

Action Learning for Gender Equality: The Gender at Work Experience David Kelleher¹

In area offices all over Bangladesh, staff were meeting to discuss how their program could meet the newly emerging gender equality expectations of their organization, BRAC. Over years, these meetings led to hundreds of small-scale innovations that improved BRAC's program for women and the life of BRAC's women staff. A few years later, in Gujarat, a group of youth leaders were involved in an intensive, life-changing program to understand how ideas of gender equality affected their lives and those of their families. In Andra Pradesh, a Dalit union was transforming itself in order to respond to the issues facing their women members. In Petermartitzberg, South Africa, a small women's organization was coming to grips with the issue of power and victimhood, claiming their power and defining how their organization could work more effectively.

All of these projects were part of what became Gender at Work's Action Learning Program (Now known as CSO Strengthening Program). The program was intended to help organizations create a reflective space that would allow them to change their organizations and their programs to become more gender equitable. The program was built on an understanding of *action learning* and an integral, holistic understanding of gender equality and women's empowerment that over the past 14 years has resulted in impressive changes in a variety of NGOs in South Asia, South Africa and, most recently, the Horn of Africa region.

This paper describes the program, the conceptual framework that supports it and makes judgments regarding what seem to be important factors that lead to successful outcomes. First we look at the idea of action learning itself.

Action learning is a process that has been part of private sector strategies for leadership development and to a lesser extent organization development for many years.² (Reg Revans wrote a review of 25 years of experience in 1980!) The main features of the method are:

- A small group analyzes and develops solutions to a real organizational problem
- It is expected that participants will learn from each other as they work on a real problem
- People will learn how to ask questions that will bring unstated assumptions to the surface
- People will learn about themselves as they work on a problem together
- People are accountable for their decisions and (in most cases) are expected to implement them.

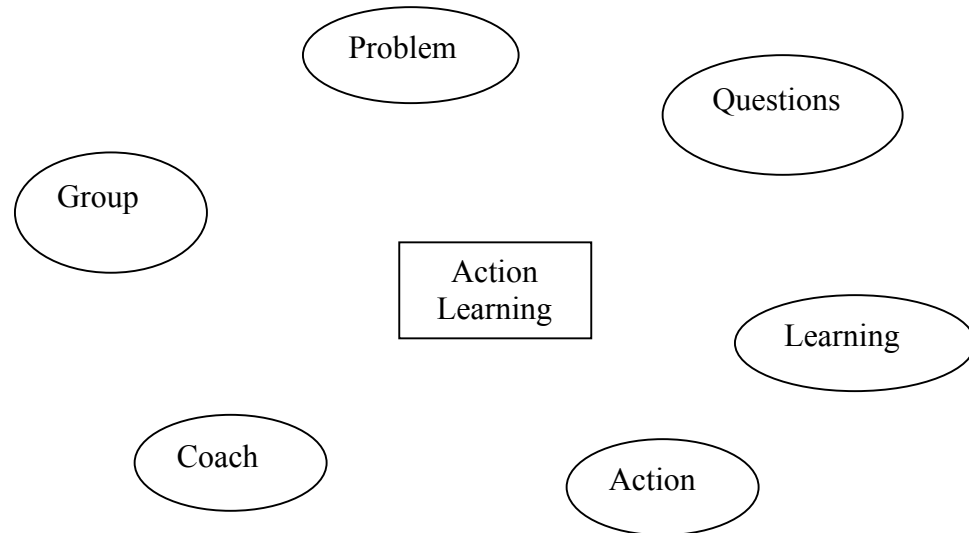
¹ The ideas in this article have been developed collectively in discussion and in our work with partners. Primary thought leaders have been, David Kelleher, Aruna Rao, Anasuya Sengupta, Michel Friedman and Rieky Stuart

² I am grateful to Ingrid Richter who shared her research material for the preparation of a review of action learning for the Canadian Centre for Management Development.

- There is a process of analyzing results and learning from experience.

These core ideas have been used in a variety of ways to stimulate learning on the part of individuals and to also improve the effectiveness of organizations.

Marquardt has synthesized the key aspects of action learning in a diagram similar to the following:



The six bubbles are:

- Problem—a project, opportunity that is important to the organization, and becomes the responsibility of the group to solve
- Group—the action-learning group is made up of individuals who work on the problem. They should have the power to solve the problem and may come from a variety of perspectives in order to generate learning and creative approaches
- Questions—good questions deepen dialogue, stimulate new approaches and challenge participants to see the problem in new ways.
- Learning—individuals that have increased their knowledge and skills will continue to benefit the organization beyond the solving of a particular problem
- Action—Although individual learning is important, the point is action. The group must feel that its work will result in action not just recommendations. Ideally, the group is responsible for implementing their solution and learning from the action itself.
- Coach—optimally, the group will have access to a coach who will help the group focus on the quality of the questions it is asking, how they are working together and how they are doing on the problem or project they are working on.³

As this method has been used in many organizations, there are a variety of ways have emerged to design a program to optimally touch all these bases.

³ Michael Marquardt, *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning: Solving Problems and Building Leaders in Real Time*, David-Black, 2004.

At Gender at Work, our focus has been on individual and organizational change to further gender equality. From the beginning, we realized we needed to provide an educational experience that would change how organizations deliver services so that those services benefit women as well as men and that they contribute to women's empowerment. We also realized that the organization itself needed to become more capable and willing to do work on gender equality and women's empowerment. A study we conducted of 18 Indian social change organizations led us to the idea of "reflective space". We talked with these organizations about their efforts to grow and develop and improve their services to women. Almost all reported there was no reflective space for them to come together with others they trusted to think issues through and design new approaches.

Accordingly, we developed a process to support reflective peer-learning space that enabled action. That reflective space had at least 4 aspects:

1. The organizational visit—a reflection on history, existing program, readiness for change and the reasonable next step. In all cases participants felt energized and engaged in the problem of how they could take their work for gender equality to the next step. In one case, in particular, they came away from this meeting quite challenged by how they had been working and determined to expand their focus.
2. The peer learning workshops allowed the participants space to think, plan and to get supportive feedback from facilitators and peer organizations.
3. The peer learning workshops also built a social group that supported participants personal explorations related to the work. The peer group also brought a sense of accountability. Participants were determined to have something to share at the next meeting.
4. The Gender at Work facilitators brought experience, relevant ideas and a supportive ear to the on-going process of implementing the plans

The program unfolded in a series of steps:

1. Inception workshop: This first workshop included Gender at Work staff and potential partner organizations. This meeting allowed us all to talk about what we do and to explore whether the action learning program would be helpful. Following this meeting the organizations decided whether or not to participate.
2. Organizational Visits: Gender at Work teams visited each organization and members of their community to map the organization's work in the community looking at the history of the work and how it is evolving. We also focused on the organization and its history of promoting gender equality, its capacity and its potential directions for change. This stage allowed the participants from the organization to meet and begin to know the Gender at Work staff, understand the structure of the program and begin to think about what they might learn and how this learning would be translated into action in their organization.
3. Workshop 1: Telling Stories, Sharing Doubts and Re-thinking the Work: This first 3 day workshop heard the story of each of the participant organizations,

introduced key ideas of individual, community and organizational change, and built a learning community characterized by trust, respect and openness. During the workshop, each organizational team met with their facilitator and developed a change project that significantly affected at least one aspect of their organization's capacity to promote gender equality.

