

'SAMENESS' AND 'DIFFERENCE' FOR WOMEN BUREAUCRATS: EXPERIENCE FROM A MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN PROGRAMME

Marion Macalpine

1 INTRODUCTION

This article is written from a practitioner's perspective, from the perspective of designing and delivering a management development programme for women civil servants from 'developing countries'. It is based in the experience of bureaucratic life shared by successive participants on a course for women civil servants from the 'south' who attend a three month programme based in London.

The programme is concerned with examining the barriers for women within civil service organizations, and with the development of gendered management tools to clarify their own goals in their management role, to influence the production of gendered outcomes. It focuses on increasing the effectiveness of women managers, and on identifying and reducing the barriers they face. It provides some material from within institutions to explore what Goetz identifies as 'the persistent failure of public service delivery agencies to include women equitably amongst the publics that they ostensibly serve' and the need to 'understand not just the role of public administration in producing gendered outcomes but the role of gender in structuring power and opportunity within administration, and the links between these two processes' (Goetz 1992: 6).

This article focuses on just one aspect of the programme, using women's words and narratives as case material. Over the last four years of the programme, the majority of the participants have consistently entered the programme with the view that the organization is gender neutral. By the end of the 3 months, they have made a substantial shift: they see the organization as a site of gendered subordination. Both the gendered outcomes and the role of gender in structuring power and opportunity within administration are visible to them, and they have developed some strategies appropriate to their situation to challenge this subordination. The article will examine how both the group process and the training process contribute to this shift.

2 THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

All the participants on this programme are women civil servants from a range of 'developing' countries: participants have come from Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, the Sudan, and the Yemen. The programme is funded through the British aid programme. The focus of the management development programme is women civil servants as agents of change in the development process, with a value base that puts redistribution of power at its centre. Its aim is to enable the participants to analyse the links between the two features identified by Goetz: the membership, processes and culture of the institutions they work in, and the policy and practical outcomes of those institutions; and to intervene in the complex and unequal relations of power in order to influence these outcomes for women's benefit, both within and outside the organization.

The curriculum is based on a model which places the woman bureaucrat at the centre of a series of concentric circles, which represent the domains which influence her ability to act: she is at the centre, surrounded by her household, the section she manages, her department, the civil service, the communities it serves, the national and the international context. The curriculum includes a wide range of themes, concepts and skills which bridge and connect these different circles. So it includes analysis of the international and national environment within which the civil administration operates, including the role of the World Bank, the IMF, and the GATT; strategic management and policy development; organizational analysis, staff management and development, personnel and finance management, information technology. It looks at all of these through the gender lens, and locates them in the context of the multiple roles of the woman at the centre, and in the context of development policy and practice and over arching north-south relations. It also takes into account diversity in a range of meanings, differences between civil servants and 'beneficiaries', differences

of class, region, education, religion, ethnic origin, marital status. In order to enable constant inter-connections to be made between these different elements and levels of analysis, the curriculum is spiral rather than modular, referring back and forth in making these links, weaving strands of learning together rather than completing building blocks. Personal and explicit connections are made between different parts of the programme and the participants' own experience.

Indeed, a key feature of the model of learning is that it is firmly based in participants' experience. The programme provides an exciting opportunity for this experience to be reflected on and shared, within and across countries. New concepts and generalizations emerge from this process of women sharing, which challenge received ideas of how things are. The exploration of the idea of the gender-neutral organization, and how far this matches women's actual experience, is one example of this process of building theory from experience.

3 'SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE': PERCEPTIONS OF THE INSTITUTION

Many delegates to the programme arrive with a gender-neutral model of how their institutions work: 'Of course there is equality: there are no barriers for women. Men and women are treated equally'. The picture they have of the institution is the Weberian organization chart, with posts arranged in a hierarchy in functional units determined by the work to be done, and that these posts are filled, not by gendered 'bodies' (Acker *passim*) but by gender-neutral postholders. This picture works powerfully to camouflage or suppress women's actual experience. It is only by jointly collecting data of women's actual experience that this model can be challenged, and the consistently gendered nature of structures, culture and work relationships be made visible.

Early in the programme participants are invited to present a 'dilemma' they have faced in the workplace, which they have either been able to resolve, or which they wish to discuss. It is on the experience presented in these sessions over the period 1991-94 that this article is based. Although this is not part of the brief they are given, almost all the 'dilemmas' presented are rooted in gender relations inside the institution or at the intersection between the 'private' and 'public' domains of the women's lives.

