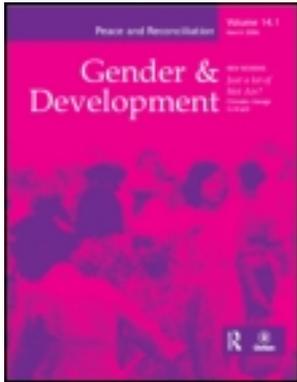


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The elephant in the room and the dragons at the gate: strategising for gender equality in the 21st century

Joanne Sandler and Aruna Rao

The ominous vision of elephants and dragons in the title of this article represents the perplexing equation of progress and backlash that characterises work on gender equality and women's rights. This article advocates a move away from the ongoing debates about gender mainstreaming, towards re-framing strategies for ending gender discrimination. Synthesising the analysis and priorities for action shared by 40 gender and development activists and practitioners participating in an eight-day electronic discussion on gender and organisational change sponsored by Gender at Work, the article identifies three strategies for social transformation that are central to enabling feminists to seize emerging opportunities and avert emerging threats. We argue that the current debates on whether to hold a Fifth World Conference on Women in 2015 present an important opportunity to catalyse a global reflection on which strategies are no longer relevant and which approaches will infuse women's networks and movements with the vitality and vibrancy required to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

La vision de monstres et de molosses évoquée par le titre de cet article représente l'équation compliquée des progrès et des réactions brutales qui caractérise les activités en matière d'égalité entre les sexes et de droits de la femme. Cet article préconise un éloignement des débats en cours sur l'intégration du genre pour se rapprocher d'une reformulation des stratégies afin de faire cesser la discrimination basée sur le genre. En synthétisant les analyses et les priorités de l'action partagées par 40 activistes et praticiens du genre et du développement ayant pris part à une discussion électronique de huit jours sur le genre et le changement organisationnel, sous les auspices de Gender at Work, cet article identifie trois stratégies pour la transformation sociale qui sont essentielles pour permettre aux féministes de saisir les nouvelles opportunités et d'éviter les menaces émergentes. Nous soutenons que les débats actuels sur la question de savoir si une Cinquième Conférence mondiale sur les femmes en 2015 doit avoir lieu présentent une importante occasion de catalyser une réflexion mondiale sur les stratégies qui n'ont plus lieu d'être et sur les approches qui insuffleront aux réseaux et mouvements de femmes la vitalité et le dynamisme requis pour relever les défis du XXI^e siècle.

La metáfora ominosa de elefantes y dragones en el título de este artículo representa la compleja realidad de avances y retrocesos que caracteriza el trabajo en equidad de género y en derechos de las mujeres. Este artículo propone dejar al margen los constantes debates sobre la integración de la perspectiva de género y centrarse en reconceptualizar aquellas estrategias que permitan poner fin a la discriminación por motivos de género. Del mismo modo, sintetiza los análisis y las prioridades para la acción que se intercambiaron entre 40 activistas y actores que trabajan en género y desarrollo, en el marco de un diálogo sobre género y cambio organizativo llevado a cabo por internet durante ocho días, el cual fue patrocinado por Gender at Work. El artículo identifica tres estrategias fundamentales para la transformación social, las cuales facilitan que las feministas aprovechen oportunidades emergentes y, a la vez, eviten peligros emergentes. Las autoras sostienen que el debate actual sobre la conveniencia de realizar la Quinta Conferencia Mundial sobre la Mujer en 2015 representa una oportunidad importante para impulsar una reflexión mundial respecto a qué estrategias dejaron de ser pertinentes y a cuáles son los métodos que posibilitarán dinamizar las redes y los movimientos de las mujeres con la vitalidad y el entusiasmo necesarios para hacer frente a los retos del siglo XXI.