4. **Work in Organizations:** Participants carried out a change project in their organizations and communities. This project was either inside the organization (focusing on informal norms and power relations for example) or in the relations between the organization and its community. The work was supported by a facilitator visited periodically and helped in a variety of ways.
5. **Workshop 2: Telling our Stories, Re-vitalizing our Practice:** This workshop, also of 3 days heard the stories and experiences of the participants' change efforts. Other participants and resource people offered analysis and advice. The organizational teams and their facilitators planned the next stage of their change work.
6. **Work in Organizations—**participants continued to work on their projects with the support of the facilitator.
7. **Final Workshop:** This workshop was to pull together the learning from all the organizations and thought about the change process itself.

In one of our programs, the organizations themselves wrote about the experience. This for some turned out to be the most powerful learning of the program.⁴ The foregoing has been a description of the *process* of the action learning work, we now turn to the *content* or the question of what we are trying to change.

What are we trying to change: A Holistic Approach to Gender Equality

After thirty years of effort, the promise of women's rights remains unfulfilled. This is despite United Nations conferences and agreements, much scholarly writing and immense efforts of women themselves (often at some risk). There have been examples of positive outcomes for women's lives but these examples are far from the norm. Governments, NGOs, the United Nations and bilateral agencies all acknowledge that gender equality is critical to development and peace, yet all consistently under prioritize and under fund gender equality work. After all this time, why has there not been more progress?

We believe that while much has been done (particularly in providing increased resources to women (health and education for example), there has been insufficient attention to

⁴ See, Michel Friedman and Shamim Meer, *Change is a Slow Dance: Three Stories of Challenging Gender and Power Relations in Organizations*, 2007, www.gendertatwork.org.

underlying factors, which hold inequality in place. For many, this requires a focus on *institutions*.⁵

By institutions we mean the rules (stated and implicit) that maintain women's unequal position in societies. The terms 'institution' and 'organization' are often used synonymously, but we find it useful to distinguish between the two. We understand *institutions* as the rules for achieving social or economic ends.⁶ In other words, the rules which determine who gets what, what counts, who does what, and who decides. These rules include values that maintain the gendered division of labour, restrictions on women owning land, limits to women's mobility, and, perhaps most fundamentally, the devaluing of reproductive work. *Organizations* are social structures, which embody the institutions prevalent in a society.

Our understanding of institutional change has evolved from over a decade of practice, writing and conversations with colleagues in Asia, Africa, North America and Europe. What has grown out of this work is a conception of institutional change that is multi-factorial and holistic. It is concerned with both the individual psychology of women and men, their access to resources and the social structures in which they live. Furthermore, our conception is intervention focussed—it begins from the point of view of an organization attempting to change the institutions underlying inequality. We also begin with the assumption that organizations that are not gender equitable in their own functioning will be limited in what they can do to infuse gender equality into their work.

From this point of view, change must happen in two places—inside the organization and outside in the “community” in which it works. Moreover, change must happen in a variety of areas.

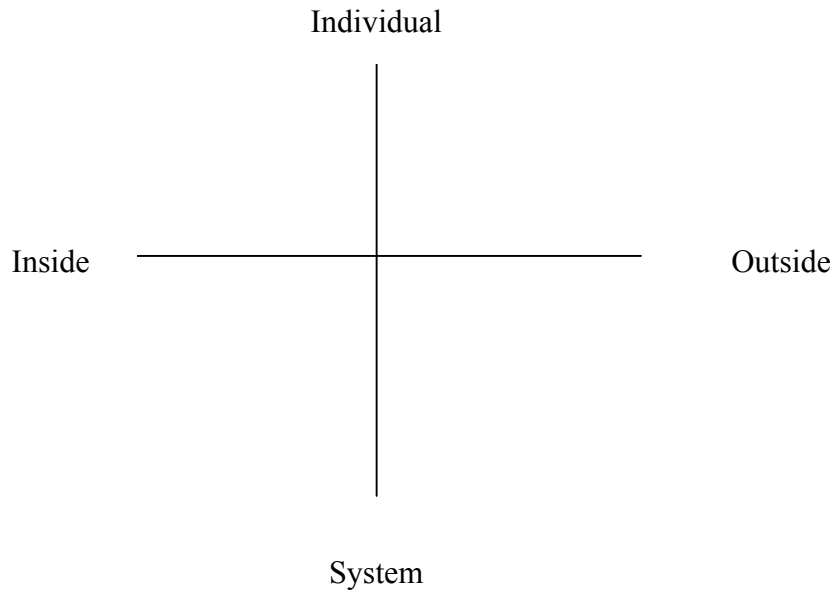
In thinking about this we came across the work of Ken Wilber. Wilber has been working to integrate the major wisdom traditions (ancient and modern) and has developed a framework for looking at the many aspects of the human condition. For the first time we have available to us all the major knowledge and wisdom developed through history and in different parts of the world. It is possible for us to study everything from Taoism to systems theory, from Chinese medicine and the mysteries of Qi to modern cognitive science. Wilber's effort has been to *integrate* the best of all these traditions in a way that can bring us the deepest possible understanding of human experience. This is what Ken Wilber has attempted with the integral approach.⁷

⁵ Rao, Stuart and Kelleher, *Gender at Work: Organizational Change for Equality*, Kumarian, 1999; Goetz, *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development*, Zed, 1997; World Bank, *Empowering Development Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*, World Bank, 2001.

⁶ Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London: Verso, 1994.

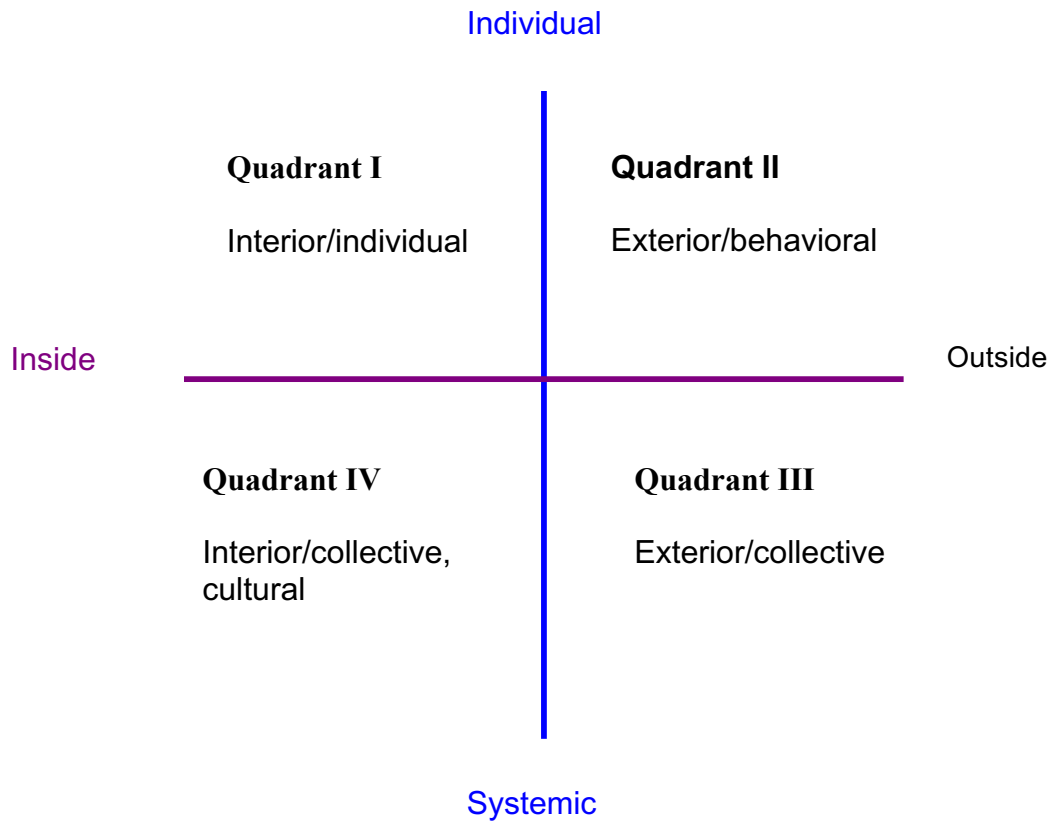
⁷ Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, Shambhala, 1996.

