"Reflections from a transformative space"

Introduction

This note is an outcome of our experience of working together as part of a research project[1] on water-induced disasters in Nepal. The project was implemented by a consortium of three organisations[2] and was aimed at generating "gender transformative" policy recommendations. In partnership with Gender At Work[3], the project team used an action-learning approach to explore the issue of gendered vulnerabilities.

The action-learning component of the project was steered by a Core Team - the gender leads from the three implementing agencies and the G@W facilitator. This group met regularly to plan each step of the action-learning process, review the results of each intervention, and share their experiences, thoughts and reflections on the project and how it was playing out on the ground.

Turning the lens inward

It was only in the last leg of the project that we turned a critical lens on our own experience of working together in the space of the Core Team. As we were reviewing the whiteboards from a just-concluded "harvesting learning" workshop with the research team, one of us had a sudden epiphany.

"It has just struck me that what we wanted to happen is happening. We actually succeeded in influencing and changing the mind-set of our leaders. We have been able to critically question our colleagues......This really is a gender transformative project. **We should claim this achievement formally!"**

Her insight resonated with all of us. We continued the conversation and tried to go deeper into what each of us saw as transformative, what we had learnt and how we ourselves had changed in the course of our journey with this project.

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[1] IDRC-supported project "From Vulnerability to Resilience of Those Left Behind: Empowering Women, Children, and the Elderly in the Mid-Hills and the Tarai Regions of Nepal to Cope with Water-Induced Disasters".

[2] Nepal Water Conservation Foundation (NWCF), International Water Management Institute, Nepal (IWMI-Nepal) and Policy Entrepreneurs Incorporated (PEI).

[3] See https://genderatwork.org

What has changed?

"There are very few spaces like this, that encourage open sharing and group reflection to feed into the ongoing research process. I have never seen early-career researchers who actually do the bulk of the work getting a chance to share their own experiences as they have here. This space has given a new perspective to gender researchers. It has also given a new direction to young researchers at the start of their careers...."

"I was initially unclear on how this project could be gender transformative but through the data analysis process I saw how research findings can be processed to dig down and expose the roots of gender inequality. Another transformative moment was the webinar on Bernadette's book. The takeaway for me was the importance of solidarity and support among women professionals working on gender. I realised how much I could learn from the experiences of others. At the "harvesting knowledge" workshop, I saw that everyone was speaking openly and being critical...that for me was proof of the change in their perception, and showed me what gender transformation can be."

"In these three years, we have become more open in sharing our thoughts and issues...this process has provided an enabling environment for critical thinking and reflection. We were able to raise critical issues about institutional gender dynamics with our organisation heads, with no thought of the repercussions for ourselves.... The GAL process helped us to push some internal agendas, like developing organisational gender policies.... I feel we also sparked some new thinking about the approach to gender integration when we shared our work at the peer meeting last year."

"I was quite sceptical about the transformative possibilities of purely virtual learning spaces. Working with the Core Team inspired me to push the boundaries of my practice. I know now that it is possible to create virtual spaces that nurture new ways of seeing, being and doing. It was transformative to see the Core Team creating new norms for themselves, raising the bar on their expectations from their leaders and colleagues, demanding that they walk the talk ...."

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What was different about this space?

"The reflection workshops with the Core Group and the research team made me realise that this is not just the conventional gender training or coordination mechanism. The workshops responded to the needs and requests from the Core Group .... the process of designing and conducting each workshop was itself a reflection and interaction among the research team to find solutions to the dilemmas they were facing in the research or in the project."

"From the outside, this looked like a space for guidance on feminist research methodologies. But feminist research itself carries an agenda of "transformation within" through methods such as reflexivity, positionality, standpoints.... So this process was one that enabled gradual and indirect transformation not only in the understanding of feminist research but also in individual mind-set, thinking patterns, attitudes, and behaviours.
I continue to be fascinated by the critical dialogic method. While reflexivity emphasises individual reflection I found that this method of critical reflection and collective dialogue demands not only ethical conduct from the researchers, but also trust and empathy in the collective.
This is not an easy method....it requires excellent facilitation skills and expertise...."

This was a reflective process which acknowledged and accounted for individual, and institutional power differences and relationships. This process was adapted to the context of the institutional and social context of the research project. We tried to place the lessons on gender vulnerabilities and institutional learning within the larger context of global experience – the webinar to launch the "Troubling Gender" book gave us a platform for this.

"This was one of those rare instances where the organisational heads engaged substantively with the learning process, participating in every session on an equal footing with researchers and bringing a sharp political perspective into every discussion."

What did we expect when we started? Did these expectations change with time?

"I thought that G@W was engaged with us to provide gender training. My main reason behind joining this project was to gain experience in doing gender research. That's why I was very optimistic about it, thinking that I will have opportunities to learn different aspects about gender.