Key words: backlash; gender discrimination; gender mainstreaming; women's human rights; Fifth World Conference on Women

Introduction

Backlash against women's rights and gender equality in development is ubiquitous and thriving. A startling example is the case of Kathryn Bolkovac, the now famous 'Whistleblower', who was fired by the United Nations (UN) when she reported that the officers hired by DynCorp – which had a US\$15 million UN contract to hire and train police officers in Bosnia – were paying for prostitutes and participating in sex-trafficking. The 2010 thriller film, *The Whistleblower*, directed by Larysa Kondracki, chronicles Kathryn's experience. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, was obliged in October 2011 to stage a special screening of the film, and to pledge action, but senior officials tried to belittle the film while Kathryn herself warned that 'the widespread horror is already there. This is not going to be simple or a quick fix'.¹

Another example comes from the Hindu heartland of Uttar Pradesh in India, where, in July 2012, a *panchayat* (village-level governing body) banned women from using cell phones, ordered them to cover their heads in public, and outlawed 'love marriages'.² Three months earlier, in April 2012, the Vatican issued a stinging 'doctrinal assessment' to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious – an umbrella group for leaders of about 80 per cent of Catholic nuns in the United States – accusing the Catholic sisters of numerous breaches, including that the nuns spent far

too much time promoting issues of social justice and airing discussions about the church patriarchy while failing to speak out enough about issues of crucial importance to the church, such as abortion and gay marriage.³

In South Africa, due to the prolonged economic crisis and despite progressive labour legislation, young women leaving school are faced with the bleak prospect of unemployment or low paid, part-time and insecure jobs in sectors like retail, hospitality, cleaning, and call centers, and appalling working conditions. Yet, when those women learn to gain confidence and exercise their voice – as is happening in the *Decisions for Life Campaign* – a multi-country programme including South Africa sponsored by the International Trade Union Confederation, which aims to create a women-friendly environment in trade unions and develop strategies for inclusion of gender standards in collective bargaining – they are viewed by the old guard in union structures as unruly and ungovernable. The ‘safe’ spaces women trade unionists have been creating as a way of safeguarding and developing their own emotional, psychological, and bodily freedom are described by their male counterparts as separatist and undemocratic (Labour Research Service 2011).

These stories of backlash against women’s rights and gender equality are not uncommon: in fact, they are echoed in communities, countries, and organisations around the world. As women and girls gain ground and voice in an increasing number of spheres – from political leadership to educational achievements – powerful interests are rising up to challenge the new ‘gender’ order. The subtext to all of this is not complicated. Patriarchy, politics, and power sabotage progress on women’s rights. Pervasive institutional discrimination undermines women’s access to rights and justice. Institutions which proclaim the urgency of making progress on women’s rights are themselves sites of entrenched gender discrimination and abuse.

Much of the frustration with the ‘stickiness’ of institutionalised gender discrimination from those on the front line of this work gets manifested in conversations between ourselves, where we share our concerns about the practice – and theory – of gender mainstreaming. In our experience, both detractors and defenders of gender mainstreaming are passionate. Their arguments can be placed on a continuum, from those on the extreme ends – either condemning gender mainstreaming as a failed strategy that has sucked the vibrancy out of work on women’s rights, or as the pre-eminent transformative strategy that has delivered the undeniable gains in women’s status and rights that we have seen over the past 20 years – to those who undertake a more sober assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. In this article, we are not going to regurgitate either of these old stories. Instead, we believe that we need to leap beyond the endless debates on gender mainstreaming, and immerse ourselves in a meaningful discussion on strategy, that recognises that the contexts, the protagonists, the antagonists, and the dilemmas that characterise work on gender equality and women’s rights have changed radically since 1995. We view the focus of this issue as a

curtain-raiser for what should become a vibrant and multi-locational global conversation on strategy over the next two years.

Our aims in this article

The ominous vision of elephants and dragons in our title, above, came about as a response to a discussion between us about the perplexing equation of progress and backlash that characterises work on women's rights and gender equality and as a way of understanding some of the aspects of the challenges we face. But the elephants in the room, and dragons at the gate, should not make us shrink; rather, they must be taken on, because fearing them keeps us in a state of self-absorption and paralysis.