Wilber organizes all this wisdom with two major dimensions as shown below:



Wilber says that there are two major ways to organize what we know about human existence. First, it is either about individuals or collectives (or systems). Secondly, we are looking either at the inside, subjective experience (what I feel, or think for example) or the outside (how it looks in an objective way, such as blood pressure readings or opinion poll findings).

These two dimensions give us four areas of interest:



Quadrant I is where we consider the developmental path of individuals. It is in this quadrant that the work of Jung, Freud and Maslow are integrated with the insights of the Buddha, the Hindu sages and all the thinkers who have pondered the human mind and spirit through the millennia. Wilber believes that this quadrant (like all of them) has a developmental content. That is; when we look at the work of scores of thinkers it is possible to see a developmental path (such as from egocentric to ethnocentric to worldcentric). These are *levels* of consciousness. It is also possible to see different *lines* of development (moral, cognitive, psychosexual, etc). Finally it is also possible to see different personality *types* (Jungian types, Enagram, Myers-Briggs, etc.)

Quadrant II is the external view of individuals. These are the noticeable, perhaps measurable manifestations of individual experience. These can be at a micro-biological level, (measures of hormonal levels for example) or they can be more easily observable. For example, in Quadrant I, one may be feeling anger. Quadrant II is about the red face and the loud voice and other behavioral signs of the inner feeling of anger. There are other interesting correlations between the two upper quadrants—for example certain

internal mind states can be mapped used cognitive imaging and certain levels of consciousness can be correlated with brain waves and brain chemistry.

Quadrant III is about the outward manifestations of our collective experience. This includes all the institutional and material forms of society—everything from architectural styles, systems of government, population levels or economic systems. These external forms are generally correlated with the developmental levels found in the other quadrants.

Finally, Quadrant IV is about the interior of our collective experience. This is generally called “culture”—the collective beliefs, values and ways of doing things that we share as a community.

In summary, we have four quadrants, each with developmental paths and lines of development all of which are correlated. For example a post modern society (culturally) will have individuals at a particular level of consciousness, exhibiting certain behaviors and building social and economic institutions of a particular type.

This framework has been used for a variety of applications including medicine, ecology, art criticism, and business. We now turn to the organizational version of this framework.

Organizations and Integral

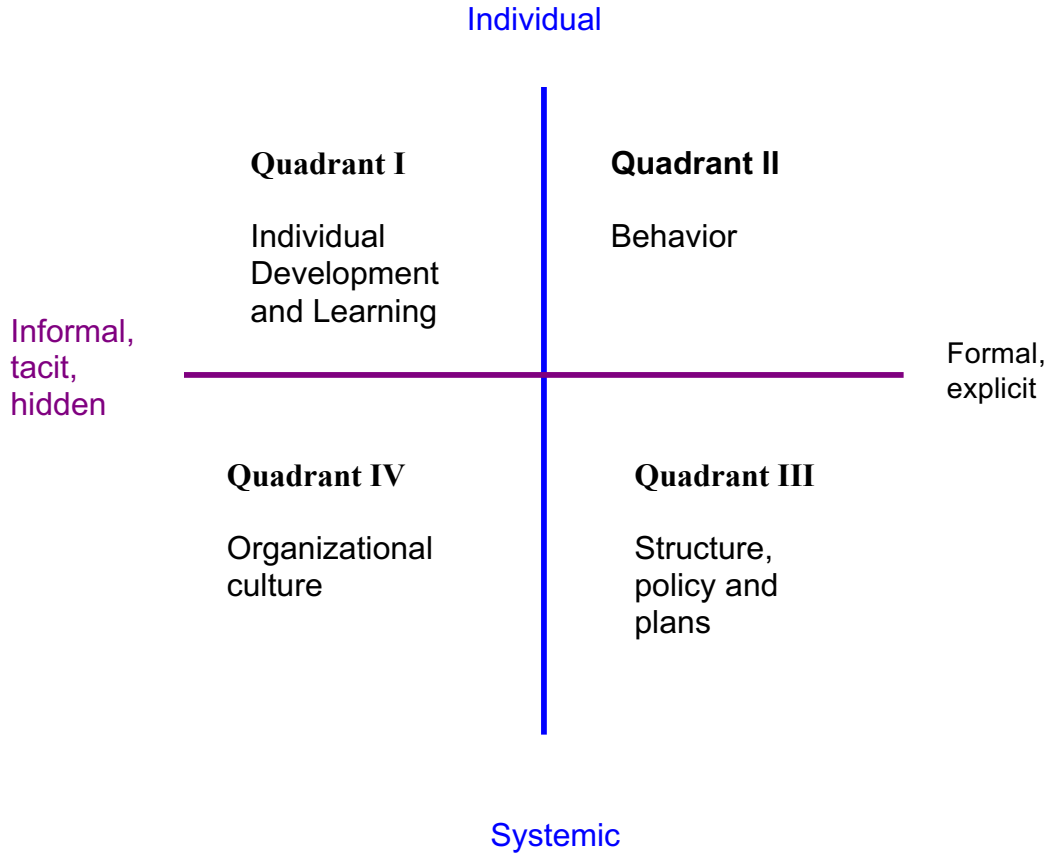
Once again, we are looking at the two primary dimensions, individual-system and internal-external. In the organizational version of this we have altered some of the terms but the core framework is still the same. What this organizational framework does is integrate the various ways to intervene in organizations to assist their development.

Quadrant I is about individual learning. This includes leadership training, coaching and other interventions aiming to help individuals develop as managers or staff.

Quadrant II is about behavior—the outward indications of the levels and types of consciousness in Quadrant I. Quadrant II is also home to behavioral training—training that focuses on skills such as sales, or presentations or even particular management skills.

Quadrant III is about the formal structures that define an organization. These might include organizational structure, operational and strategic plans, policies, budgets and even office layout.