However, I could not participate in the initial G@W interaction workshops because I was on leave after my child was born. So in the beginning I felt like I was missing something and was very confused about the GAL process itself. But after being in two-three interactions, I started experiencing it as a space of bonding for gender leads from the three different organisations, a space for them to share their problems and come to a common position.

By the end of the project, I realized that the GAL process was beyond the conventional gender training program/workshop. It is a space to learn, reflect, apply and again reflect in a collective way to bring gender transformative change simultaneously in research activities, research institutions and within the researchers.

"From the beginning, I was aware that G@W is engaging with us to mainstream gender in the research project (when we had our first workshop). But did not have a clear idea of how it would happen. Now, I feel that the GAL process we went through is one of the beautiful and productive experiences of my career journey. The facilitation process (completely tailored to the actual context), communication (two way), gender concepts and processes, theories and its applicability..."

"Like other team members, I was not sure about the role of G@W in the project. I think the information flow was not clear on this particular engagement. During and after the Nairobi workshop, I had gained some clarity that G@W has been hired to maintain/monitor gender outcomes in the project defined by the wider Gender Continuum.
The workshop at the NWCF office in Kathmandu had also provided some indication about guidance with feminist research methodology for the researchers involved.
However, I was less aware of the transformative agenda that the project was aimed at from the very beginning."

What did we gain from this process, that will stay with us even after it ends?

"I have expanded my understanding and knowledge on gender and feminism – it has made me better, though I still need to learn a lot. This has implications for my future work. In the last three years, I developed the conceptual framework and theory of change for seven project proposals, of which four were successful. GAL has enriched my experience of gender so I am better able to integrate gender perspective into the conceptual frameworks.
I am also tasked with monitoring and evaluation, where gender is a mandatory crosscutting component. Often, projects that claim to be "gender transformative" are actually gender-responsive or gender-sensitive rather than transformative. After going through this experience, I am better able to distinguish between indicators and identify those which are transformative. So, I have increased my competence for consulting assignments in monitoring and evaluation.
I have also learnt to be aware of the gender dynamics of circumstances, language use, and behaviour of people in my personal life.

"I understand that gender research demands not only research expertise but applied knowledge of innovative and practical skills that could convince and engage researchers and stakeholders to work together on gender justice issues. Such knowledge and skills should be contextual."

"So many things.... I was looking for an opportunity to expand my experience in the gender sector. My long term goal is to work as a gender expert in the water sector, but I did not have much experience or academic knowledge on gender. Working in this project and in the GAL process helped to enrich my knowledge and experience. The engagement with GAL process not only helped in gaining theoretical understanding but also practical experiences. The deeper conversations during the GAL process helped me in understanding and reflecting diverse perspectives on gender and feminism.

Do others notice the change in you?

"Those who knew me from 20 years back do not consider me a social scientist. But those who see my work now – my presentation on feminist methodology, a newspaper article on gender professionals and working environment, and three discussions in different public forums on gender – recognise me as a gender expert. I got a consulting assignment from one of the top donors in Nepal - there might be other factors influencing it but, this ...

"Personally, at home, they see a much calmer version of me when it comes to any general discussion on gender issues. I used to be very reactive. But gradually, as my understanding of gender and feminism grew I controlled my knee-jerk reactions on minor issues and started looking at the deeper side to it. Motherhood also has a major contribution to this change. Professionally, I have become more confident to speak on gender issues and feminism. I think I am now able to present my thoughts on gender inequality in a logical way and also influence others. I am gradually being recognized as a gender expert and invited to consultations and workshops to give my opinion."

"My confidence of using online tools, facilitating and participating in virtual collective dialogues has improved".

"My G@W colleagues have certainly noticed my switch from scepticism to enthusiasm about the possibilities of online learning spaces!"

What do you value most about this experience?

"GAL gave me a platform to speak from the heart because I knew I was with others who were open to thinking, reflecting and questioning without any barriers of hierarchy, power and position."

"We had differences in perspectives and opinions because of different experiences and disciplinary backgrounds – institutional affiliations or constraints were never an issue. Our passion and integrity for gender justice glued us together despite our differences. We had constructive debates and arguments among ourselves. We had one common agenda – women empowerment and gender justice. In our own ways, we all made efforts in this direction over the last three years. As a result, I feel, both the bond and the agenda have become stronger."

"The GAL process - taking into account the differences between people, institutions and social context and trying to flatten the power relations between them. And of course, the bonding between us, and our motivation towards the project."

"Apart from valuable lessons on translating feminist principles into practice in online spaces, I treasure the friendships that have grown from and enriched the process."

Contact Information:

Mina Adhikari, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation (NWCF), Nepal. maadhikari673@gmail.com

Sanju Koirala, Policy Entrepreneurs Incorporated (PEI), Nepal, koirala.sanju@gmail.com

Gitta Shrestha, International Water Management Institute, Nepal (IWMI-Nepal), g.shrestha@cgiar.org

Kalyani Menon Sen, Gender at Work (G@W) kalyani@genderatwork.org