In this article, we consider how to do this, drawing on the theory of Erik Olin Wright about three ways in which change happens, and on a recent and fascinating e-discussion hosted by our organisation, Gender at Work, in which 40 seasoned gender and development activists, policymakers, and practitioners analysed the elephants and the dragons and the different kinds of change taking place, and shared their own experiences about moving beyond gender mainstreaming.⁴

Currently, there is talk of a possible Fifth World Conference on Women,⁵ and debate about whether there will be a new set of Millennium Development Goals agreed after 2015. There has been, in addition, recent lively dialogue about the future in many different spaces – including *Gender & Development's* Beyond Gender Mainstreaming Learning Project; the discussions held at the 56th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York in February 2012; a series of interviews with key women's rights activists, that we undertook at the April 2012 AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) Forum in Istanbul; and a series of meetings that Gender at Work hosted of its own Associates and colleagues who are engaged in helping organisations, from community-based groups to major international institutions, to become more effective at promoting women's rights.

All these discussions pointed to the need to reinvigorate, repopulate, and reframe our strategies for ending gender-based discrimination. We feel there is also a need to engage with some of the concepts that are blithely thrown around in so many of our discussions: social justice, transformation, and change. Our challenge as feminists involved in the project of social transformation is how to assess our strategies for ending discrimination and furthering women's rights, and how to measure the results of our struggles. How do we judge if what we do now has transformatory potential for the future? How do we assess whether what we have done has actually effected transformation? What prism will accurately reflect whether these 'incremental modifications of the underlying structures of a social system and its mechanisms of social reproduction [can] cumulatively transform the system' (Wright 2010, 228)? This article proposes some ways to think about these issues and questions.

Acknowledging and naming the elephants and the dragons

The imagery of elephants and dragons helps us with this task. When we refer to ‘the elephants in the room’, we are talking about two dynamics that happen in our work and strategising on women’s rights in the real world. The first dynamic occurs because the elephant – that is, gender discrimination in the deep culture and structures of our organisations – is so huge, so all-encompassing, and so omnipresent that it feels like it is barely worth mentioning. Dealing with this elephant would be an enormous task, so in the interest of ‘quick wins’, which will show results, we feel that we have sometimes chosen to strategically ignore it, and focus on easier gains. The second dynamic occurs because of perceptions about the elephant. Its enormous size means that notions of what it is are different depending on what part is visible to particular people, all of whom have different vantage points. For some, the elephant is distinguished chiefly by its trumpet-like tusk, while for others it is a massive rump with a tail. Getting anyone in the room to see the elephant as you see it means that you have to change positions. And we know how hard that can be.

The dragons at the gate are the looming, fire-breathing forces that stop us from leaving safe territory. We think we see them on the horizon. They instill fear. As Gita Sen said at the AWID Forum:

we are living in a fierce world in which many social contracts have been broken, with huge increases in inequality, both in and between countries over the last two decades. New players have emerged, but the old order is not giving way. (Plenary session, 19 April 2012, AWID Forum, Istanbul)

As feminists working for social transformation, we all need to overcome that fear, and think about ways of overcoming the elephants and dragons. But an equally important element is to understand the importance of timing. Is the time now ripe for profoundly advancing the goalposts on gender equality, despite the stories of backlash?

Timing and transformation: is the moment right?

Recently, the evidence base making a rational argument for advancing gender equality has been recognised more widely, and arguably also grown significantly. In the media, high-ranking officials from development institutions such as the World Bank have made the case for gender equality on the grounds of economic growth and efficiency. For example, one high-ranking World Bank staff member stated last year, in the US press:

If it could rid itself of gender discrimination, the average developing country would grow at least two percentage points faster every year. That would generate enough public resources to

double the size of most social protection programs, fund pre-kindergarten education for all children or maintain just about every road. (Giugale 2011)

Yet, as flagged in the stories with which we began this article, a diametrically opposite 'push factor' is the growing backlash in response to these advances, a backlash that requires a strong and collective response. The so-called War on Women in the United States, a movement by conservative forces to roll back women's reproductive rights, is one such sign. The most intransigent parts of gender inequality – that is, the 'sticky domains' – cited in the World Bank's *World Development Report 2012* on gender equality (2011, 13) – are precisely those that have to do with the Gordian knot of control over women's bodies, sexuality, and voice held in place by misogyny, brutality, and fear.

The weakening of rights previously guaranteed to women in other countries and regions is another sign. In her no-holds barred article, 'Why do they hate us?', Mona Eltahawy (2012) declares that:

an entire political and economic system – one that treats half of humanity like animals – must be destroyed . . .