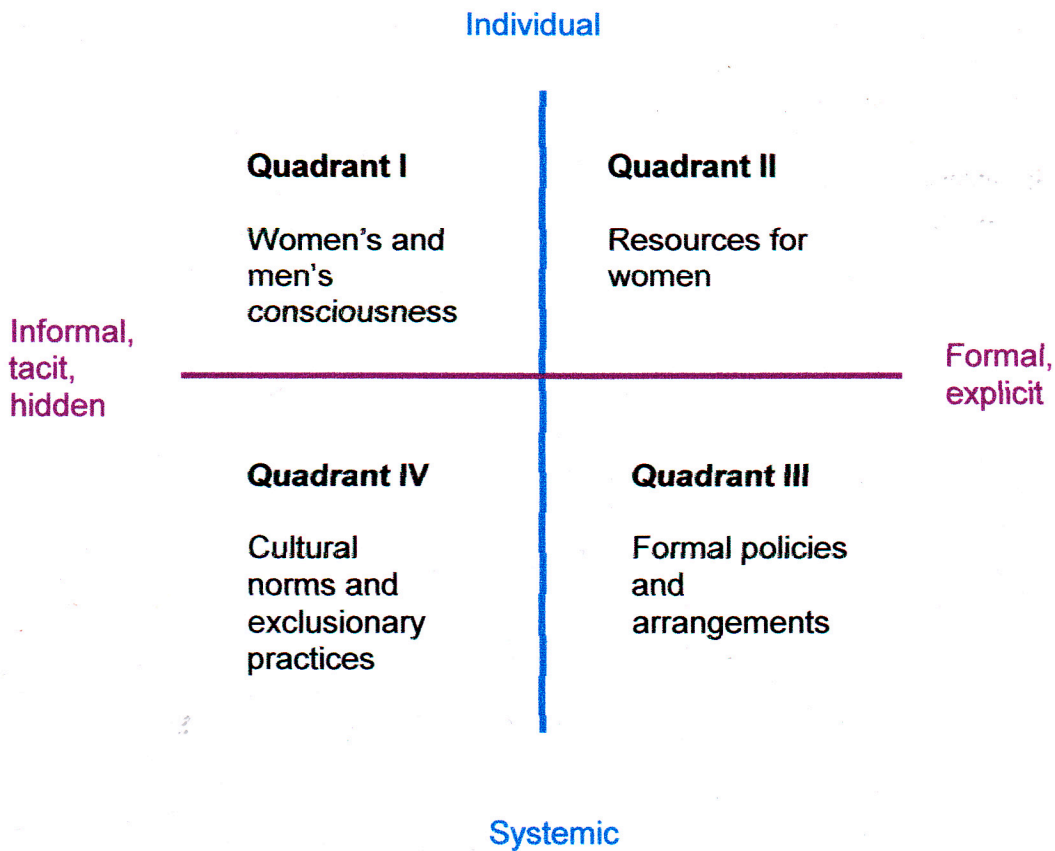
Quadrant IV is about organizational culture—the hidden and not so hidden rules, norms, values that define the informal organization. This also includes the informal relations of power and leadership (which are generally different from the formal power structure).



Integral and Gender Equality

As we were struggling to develop a conceptual basis to our work on gender equality, Wilber's method said a lot to us. We asked, "Is it possible to map the main directions of work on gender equality in a similar way? Gradually we evolved the following framework which shows the changes that are required to actualize women's rights. The first diagram shows the changes required in the community.

Once again there are two primary dimensions to consider. The first is individual-systemic and the second is formal-informal.



The top two quadrants are individual (changes in measurable individual conditions—resources, voice, freedom from violence, access to health) and individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness and commitment to change toward equality). The bottom two clusters are systemic. The cluster on the right is of formal institutional rules as laid down in constitutions, laws and policies. The cluster on the left is the informal norms and cultural practices that maintain inequality in everyday practices. Change in one quadrant is related to change in the others.

The top left hand quadrant (Quadrant I) is about *women and men's consciousness*. By this is meant, level of knowledge of and commitment to equality and women's rights, and finally, willingness to take action to ensure those rights. For example, the *Jathas* (journeys) the Grama Vikas women took from village to village was an example of women who understood their rights and were prepared to act to claim them. Similarly, the action of the men in the men's groups to facilitate land transfer to women is also an example of action on the basis of beliefs. Other examples of action would include such gender norm-challenging actions as women building their own houses or leaving abusive husbands or men doing household chores.

The top right hand quadrant (Quadrant II) is about *resources for women*. In the community context resources refer to such “assets” as access to health, education or increased security and freedom from violence. This quadrant has received the bulk of attention in work on gender equality over the years. There is no doubt that it has needed this attention as research has consistently shown that women benefit less than men in income, access to health and education, land, and security.

The bottom right hand quadrant (Quadrant III) is the region of *formal policies or arrangements*. For example, an Indian NGO was able to successfully struggle for a freedom of information law that allowed them to audit whether or not officials were giving poor women their rightful money. Similarly a Pakistani NGO was able to include a more gender sensitive curriculum for early childhood education. In both cases, the relevant authority has agreed to a formal arrangement that will advance women’s interests. Other examples are, family friendly policies in a government department, the constitutional guarantee for gender equality in the South African constitution, a gender budgeting agreement or employment equity legislation.

The bottom left hand quadrant (Quadrant IV) is about *culture and informal norms and exclusionary practices*. While work has been done looking at how different aspects of culture affect development, we are concerned with the discriminatory aspects of culture/s towards women.⁸

Cultural values and practices are continuously changing are contested, and can be influenced by intervention. In this context, we are interested in how social change organizations can trigger changes in prejudicial customary practices and exclusionary norms.

Our concern is how ideology and cultural norms and practices devalue women, limit choices for women’s exercise of their rights, how they limit intervention for change and how they may override formal laws or constitutions which mandate equality. We are also concerned with how power relations manifested through the threat of violence together with fear of social ostracism inhibit challenges to inequity.

For example, in India, the law provides for a number of seats for women on local elected councils but often women are prevented from running or if elected are relegated to powerless roles. The Hunger Project, an Indian NGO helps women organize, does leadership training and endeavors to protect women with human rights monitoring groups. These interventions are slowly changing the cultural practices in some communities. In another example, an NGO trained women as managers of the village water systems. Over a number of years those women acquired such respect that they are

⁸Our understanding of culture draws on numerous sources including Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford: Stanford Social Sciences, 2004; Douglas, M., *Traditional Culture, Let’s Hear No More About It.*, in Rao and Walton, *op. cit.*; Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; Susie Jolly and Andrea Cornwall, *Bridge Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Cultural Change*, IDS, 2002; and Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay, Gerard Stehouwer and Franz Wong, *Politics of the Possible: Gender and Organizational Change Experiences from the Field*, Oxfam, 2006.

now used by villagers to resolve conflict. Previously this had been the province of the men’s council.

We have been led to the question of, are some cultures more supportive of women’s rights and empowerment? This requires a category scheme for classifying cultures—clearly impossible at any detail but it may be possible to think at a sufficiently high level that we can imagine different cultural patterns that could guide intervention.