Some are accounts of institutional barriers; some are of individual men's responses to women in management positions, which contribute to a culture which is uncomfortable for women and which challenges their legitimacy.

One woman described her first posting to a civil service station far from the capital. She arrived on the day before a local election. Her new boss said to her: 'I hope you are very much aware that our service is for 24 hours, and you have to put up with every problem that you meet.' So on her first day, she was kept sitting in the control room until two o'clock in the morning, and then taken to a rest house occupied only by men.

An intense discussion followed this presentation: some women felt that this treatment was cruel and unnecessary, and indeed constituted a hostile initiation ritual, and put the woman's reputation at risk. Many of the other women felt that this was 'normal' treatment of a new officer, and women should not require anything different. Indeed if they did, they ran the risk of harming the prospects of women rising in the ranks of the civil service.

Another woman described her attempts to get women's toilets in the central offices in the capital city. She said she would use 'all the usual channels' to get this agreed, and if these did not work, she would start to hang posters on the buildings. Other women were very shocked at this suggestion.

Another account was again from the field: the Bangladeshi woman telling this story was posted to a district far from Dhaka. At the time she had a nine month old son. Of the small number of women civil servants in this district, all the others were unmarried, and shared a women's house. Nothing was provided for this officer. 'It's up to you', she was told. She had to work till seven or eight in the night, and had to send her son far away to her mother's house, and then lodge in the unmarried women's house. However, her son reacted unhappily to this separation, and she was forced to send for him. There was 'no woman boss and no sympathy', she said.

A Sri Lankan was appointed to coordinate the work of a Minister. According to the usual practice, she had to work till the Minister left the office, which was sometimes midnight. She was a young unmarried woman, and her parents were very unhappy with this.

In all of these cases, women were required to act as if they were men. Cynthia Cockburn, in her study of gender relations in organizations in the UK, found that men could argue: 'if you want to join men as equals in the public sphere you must leave behind womanly things, you must be indistinguishable from a man, you must in short assimilate.' (Cockburn, 1991: 164.) Women's own expectations reflect this pressure. A Sri Lankan delegate in charge of a government district said: 'I do my work ambitiously, bravely, without thinking that I am a woman'.

However, most of the dilemmas were concerned with women expecting to be treated as 'officers', but being seen as women who belonged in the 'private' domain. A Senior Evaluation Officer found when she visited projects that the senior project personnel:

always tried to avoid giving me proper attention. They sometimes start gossiping, asking me about my personal affairs such as what does my husband do, how many children do I have. After this type of attitude, I start my questions about their project and they realize that I am not only a woman, I am also an officer who knows every in and out of their project and then they pay attention to me. To overcome this situation, I always prepare myself and inform myself about the projects which I want to visit.

Only by preparation and determination does she avoid attempts to diminish her role and authority.

One participant went to her manager to discuss the place she had been offered on the Management Development for Women course. Her boss told her: 'How could you manage this offer? Would you go to London for management development? But you know you are a lady officer. You manage the office: it is a very tough job. You can't do this'. He refused her permission to go a meeting about the programme at the British Council. The senior manager told her: 'You have very important work in your office, then why will you go for your personal work within office hours?' She replied: 'No sir. It is not my personal work. The government has nominated me so I think it should be treated as my official work too.' She commented: 'I think it was the jealousy to a lady officer from a male boss.'

Another woman was faced with a charge of overstaying her leave when she went to Dhaka to take some exams. 'It could have happened to anyone from the service,' she commented. 'But I have the feeling that because I am from the other gender and I was the only female executive in my organization, that may have created this issue. A male colleague would not have faced such charges'. Another delegate commented: 'Men manipulate the rules to suit themselves but are never prepared to relax them to accommodate women.'

Several women were ignored when they joined an office, and provided with neither room, desk, nor work.

My big boss told me to manage my seating arrangements by myself. I waited for about two weeks to see whether any of the male colleagues offered me his room or offered me to share. But I did not have any response from any of them. So I found a small anteroom and I myself went to the common service section, and applied for the necessary logistical supports. After decorating this small room, I invited two male colleagues to tea. They were surprised to see how beautifully I arranged that small, not spacious room. Although my room is small, has only one window, no proper ventilation, I feel independent, free to think, to work and to stay. Though I haven't been able to recover my whole power, I was able to establish myself, my work - that was my achievement.

She also faced what she felt was special and unwelcome attention as a woman.