While Mona Eltahawy eloquently documents gender discrimination in Egypt, her analysis extends far beyond Egypt's borders, and resonates with many women around the world:

Our political revolutions will not succeed unless they are accompanied by revolutions of thought – social, sexual, and cultural revolutions that topple the Mubaraks in our minds as well as our bedrooms. (ibid.)

In the next section, we explore some ideas about how change happens, in relation to the recent Gender at Work e-discussion, which, together with other consultations, identified important areas of needed action.

Priorities for transformation: a recent Gender at Work e-discussion

In the Gender at Work e-discussion in March 2012, we accepted that the time is ripe for real change in gender relations and that new and more focused strategies are required to enable feminists to seize emerging opportunities and avert emerging threats. We will organise our account of some key aspects of the discussion using Erik Olin Wright's (2010) ideas on three ways that change happens. He distinguishes between symbiotic, interstitial, and ruptural transformations, which we explain further in the sections below.

Symbiotic transformations

These transformations take place when change happens which extends and deepens the empowerment of previously marginalised individuals and groups, while

simultaneously helping solve certain practical problems faced by dominant classes and elites. Symbiotic transformations have a contradictory character to them, both expanding social power and strengthening aspects of the existing system. This is akin to what Audre Lorde called 'using the master's tools' to dismantle the proverbial 'master's house' (1984, 110).

First, it seems very clear from the e-discussion that efforts to end gender discrimination urgently need to revise the basic ways in which they understand gender as a concept, and gendered power relations. We need to promote a bigger picture view of gender equality as it intersects with class, caste, race, sexuality, nationality, neo-liberal economic models, and the politics of post-colonial North–South agenda setting. Much of the work on gender equality in organisations has focused on engaging in processes to develop gender equality policies, strategies, and scorecards; on training staff and strengthening leadership commitment; and – more recently – on advocating for quotas and mandatory percentages of budgets for gender equality and women's rights. Underlying this work are theoretical constructs of gender that are implicit and based on analysis that is probably at least 20 years old. In fact, gender equality is a complex 'moving target', which cannot be attained by means of – for example – the minimalistic set of targets and indicators in frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals. Because gender equality goals are inherently hard to fix and because gendered power is all over the place (and the links between identities, behaviours, symbols, and institutions are constantly changing and being fixed temporarily), flexible strategies are required. Building greater conceptual clarity on what constitutes gender equality that is intersectional, contextual, and location-specific is a high priority for the future. Bringing new voices in – younger women, men, and many others – to build this conceptual clarity is key. Linkages between activist, policy, and academic feminists have been effective at producing galvanising concepts in the past, including the notion of gender mainstreaming itself. How can we support the further deepening of these linkages to produce concepts that will take us to another stage of transformation?

Secondly, we need an understanding and re-examination of the dominant practices and sites of power that have made gender relations 'real' – and therefore governable – over the past 20 years. This, again, relates to institutional (both public and private sector) policies and relevant laws that mandate gender equity. 'Truths' about women's situation and about gender relations have been generated through research and knowledge that are acceptable to the mainstream. The formalisation of expertise on gender equality and women's rights (from gender advisors to equal opportunity offices), the construction of institutional methodologies and strategies (from gender audits to equal pay policies), and the development of training and tools (from diversity training to mentorship programmes for young women), need to be explored and questioned. The 'gender architecture' – from Ministries of Women's Affairs to women's political caucuses and women's funds – needs to be re-examined. Also, we need a careful consideration of what we think will work in the future. Do we use the

categories, rationalities and techniques that the State has set up to generate a politics of change or resist the categories to produce new categories that defy re-inscription in the mainstream?⁶

Thirdly, we need to re-claim key organisational processes to support rather than work against advances in women's rights. The focus on results, evaluation, and evidence is a good example. The trend is to harmonise and institutionalise policy and practice on these, even though we recognise that monocultures are weaker than diverse ecosystems. How do we combine the best of both worlds?