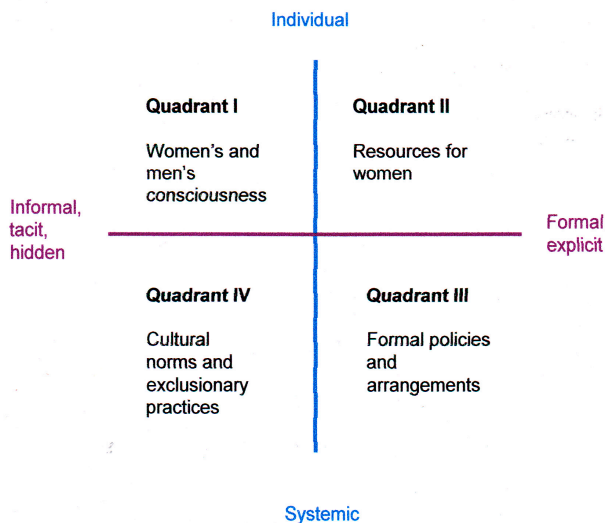
For example a very rough categorization would be: traditional, modern, post modern. This categorization does not imply “progress” or that one kind of culture is better than another it merely means they are different and different cultural practices and values likely to be in place.

If we believed that cultures could be categorized this way, we would think about what intervention would be more likely to succeed in different cultures and also what the images of success of that intervention may be. There are two issues here:

1. What can we hope for in a particular culture? For example, in a post modern culture, a woman who declares her independence from her family in order to pursue her own direction would be applauded. In a tradition society where family protection and support is much more important we would be less likely to hope for independence and individualism and more likely to look for a different type of empowerment.
2. What motives are likely to lead to an openness toward gender equality? For example in a modern society, the possibility of added family income is likely to be a motivating factor for men to consider the idea of women working outside the home. In a post modern society it may be possible to appeal to the idea of rights.

What are we trying to change inside the organization?

An organization that is itself uninterested in gender equality and retains inequitable practices inside the organization is incapable of implementing a program that fights for gender equality or women’s empowerment. It is possible to use the same integral framework to ask what should a gender equitable organization look like.



The framework reminds us to ask about resources are available to women staff (promotion, access to training, access to influence, and freedom from harassment, for example) but also shows that gender equality in an organization requires attention to the consciousness and learning of individual men and women (the top left quadrant).

However, both of these top quadrants are concerned with *individual* change. What is also required is attention to the *systemic* or social aspects of the organization.

The first of these (bottom right) is the set of formal policies procedures and arrangements such as presence of a gender policy, family friendly human resource policies, an adequate budget for work on gender equality and well-developed programs to further gender equality.

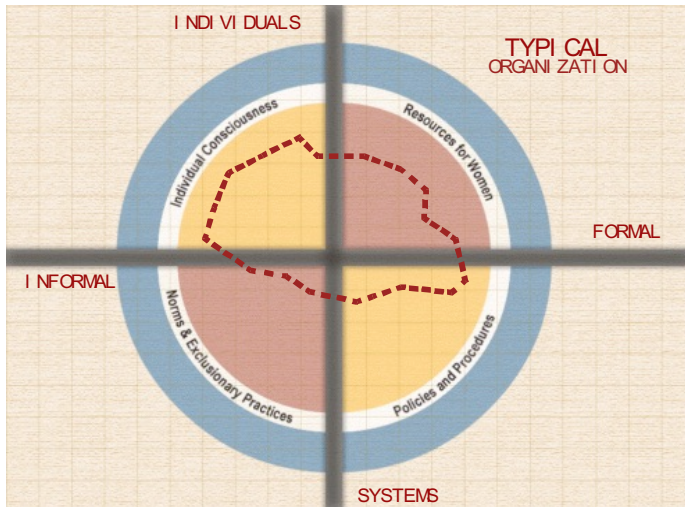
The bottom left hand quadrant is about *culture and informal norms and practices*. In the organization, this is what we have called this the “deep structure of organizations” -- a collection of values, history, culture and practices that form the basis of organizational choices and behaviour, that are gendered, kept in place by power structures and are often unquestioned.⁹

The deep structure may be likened to the unconscious of individuals in that it is largely out of awareness and is unquestioned. Areas of inquiry regarding the deep structure include:

- Acceptance and encouragement of women’s decision-making and agenda setting
- Values of equality that are exemplified in social, informal and work relationships between women and men
- Acceptance of women’s “triple role” and its implications for participation in the work of the organization
- Belief in the importance of work on gender equality and informal reward structure for this area of work

Finally, when we look at organizational and community analyses together it allows us to see the direct connection between organizational capabilities and the potential to do certain kinds of work in the field. For example, in the drawing below, we show how we might analyze the capability of an organization to promote gender equality. The diagram shows an organization that has done considerable work in the top quadrants—possibly doing intense gender training with men and women staff and also ensuring that women in the organization have access to resources (promotion, safety, etc.) Women may be well represented in management. But the organization (like many) has done little to ensure change in either policy and procedures or the deep structure. It may be that while there is considerable individual interest in promoting gender equality—there are not enough systems for doing so (programs, budgets, accountability mechanisms). Looking at the underdevelopment at the bottom left of the matrix, we would also hypothesize that there is little organizational valuing of work on gender equality.

⁹ Rao *et al*, *op. cit.*



Not only does this lead us to a diagnosis of the organization, it shows what kind of work the organization is capable of doing to support gender equality in its programs. This organization would be inclined to do training and resource provision, as these are the two areas where they have first hand understanding. This is a situation often encountered: an NGO doing gender training and micro credit work for example. What often happens is that the work is limited by the cultural norms in the community which maintain the web of norms and informal arrangements which maintain women's subordinate position. If an NGO wanted to intervene to affect the community culture it would need to work on its own organizational cultural and deep structure.

What are the advantages of the integral framework?

As we have worked with partners and discussed this framework two things are clear:

1. The framework allows people to see “the whole picture” and locate their efforts within it. This allows them to think strategically about whether their work is enough by itself, whether partners can work in other quadrants and just where their efforts are required
2. It becomes clear how much effort has been invested in the formal/objective side. That is, providing resources and working on policy and other formal arrangements. What has been missing is the work on what has been called “mindsets”. There has been little work on changing the consciousness of men and women beyond a generation of gender training. There has been little explicit thought about cultural/normative change. What this has meant is that although a government may sign up to the Beijing Platform for Action or CEDAW, little changes on the ground.
3. The relation to Wilber's model challenges us to think not just about the “what” of change but also the “how”. If for example, it is possible to see a developmental path of individuals as they become more knowledgeable and committed to gender equality then we could ask, what facilitates the transition between stages. Similarly, is there a developmental path for cultures that we can understand in terms of gender equality? Can we also think about how these stages evolve?

Organizations as systems

From the beginning, our work has been grounded in feminist theory and understandings of organization development (OD). However, OD grows out of a conception of social science, which believed that with sufficient knowledge and skill, one could “fix” organizations and solve problems. It believed that being outside and objective was possible and helpful. This has been called a “machine” model of thinking about organizations. But, as we reflect on the findings of systems thinking over the past thirty years, we feel it is important to affirm that organizational life is not machine-like. It is complex, emergent, and evolving.

Brenda Zimmerman made a distinction that has been very helpful to us.¹⁰ She describes three types of systems. A simple system is like baking a cake where following the recipe is important and experience counts. A complicated system is like sending a rocket to the moon where there are hundreds of things that have to be right but it is ultimately predictable what will happen if everything works. A complex system is like raising a child—skill and good practice are important but the outcome is largely unpredictable.

