are the gains made by participating organizations, such as ADMAS? Our suspicion is that it is critical to create supportive structures under which those involved in addressing gender equality can meet, share learning, and develop new approaches to societal change.

straightforward process, and a key question is: how sustainable and scalable are the gains made by participating organizations, such as ADMAS? Our suspicion is that it is critical to create supportive structures under which those involved in addressing gender equality can meet, share learning, and develop new approaches to societal change.

We have not yet begun to develop the mechanisms for creating the kind of global stewardship needed to address gender equality more broadly. Such stewardship would put to the test the often-quoted idea to “think globally and act locally.” There are numerous questions; among them: Does stewardship imply building international organizations that address gender issues to counterweigh for the emphasis on economic growth? Is such a broad stewardship effort sufficient to address gender issues that are essentially local? How can we connect the power and accessibility of local civil society organizations and faith-based organization with stewardship at national and/or international levels? What are the design criteria for such a system and what might such a system look like?

There are at least three design criteria to consider for building a global learning system capable of successfully addressing in a sustainable manner the complexity of gender inequality.

Peer Learning: As we’ve seen at the local level, peer learning assists organizations to reflect on what approaches are working and why; then using the insights gained to guide future action. The same could happen at a global level connecting

those organizations already working on gender equality.

Bridge-Spanning Capability: This suggests a system capable of bridging between civil society, government, and for-profit organizations and across sufficiently diverse constituencies, jurisdictions, and disciplines to equal the complexity of factors and stakeholders keeping the current situation in place.

Global Learning Platform: This suggests a learning system capable of connecting actors and activities at the local, national, and international levels.

It is an open question whether or not organizations involved in addressing women’s rights, donor’s who can support this work, governments with their policy making and enforcement mechanisms, and businesses that generate opportunity and economic power have the collective will, capability, and understanding to make such global stewardship for gender equality a reality.

Our work suggests there’s reason to hope.

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