Many development organisations now rely on results-based management, but using mechanistic and formulaic approaches. In the Gender at Work e-discussion, one participant related the experience of working with Irish Aid to incorporate gender equality requirements into the organisation's Management for Development Results Framework. Its requirements included gender-disaggregated indicators and/or base-lines. She pointed out that using the framework brought about a recognisable shift in strategies, including a shift in emphasis from gender training to more gender analysis and greater expectations of change as a result of programme interventions. She noted that: 'in 2.5 years, this approach has shown more change than the 10+ years that I previously supported the organisation (intermittently) on gender mainstreaming'.⁷

Evaluation, assessment, and evidence are other areas where symbiotic strategies are important in the future. An example is Gender at Work's 'Dalit Women's Accountability Initiative' (DWLAI) – funded by the UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality. This is an initiative which effectively employed data to shine the light on the failure of the well-known Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act/Scheme (MNREGA) programme, to support the equal rights of Dalit women in Uttar Pradesh, India. MNREGA guarantees 100 days of paid employment per year to each rural household in India. The work should be provided within five kilometres of home for all applicants. There is a 33 per cent reservation for women, and wages are paid equally between men and women. If the requested employment is not provided by the duty bearers within 15 days of the demand to work, there is a legal provision that the applicant can claim for unemployment allowance. Also guaranteed are safe worksite facilities, providing drinking water, shade, child care and health care to workers.

The baseline survey carried out by Gender at Work and its partners – Lok Samiti, Vanangana, Sahjani, and Parmarth – highlighted the following. Fewer women than men had accessed MNREGA entitlements; most Dalit women were unaware of the Act and its provisions; there was no information available to them on how to claim entitlements; women's participation in MNREGA in Uttar Pradesh was at a low of 21 per cent; the work was manual work which strengthened gender stereotypes, in that semi-skilled jobs are only given to men; no facilities for women were provided at worksites; and there was no social accountability to the marginalised populations that the Act aimed to support. The survey made clear that though several civil society groups were monitoring MNREGA and creating awareness and working towards

improving the implementation of MNREGA, almost no work was being done on Dalit women's access to MNREGA entitlements. Dalit women have had no organised voice within MNREGA discourses.

By making these facts evident and focusing on systematically and consistently advancing the interests of Dalit women, the DWLAI programme addressed a crucial unmet need. Over a two-year period, Gender at Work strengthened the awareness of its local non-government organisation (NGO) partners on Dalit women's conditions and how to involve them in their work, and designed four innovative implementation models which broke gender/caste/class stereotypes, which were implemented in four districts. The results were very positive for the women and the local NGO partners involved: the participation of Dalit women increased by 30 per cent; women's work days increased by 30 per cent; a model worksite was developed with all facilities which proved that this could be done; 50 Dalit women were trained and began working as supervisors on worksites; and women's right to food and livelihood security was strengthened as a result of their own advocacy and lobbying efforts. In addition, the Uttar Pradesh government, which was very satisfied with the performance of Dalit women work supervisors, is now considering training 50,000 Dalit women as supervisors, using the module and programme expertise developed under the DWLAI programme, and some *panchayat* leaders are providing more work for Dalit women.

Interstitial transformations

This phrase refers, in Wright's (2010) typology, to building empowerment in the niches, spaces, and margins of society, often where it does not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites. Cumulatively, such developments can constitute a key way to enlarge the transformative scope for gender equality and social empowerment efforts in society as a whole.

Gender-based discrimination is being dismantled in some areas in almost every country in the world. How we cultivate these seeds and transfer and plant them in new areas, encouraging them to grow in strength and influence, is a key challenge for the future. There were four areas identified in the e-discussion that pointed to using an interstitial strategy.

Firstly, the importance of supporting transformational leadership and the work of internal 'change agents' – that is, individuals who make change happen – was highlighted. While there has been a significant focus on the importance of securing support for gender mainstreaming from organisational leaders, and ensuring that accountability rests with them for gender equality in mainstream organisations, the e-discussion highlighted two different dimensions to the issue of leadership: the willingness to transgress norms and values and the price to be paid for this. Positive policy environments, new educational opportunities and access to decision-making positions can create space for women to advance their interests but organisational

cultures are transformed by individuals who have come to terms at some level with the deeply dissatisfying and damaging dynamics of unequal power relations in their own lives.⁸

Citing the example of the quota law in Kenya,⁹ one participant noted that the positive result that this law has had has been largely a consequence of personal effort on the part of women who demand and deserve to be recognised for what they bring to the table. There needs to be acknowledgement of the courage required by such change agents to flout the unspoken rules of gender power relations, and the vigilance they need to resist unequal power dynamics.¹⁰ We also need more in-depth understanding about what sanctions institutions impose on members who question established hierarchies, and how they navigate these constraints.