If our work is more like bringing up a child than building a bridge, certain things follow:

1. Change in complex systems can be intentional but it is largely unpredictable
2. It's all about relationship—if the relationships aren't right, the intervention isn't going anywhere; coercive strategies can destabilize organizations and open organizations to change but change itself requires negotiation, relationship and learning
3. Power is everywhere and change can begin from anywhere in the system. In complex systems leaders (and consultants) have limited power. As a change agent, it is best to see yourself as a force for a particular change rather than imagining you are “causing” change.
4. Organizational systems, like rivers have fundamental directions that it is wise to understand.
5. Change is more likely if it builds on an existing trajectory of change.

Gender at Work Action Learning—What is it trying to do?

In summary, we are trying to provide a series of reflective spaces that allow organizations to reflect on their work for gender equality, their own organizations and then help them think about a high potential next step for their work. This means helping them discover their own trajectory of change and work with change in their own terms. The work may be either in their organization or in the community. The program supports them in the analysis, planning and then carrying out a change. In some cases we have supported their writing about the process of change. We use frameworks such as the ones above to allow

¹⁰ Westley, F., Zimmerman, B. and Patton, Michael, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*, Random House, 2006.

organizations to look at their organization but we do not use them prescriptively. We also endeavour to support the personal learning that is critical for movement at the other levels of organization and community. We use techniques such as Capacitar and Repatterning to work with the energy of the group.

Another way to see our work is that we are trying to create the conditions for the 3 requirements for change:

- Willingness—often referred to as mindset or political will. Work is required as a result of generations of prejudice, systems that provide incentives for staying the same and lack of power on the part of women and their allies who would change these arrangements
- Understanding—Despite a generation of gender training, there are many who do not understand how women have been systematically deprived of power and resources for equal citizenship. They also don't understand how this has blocked development. As one of the BRAC staff told us, "We can't build our country with one arm." Once the NGOs realize the need to change, there is little understanding as to how to go about it.
- Capacity—Organizations that work for gender equality require resources, tools, skilled people and systems to support the work.

Willingness and capacity without understanding leads to wrong actions, understanding and capacity without willingness leads to cosmetic action, willingness and understanding without capacity leads to failure and potential disillusionment.¹¹

¹¹ Gallopin, G., Scenarios, Surprises and Branch Points in, L. Gunderson and C.S. Holling, *Panarchy, Understanding and Transforming Human and Natural Systems*, Washington: ,Island Press, 2002.

Some examples of action learning

The Hunger Project

Hunger Project works with women elected to local level governance bodies in 14 states in India. The Hunger Project (India) is part of a global organization that empowers women and men to end their own hunger. Hunger Project India has chosen to focus on political participation of women in rural India. In their words, they are,

...seizing the historic opportunity of the election of one million grassroots women to local government. As women take office, they shift the agenda towards health, education, nutrition and family income.

The Hunger Project (THP) joined the Indian Change Catalysts program on the basis of its relationship with one of the [G@W](#) facilitators and after attending a three day workshop designed to allow [G@W](#) to present the program and to ascertain the interest and fit of potential participants. THP was interested in using the program to think about its pre-election campaign work for women in local elections.

The first step was an organizational visit by [G@W](#) staff who led the THP team through an analysis of their organization, its history, culture, its work and strategy. As well as listening to understand how the organization worked and what the key dynamics were, the Gender at Work team also challenged the THP. Are they defining women's leadership exclusively in terms of trust, care, learning, nurturance and love? This questioning led to some serious reflection and with some but not all clear answers.

Later the team used the integral framework described above to analyze their change efforts in communities. From this analysis two things were clear. First, that THPs model of change is premised on the assumption that individuals make change happen and therefore the organization works to build individuals skills, provide them with information, and support them in various ways so that they are better able to make change happen. Second, it was clear that THP's analysis and strategies did not explicitly address the informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices that restrict women's voice, mobilization and influence.

The discussion then mapped out potential options that THP might pursue in the Change Catalysts Program.

At the first workshop the THP team developed a plan for a Pre-election Voters Awareness Campaign (PEVAC) in Bihar. Elections for panchayats were scheduled for Spring, 2006. THP planned to organize and implement a PEVAC in Bihar in collaboration with its 12 state partners. The campaign would educate women on the elections; encourage women to stand for election and to vote. This work would build on lessons learned in previous experience in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh but in this context, in addition to the regular menu of issues they deal with, THP wanted to

specifically address the enabling and disabling conditions for women's participation and exercise of leadership.

Over the period of the project, THP worked with partner organizations in Bihar on voter awareness in panchayat elections in 19 blocks involving 490 panchayats. With Gender at Work's help, the Change Team decided to focus particularly on women leadership in the panchayats, with an emphasis on women from disadvantaged and minority communities, i.e. mainly Dalit and Muslim women. The process was intended to redefine the concept of leadership (for voters as well as candidates) as well as to promote an enabling environment which encouraged women's participation internally (within the family) as well as externally (community, village, panchayat, State-level). An additional outcome of the process would be an increased understanding within THP of women's political participation in the context of caste/power relations/party politics. THP intended to use this experience as a basis for designing future program strategies in other states.

The focus and strategy of THP in its Bihar campaign shifted significantly from general voter awareness to women's leadership, particularly in minority communities. This required advocacy for this strategy both within THP as well as amongst their partner organizations. THP had essentially decided to shift its strategy from quantity to quality of leadership.

Justice and Women (JAW)¹²

JAW works with women fighting to get maintenance payments through the family court in Petermaritzberg, South Africa. JAW was founded in 1998, after the end of apartheid. JAW's organizational culture is shaped by a number of key factors. It was founded and is led by women; its main *raison d'être* is to serve women as a service delivery organization with close links to its constituency; its mission is to ensure that women themselves take up their legal rights; and it is staffed by women across the race and class groups of South Africa, most having themselves experienced the issues the organization takes up -- violence and difficulties with respect to child support.

As a result of acquaintanceship with the Gender at Work South Africa Manager, JAW attended a Gender at Work workshop held to explain the program and to allow potential partners to assess whether it could be of benefit to them.

After they had decided to be part of the program, Gender at Work staff visited the organization and spent two days in a discussion of the history and culture of the organization, how it worked and what it was trying to accomplish. We ended the meeting by discussing 3 options of projects that JAW could pursue in the program.

¹² This section is excerpted from: Michel Friedman and Shamim Meer, Eds, *Change is a Slow Dance: Three Stories of Challenging Power Inequalities in Organizations*, www.genderatwork.org, 2007

Their decision was to build the organization's governance system, its formal procedures and systems, while at the same time staying congruent with its value base of valuing emotional realities, holding on to core humanizing values, dealing openly and skillfully with power and authority, and maintaining flexibility and sensitivity.

The dire need to become a recognized legal entity, their emotionally open culture and small size enabled JAW to embark upon a profound and lasting change process.

In the first peer-learning event, JAW used the Integral Framework to analyze their organization and the work it did. They then built a detailed plan for developing a new legal governance structure. This included:

- Increasing staff awareness of key concepts such as power, authority, management, accountability – and developing common understandings out of individual understandings of these concepts.
- Involving staff in a process before getting the board involved. This dual process was required because many staff carry a history of abuse, which contaminated their relationship to positional power and authority figures.

Many of the staff had been victims of abuse, including at times by management.