Secondly, we need to re-engineer the workplaces, workspaces, and bureaucracies that are established to deliver on commitments to women's rights. Ending unjust power relations that enable sexual harassment and gender discrimination remain high on the agenda, as does the issue of work–life balance. Organisations need to be able to support life-giving work and life-giving relationships. In her recent *Atlantic Monthly* article, Anne Marie Slaughter (2012) addressed the half-truths fed to women about balancing professional and personal lives.¹¹ At the core of this are the baseline expectations about when, where, and how work will be done, and the devaluing of child care and family. Continuing to ignore these issues enables the deepest of the deep structures – patriarchy. Instead, we should recognise that change happens when individuals begin to see themselves as gendered beings trapped within, but not entirely prisoners of, multiple gendered institutions. How can we create the reflective space that will allow individuals in institutions to experience the kind of personal transformations that give way to institutional change?

Organisations tackle their exclusionary practices – including gender inequality – when they come to the realisation that these practices and underlying discriminatory values inhibit them from achieving their goals. Factors that facilitate institutions to transform include closing the distance between the institution and the community it serves; boundaries that are somewhat fluid or porous which easily allow partnerships to be forged with relevant stakeholders for experimentation; and learning with a focus on results and accountability. For large development bureaucracies and governments, the distance from their constituencies is quite large and the heavy burden imposed by routine and regimented systems and ways of work, especially at the centre, makes it hard to generate transformation.

Feminist change agents need to work with these institutions to help them move away from imposing single, centralised ways of working and values on all whose lives they touch, to being loosely coupled systems, which allow individuals and groups to have more freedom and variety in the way they behave. This would profoundly affect the individuals involved, as well as change what the organisation values and the way it works.

Another issue in our e-discussion was the link between unjust power relations and suppressed feelings that characterise everyday life in organisations. How can we maximise the benefits of the ideal of value-free bureaucracy which is based on ideals of non-discrimination and efficiency, while understanding that the reality is that we are people who possess identities which create difference, and who experience emotion – which has no place in the ideal of a bureaucracy? Currently we have a feminist critique of these matters, but have not managed to provide an alternative model of how mainstream, hierarchical development organisations can better deal with the reality of values, power, identities, and emotions.

Connected to this, those of us who work in the women's movements need to examine the day-to-day practices in feminist organisations, and support their capacity to grow and have an impact. Feminist organisations have achieved outstanding outcomes of real change in providing intellectual, advocacy, and activist leadership in the enactment of laws and in the extension of social services, contributing significantly in improving people's lives. However, unequal power relations, uncertain processes of decision-making, and the challenges facing feminist organisations in a gender-unequal society have often resulted in them being a stressful and painful place for those working in our movements. Grassroots groups, too, face the same challenges of hierarchy and authoritarianism.

The tools which have been developed to support organisational change for gender equality have evolved, for the most part, in the context of unitary organisations with an integrated leadership, decision-making system, and staff, even if the size and complexity of the entity varies. We need space for honest dialogue to surface the power plays, hidden privileges, and hierarchies within women's organisations. Organisations and movements made up of women only are different from mixed organisations, and our understandings and tools for assisting them to become transformative organisations need to evolve.

A final set of challenges is posed in work which involves multiple organisations in coalitions or networks.

Ruptural transformations

Erik Olin Wright identifies a third kind of social transformation: ruptural transformation, through destroying existing institutions and building new ones in a fairly rapid way. Smash first, build second. Change can be contagious, and it can take a 'butterfly' effect. Change to advance women's rights can start with education, with economics, or with political participation, and go on to influence change in the other areas. Participants in the e-discussion acknowledged that there has to be a long history of invisible change to lead to any sustainable change. Questions were raised in the e-discussion about whether the gradual, incremental approach preferred by most mainstream institutions that are 'on board' with gender equality agendas was effective.

Perhaps feminist activists should demand radical change – a ruptural change – and then support gradual shifts of organisational culture. We have all seen examples of countries and communities that have mobilised around controversial issues, generating extreme violence that unleashes a ‘power’ that is hugely transformative, albeit often with high costs.¹² What does this mean for work on gender and institutional change?

There are many areas where a ruptural strategy is sorely needed. Sexuality and reproduction continue to be contested, shaping women’s and men’s voice, participation, and influence. Two recent inter-governmental events, the 56th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (New York, March 2012) – which failed to reach consensus on the agreed conclusions of the Commission due to a breakdown in negotiations that pitted traditional values against women’s reproductive rights¹³ – and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20, June 2012), placed in stark relief the fragility of so many gains for women’s reproductive rights that many have taken for granted. As one activist noted after the Rio+20 meeting:

Not only is the outcome document . . . silent on sexual and reproductive rights, but during the negotiations many of the EU and G77 countries who have been progressive on these issues in the past were completely silent. Despite encouragement from . . . a handful of . . . countries to protect and support women’s rights, these ‘allies’ said nothing and did nothing as . . . conservative countries rolled back the clock on women’s rights. With friends like these, you have to ask, who needs enemies. (Elisha Dunn-Georgiou, Population Action International in RH Reality Check, 25 June 2012)¹⁴

Transformation of the current structuring of an economic system that devalues and marginalises most reproductive labour and is not organised around affirming life is another area that requires concerted action.¹⁵

Acknowledging that critical, real-life issues are those that require a ‘rupture’, for the purposes of this article, we would propose that we should apply a ruptural strategy, immediately, to the terminology and use of gender mainstreaming as a key strategy. At the *Gender & Development* Learning Event on Beyond Gender Mainstreaming (13–14 February 2012), there were those who warned against dismantling what we fought so hard for in Beijing, without having a tested model to replace it. We would, however, defer to Wright’s notion: smash first, build second. Catalyse a radical disjuncture that destroys the current language and build a new institutional discourse as rapidly as possible.

Let us be clear that we are not proposing to halt the ‘practice’ of gender mainstreaming – which is based on undertaking gender analysis, formulating policies and programmes that respond to this analysis, and tracking expected and unintended consequences that result in response to these undertakings. We are proposing that we rid ourselves of the jargon and conceptual confusion that has riddled work on gender

equality, that has unnecessarily bifurcated and created contrived hierarchies between synergistic strategies – such as direct support to women’s organising, quotas, and policy advocacy – and that has soaked up so many human and financial resources that could have gone to direct action on women’s rights. We need to rid ourselves of – in Andrea Cornwall’s words – the rather triumphalist discourse of gender mainstreaming that presents gender transformation as a do-able, ‘technical’ problem that can be overcome with sufficient determination and commitment. Potential resistances melt away in the optimism of this language, reinforced by neo-liberal assumptions promising that change can be effected through constructive engagement with rational state actors, supportive institutions, and law-abiding citizens (Cornwall 2008, 159). In a world where women and men are increasingly questioning their own certainties and through that, creating openness to risk that allows, as Judith Butler says, ‘another way of knowing and of living in the world’, this expands ‘our capacity to imagine the human’ (2004, 228).

Progressive policies, programmes, and politics can assist efforts to transform gendered assumptions and practices. These changes will, of course, be constrained by the complex, shifting nature of today’s multi-polar world, especially the increasing assertiveness of the emerging economies or BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), which seems unconstrained by the exponential gender imbalance in the world’s two largest states: China and India. However, if (we) can encourage new ways of thinking and performing gender, then its transformative goals should not be abandoned, as the promise of a new gender order may indeed be a possibility worth dreaming and fighting for around the Millennium Development Goals’ elusive deadline of 2015.