As JAW later commented,

Staff currently feel a sense of powerlessness at many levels ranging from their personal experiences of being sold into marriage, discarded in polygamy, living in a drug underworld to their experience in the organization (May 2004). We felt all of us need to understand our personal relationship with power and how these issues played out in the organization, so that we could come to a different way of relating as a group (Nov 2004).

The change process JAW followed, emphasized staff ownership of the process and utilized a series of workshops and a variety of methods, including photographs, drawing, collages, reflection on experiences of power and powerlessness.

Disposable cameras were used for example, to take pictures to illustrate personal meanings of key concepts (eg. power, accountability) in the context of the court, community, and family. Photos were used to make visible abstract, complex concepts such as accountability. (Nov, 2004).

A staff workshop (facilitated by the JAW coordinator) enabled staff to concretely surface their own sense of powerlessness. This workshop aimed to access people's negative experiences of power and to explore the issue and its meanings in a concrete way.

What people had seen as their own powerlessness, others saw as their power. We saw that power and powerlessness are two mirror images of each other. A lesson was that to move to greater power processes of reflection, consulting, taking action, were key whether these resulted in change or not. One can feel powerless

and still take action. The stuckness is about your own relation to your powerlessness. Something changed in each person in the organization during that workshop. We created a language and a space to talk about being stuck, whether each one was stuck, whether we were creating demons of our past? There was a significant shift by the whole group at different levels". (J Nov 2004).

The next workshop, facilitated by a lecturer from the center for Adult Education, focused on governance. Staff were asked to map out where they locate access to knowledge and power. Following the governance workshop JAW held a three-day workshop of both staff and existing Board of Management members, facilitated by the Gender at Work facilitator.

In the final workshop in the series, Jaw developed a three-year programme and reformulated their vision so as to emphasize that people can be their own agents. The new mission states that JAW will “*empower women to be their own agents for change for socioeconomic development*”

What Works?

At the time of this writing we have completed cycles with organizations in India, South Africa and the Horn of Africa. We have also used variants of this approach with a number of Canadian NGOs. This breadth of experience allows us to speculate on emerging patterns and to hypothesize what seems to be associated with successful outcomes.

When we look at the first 11 Southern organizations that have been through a cycle of workshops and consultations we see that 7 of the 11 have made important and lasting gains. One had made major gains which were subsequently partially erased in a political setback, one had major learning for the individual participants but no effect on the organization and two led to no change.

The first analysis is to look at the action learning factors mentioned earlier:

- **Problem**—All groups came with a problem to work on but as the program developed it became clear that for at least one organization the problem was not very pressing and that it was ill-defined at the beginning. This organization was one of those that did not achieve any change. All of the rest came with a problem that was either very pressing or at least of importance to powerful people in the organization.
- **Group**—In all cases the groups involved people who were concerned with the problem, and felt responsible. The groups all included senior staff of the organizations. One group however fell apart as one member left the organization and another lost interest. (This was the group that didn't achieve change but did achieve significant individual learning on the part of one of the team members.)

- **Questions**—When we were working with these organizations, “Questions” was not an explicit part of our mental map but we did think a lot about “challenging” the organizations. We saw this as a fine line—we wanted to expand the organizations understanding of their situation but we also didn’t want to be judgmental or prescriptive. Consultants played a challenging role with at least 6 of the organizations. In five of the cases it was helpful and created new ways forward. In one case it was just another thing that went wrong in an unsuccessful change effort.
- **Learning**—In all but two organizations individuals learned knowledge and skills that continue to benefit their organizations. As mentioned above, in one organization, the individual learned at a very deep level but is no longer with the organization.
- **Action**—In 8 of 11 organizations there was important action taken that resulted in organizational or programmatic change. Two of these who didn’t take action suffered from readiness difficulties (see next section). The third didn’t achieve action in the organization as 2 of the 3 group members left the organization.
- **Coach**—All the groups but one had access to a consultant between workshops. The consultant provided reading material, on-going advice, helped with meetings and raised issues that they felt were being missed. Interestingly, the two groups that achieved least were not able to make use of their consultant. One never found time; the second actually scheduled another meeting the day the consultant was to facilitate a meeting with them.

In looking at all the factors across the organizations, the factor which stands out is readiness for change. In one case, the organization didn’t feel a particularly urgent need for change, in the other the organization was suffering such chaos that it needed change but was unable to mobilize to work on it in a constructive way.

Reflecting on the comments of participants the key factors that helped change happen were:

- The accompaniment of a cadre of organizations that could support and encourage each other and to who they felt accountable
- The support of their consultants
- Space to reflect, think and plan
- Conceptual frameworks

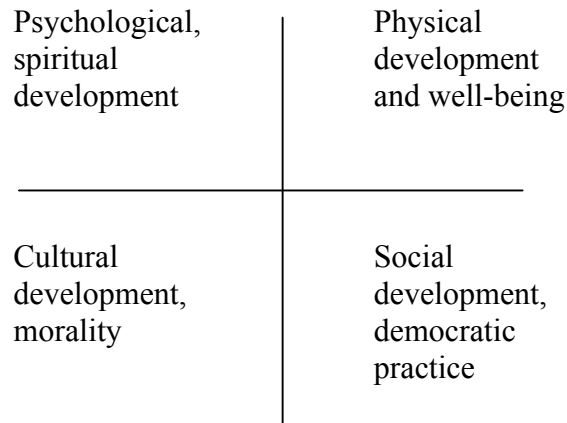
Role of personal change

Although the program is explicitly not a “training program” it has become clear that considerable personal learning happens through the year of involvement with the program and that personal learning was central to their efforts as organizational and community change agents. This learning path is described in depth in *Change is a Slow*

Dance, the story of three of organization’s paths and the personal changes that happened along the way.¹³

The action learning program does not have a particular agenda for change for the participants—we are there to help them think (and feel) about the changes they want to pursue in their organizations. However, we build a climate and process that supports what might be called “integral learning”.¹⁴

This understanding of learning is based on Wilber’s integral model.¹⁵ Wilber describes the multiple aspects of personal change—personal, physical and social.



This points to a practice that is focused on (at least) four aspects of our experience:

- The “I”—cognitive, spiritual and psychological development
- The “We”—the development of relationship from 2 people to society
- The “It”—the objective realities of our bodies and minds
- The “Its”—the formal aspects of social life (laws, conventions, etc...)

Both Leonard and Murphy and Wilber’s systems make key points about learning:

- It is holistic and multidimensional—growth and transformation come not from just focusing on one aspect of our life such as physical fitness or meditation.
- We don’t learn with just our heads—we learn with bodies, minds, spirits, and in relationship.

¹³ Friedman & Meer, *op cit*.

¹⁴ For more on Integral Learning see George Leonard and Michael Murphy, *The Life We Are Given: A long term program fro realizing the potential of body, mind, heart and soul*, Tarcher, 1995. See also www.itp-life.com/ and Ken Wilber, *The Integral Operating System*, Sounds True, 2005. See also www.integralinstitute.org

¹⁵ Ken Wilber, *The Integral Operating System*, Sounds True, 2005. See also www.integralinstitute.org

- Learning is not the result of the breakthrough meeting or the big workshop. These are important but learning happens through practice. The metaphors of the tennis pro who practices everyday, the ballerina who takes class everyday, and the garden that is regularly weeded, cultivated and watered are the images that will guide us toward learning.

In our action learning program we support this type of learning by:

- Creating a safe, open environment which allows participants to build a community of learners
- The use of Capacitar exercise to help participants to find the “still point” and to come to the discussions with a clear energy.¹⁶
- Use of Holographic Repatterning—a technique to bring clear intentions to our work.
- Providing support for learning over time.

In summary, the key factors that support change are: a strongly felt desire to change some aspect of the organization or its program, people who have the power to make the change happen, facilitation that supports community building and personal change, consulting help that mixes questions and challenge with support and empathy.

Finally, it is critical to note that all the organizations chose to be part of the program. All willingly sent senior people, all were committed to gender equality in some form. So of the three key factors mentioned earlier, we began with willingness, as well as some understanding and capacity. We needed to provide space for participants to deepen all three.

What is emerging is that initial commitment leads to a willingness to invest in the program, the early stages build understanding, the workshops facilitate the planning as well as the personal change required to confront these issues at deeper levels and the consultations between meetings add to capacity.

Approaches to Facilitation and Consultation

In a “Learning Nugget” from CDRA, (The Centre For Developmental Practice), they define action learning and then go on to highlight the place of experience.

An Action Learning centred approach values the *experience* of the learner above other sources of learning and in so doing brings respect into the learning relationship - respect for the learners by the facilitators and respect for the learner by themselves.¹⁷

¹⁶ See www.capacitar.org

¹⁷ Taylor, Marais and Kaplan, Action Learning: A Developmental Approach to Change, www.cdra.org.za

This doesn't mean that participants don't learn from others' experience but it does highlight the central place of the participant's experience as the major source for learning and respecting that experience is the core directive to the facilitator or consultant.

As Marsick put it (speaking to action learning participants)

“No experience is more important than your own and no theory is more effective than the one you, yourself, create – as long as you reflect upon your experience and are open to continuous revision of your theories in dialogue with others.”¹⁸

This has a number of implications for facilitators:

1. The participants' knowledge of their situation and what change is possible and desirable must be honored. This doesn't mean it is left untouched. The facilitators' role is to create situations in which the participants' views of their situation is enriched and deepened (through dialogue, questioning, or reflection).
2. Creating a community where participants can feel safe to explore their experience and its meaning is central

The core dilemma for facilitators is, how much to intervene, how much to allow things to unfold.

Ingrid Richter has written about this choice. In part it is summed up by two approaches to action learning:

In one, the “Action Reflection Learning School,” facilitators actively help people reflect on what they do in order to draw out a deeper set of lessons learned. In this approach, coaches frequently act as “devil’s advocate”—encouraging members into deeper questioning and reflection about their assumptions, how their assumptions are affected by their unique personalities, their previous practical experiences, and other habits or predispositions.

In the “Scientific school,” the philosophy tends towards emphasizing the ability of peers to learn on their own without much help or intervention from learning coaches. This is grounded in the belief that learning coaches inevitably either “teach” too much or otherwise induce dependence.

In our program different facilitators handle this balance in different ways depending on their own styles and personalities. However, ultimately it comes back to a deep respect for the participant and the belief that at the end of the discussion they will do what makes most sense.

¹⁸ Quoted in Ingrid Richter, Riding the Action Learning See-Saw: Early Reflections on Coaching in SNV's APLP Programme, March 2005.

What have Gender at Work facilitators done to deepen participants' understanding of their experience?

1. Create space for a structured reflection on the “story” the organization has lived up until now. This is the central task of the organizational visits. Facilitators shape the process of telling the story with methods such as drawing, web diagrams, with frameworks such as organizational analysis and by acting as a mirror by reflecting back what we are hearing and in some cases highlighting what we see as particular strengths or issues we see.
2. Ask participants to tell their story to other organizations at the peer learning workshops
3. Work with them as they develop their plans once again trying to broaden the understanding of what might work, or what might be too ambitious.
4. Comment on issues that don't seem to be visible to the organizations as they are implementing their plans

In all cases, of course, it is the participants who decide what is true, what should happen, how it should happen. It is often difficult for facilitators to stand back when they feel an organization might be on the “wrong path” but the approach is to make our concerns clear in a respectful way but that is the extent of our task. Our job is to support the path the organization chooses.

How have participants experienced this?

This was a very non judgmental space where we have been able to look at something that is lacking. It was put in a very gentle way that we should put issues on the agenda from the beginning and this made us start thinking. We are looking at our work in a new way. There are very few opportunities to work across the country like this and it has been a great learning to work with Nayen, with groups from Andhra and Karnataka. Thank you. I am glad that we were suggested and glad we said yes

I feel personally challenged and very privileged to be here with you – to be in the company of people very dedicated to their work you are doing. For me this is a great privilege.

I feel supported by everyone and I depend on everyone here.

Increasingly, we are coming to believe that participants understanding deepen as a result of the calm, centered space that can be created with the help of such techniques as Capacitar.

*Except for the point, the stillpoint,
There would be no dance,
And there is only the dance.*
— T.S. Eliot

What About Power?

If gender relations are kept in place by asymmetrical power relations how does the action learning method come to grips with those power relations?

We think of this power as a force field of power circuits, much of it far from obvious. Power can be visible (the formal rules, the physical force that can be brought to bear) hidden (the power to set the agenda, to decide what can be talked about) and most insidiously, invisible (key ideas are kept from consciousness).¹⁹

Clearly action learning programs are not about challenging power in obvious ways—we don't mobilize, we don't do demonstrations or organize petitions. What we do is to create spaces for people to consider what their strategy should be and to build the clarity and energy to carry out that strategy. Sources of power we work with are:

- The power of relationship and alliances to nurture and support learning
- The power of dialogue to make gendered ideology visible
- The power of example to inspire.

For example, participants in India utilized the power of dialogue to “unmask the political violence”²⁰ of gendered ideology and see it in new terms. An example of this is the mobile phone discussion in the Yuv Shakti process. The group did an exercise on what does a ‘good girl’ look like, what does a ‘bad girl’ look like. One of the things about a bad girl is that she has a mobile. Why is that a bad thing to have? She may be a prostitute making a date. This led to a big discussion about what does it mean for a woman to carry a mobile. Some weeks later, many women in the group had new mobiles. This may not have been as easily possible without the support of their male colleagues, who were themselves confronted with what the 'cell phone' implied in terms of gendered values of communication and independence.

The power of inspiration and renewed energy can be seen in this comment:

Vasudha and I are rearing to go. We have a fixed time schedule. This process is forcing us to make a start, to do solid, content work for once so that we do a good campaign. Questions of what caste, what religious groups what about politics are all questions we will look at.

Conclusion

As I write this I am involved in a discussion as to the importance of a non-prescriptive approach with people of good hearts and minds who have a different point of view. So, this conclusion may evolve. At the moment though, I think that the key ideas are the readiness and willingness of the participants, the deep analysis and engagement offered by the process of the organizational visits

¹⁹ Rao & Kelleher, Power, *Triologue*, Association for Women's Rights in Development, Vol 2, #2, 1997.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, quoted in Tripp, Tank Girls, Trouble and the Empire Strikes Back, in Rao *et al.*, *Gender at Work: Organizational Change for Equality*, Kumarian, 1999.

and subsequent workshops and a commitment to allow participants to discover the arc of their own development and to design change processes in their own terms and in ways they think will be effective in their own contexts.