Conclusion

As we write this article, there are an emerging number of conversations and advocacy efforts under way that either support or oppose holding a Fifth Women’s World Conference in 2015. Many compelling ideas are already on the table: to root the process in local and national consultations that strengthen local action on gender equality; to use the 20th anniversary as a ‘pledging conference’, with governments making financial and policy pledges to advance women’s rights; to use the process as a way of galvanising the voices and input of women and girls into the next set of Millennium Development Goals; to provide an opportunity for new generations of young women and men to take leadership of the process and vastly expand constituencies engaged in this work; to assess and re-focus the UN Commission on the Status of Women; to develop a process that avoids re-negotiation of the Beijing Platform for Action but allows 21st-century women’s rights issues to take their place on the political agenda.

These conversations must continue in multiple locations and bring in diverse perspectives so that whatever takes place strengthens action to end gender discrimina-

tion, social exclusion, and growing inequality. We do not need another facile five-year review like those that have taken place since 1995.

We would advocate for a process that:

- provides opportunities to reflect on and re-craft the strategies that we are using, including gender mainstreaming and its accompanying 'institutional mechanisms', so that we are responding to the real-time opportunities and threats to women's rights;
- sheds light on the theory and practice of addressing deeply held cultural norms, attitudes, and behaviours that perpetuate gender discrimination; and
- re-defines how multilateral organisations, like the UN and regional organisations, fulfil their mandate to develop inter-governmental consensus and action agendas on the critical issues of our times.

Without naming and challenging our elephants we run the danger of repeating failed strategies while continuing to skate on the surface of institutionalised structures of oppression. Without engaging our dragons, we run the danger of depleting women's networks and movements of the vitality, commitments, and new generations that kept them vibrant and relevant throughout the previous century.

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Notes

- 1 See www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/15/bosnia-sex-trafficking-whistleblower (last checked by the authors October 2012).
- 2 See <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/up-panchayat-bans-love-marriages-bars-women-from-using-mobile-phones/1/207792.html> (last checked by the authors October 2012).
- 3 See http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/08/07/13162177-after-blistering-vatican-report-nuns-gather-to-weigh-response?lite (last checked by the authors October 2012).
- 4 See www.gendematwork.org for more information.
- 5 On 8 March 2012, International Women's Day, the President of the UN General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser and the Secretary-General of the United Nations H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon jointly proposed the convening of a United Nations Fifth World Conference on Women in 2015, 20 years after the last women's summit in Beijing. For the joint statement, see www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=5904 (last checked by the authors October 2012).

- 6 This point came from Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay in the Gender at Work e-discussion.
- 7 This point was made by Cathy Gaynor in the Gender at Work e-discussion.
- 8 This point in the Gender at Work discussion was raised by Rex Fyles.
- 9 This point was made by Ezra Mbogori in the Gender at Work e-discussion.
- 10 The new Kenyan constitution in effect since August 2010 contains a provision that not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender. In effect, this means that women must form one-third of any elective public body (www.ipsnews.net/2012/01/kenya-women-set-to-make-their-mark-in-politics - last checked by the authors October 2012).
- 11 While this article has been the subject of much valid criticism related to issues of class and race – and particularly condemned as a privileged woman’s notion of ‘having it all’ – the points that Slaughter makes about the need for structural transformation of workplaces are valid for women and girls no matter what country, caste, race, class, ethnicity, or other differences exist between us.
- 12 Gagan Sethi in the Gender at Work e-discussion on Gender and Organizational Change pointed out that after the 2002 communal violence in Gujarat, many Muslims took exceptional risks and mobilised communities over basic issues such as ensuring enrolment of girls in schools and vocational training, took up jobs, and challenged traditional views. The notion of the ‘inability of Muslim men to protect their women’ unleashed this new energy and unshackled past cultural norms.
- 13 See the statement of feminist and women’s organisations on the very limited and concerning results of the 56th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (<http://csw2012.blogspot.com/2012/03/call-to-action-statement-to-un-members.html> - last checked by the authors October 2012), in which a coalition of groups states its concern that governments failed to reach a consensus on the basis of safeguarding ‘traditional values’ at the expense of human rights and fundamental freedoms of women.
- 14 See also the Women’s Major Group Final Statement on the Outcomes of Rio+ 20 (www.wedo.org/news/rio20-from-the-future-we-want-to-the-future-we-need - last checked by the authors October 2012).
- 15 This point came from Michel Friedman in the Gender at Work e-discussion.

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