There are some colleagues who are always against women. They are always ready to identify me as a woman. In our constitution and service rules, there is no word like 'female officer'. Officers are designated as 'officer', not 'male' and 'female'. But these male colleagues always talk beside me about how I behave, how I walk, what I wear. If I do my duty sincerely and efficiently they never appreciate me, but if I do any wrong that becomes a story to them.

Some forms of 'different' treatment are even more blatant, and bring sexuality even more clearly into the practices that men use to control women. A woman appointed to a senior post, the first woman

at this level in her area, had to walk up a long stairway on the outside of the place where she was working every day, with all eyes upon her, and with offensive anonymous notes delivered in her post.

Other women found that their gender was used directly to challenge their authority. A magistrate in Bangladesh told the story of what happened to her on her first day in court. 'The situation in the court was not so quiet. Many of the lawyers were shouting in the court. The comments were like these: 'Look, we have a young woman magistrate.' I was a little bit nervous for the moment but I managed the situation. Some of them were making comments about me which I overheard. The District Magistrate was making comments like the lawyers. 'A woman does not have detailed knowledge about the laws'. It was really a challenge for me. For days together I thought about whether I should be there or seek a transfer to another district.'

This story had a happy ending:

I was very much reserved in the court and passed the orders according to the rules. I always followed the principle that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. After a few days I went to my boss and explained to him the whole situation. He felt sorry for undermining me. The lawyers were moved by the proceedings and judgements made by me. They begged pardon for their first days' behaviour in the court. Even when I was transferred to another district they wanted me to stay there.

Other women wanted to take action against corrupt practices they were faced with, but felt limited by being women. Nasrin felt her manager was protecting a man who wanted to acquire some purchase deeds illegally. 'If I tell something to my Deputy Commissioner against my boss, he may take it otherwise and term me a tactless officer because I am a lady.' She wrote a factual report and recommended the Anti Corruption Unit be brought in. Her manager was forced to agree. 'I was bold and adamant enough from the administrative viewpoint, so that my boss was convinced and appreciated me much.'

4 'SAME' OR 'DIFFERENT': IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN

'Organization is precisely and uniquely the means by which power is effected,' writes Cockburn (1992: 17). These stories provide some illustrations within the civil administration of ways in which gendered power is exercised, particularly how 'men decide when women's difference becomes relevant' (*ibid.*: 63). In the course of telling and listening to these dilemmas, women became aware of the contradictory nature of the demands made of them, and the way in which these demands trivialize their presence (Goetz 1992: 14). Analysis of their experience shows that men maintain their power both through formal means and through fluid and informal ways, through cultural practices and discourse.

A management programme for women provides an opportunity for explicit sharing and joint analysis so that these informal processes become visible, and the idea of a gender neutral organization can be challenged. The programme provides a space for legitimizing women's perspectives on how they are required to fit into male designed institutions. It can also allow women to begin to clarify what institutions would look like if they were designed for both women and men, and to clarify their own view on where difference is relevant and where it is not. They found, as Cockburn concluded from her UK study, that they need to 'keep the ideas of sexual and gender difference in play but on their own terms. Women are the ones who must be able to say when 'difference' is relevant.' (Cockburn, 1991: 9)

The programme offers various management tools for women to use on their own terms. Strategic management through the 'gender lens' enables them to clarify their own purposes and goals wherever they are within the institution. A stakeholder analysis vividly demonstrates the gendered power relations within and outside the organization, and illustrates other sources of power difference, such as class, education, ethnic origin. The participants develop gendered 'statements of purpose' for the units that they manage: a Ghanaian manager in the Cocoa Marketing Board defined the purpose of her department as 'providing good education through scholarships for cocoa farmers' daughters and sons'. A Tanzanian policy adviser aimed to 'develop floriculture to benefit women farmers as well as men.' They then use a SWOT analysis (of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats)

to determine gendered strategic goals for themselves and their staff, such as improving access to their offices for both women and men users of the services they provide. These formal analytic tools enable them to have some confidence in challenging the 'file' culture of their organizations, and to be proactive in setting their own goals rather than being handed a daily list of tasks.

They are introduced to a 'power net' to analyse the informal power relations within the institution, and identify potential allies and ways of working with them. They also identify men or occasionally women who could act as mentors for them, and can begin to see themselves as potential mentors for other women. They explore the opportunities for staff development for their women staff. They sometimes plan to set up networks for their own support, an idea which has been developed in Bangladesh in the creation of the Gender Management Network in the context of an in-country training programme for women civil servants.

All of these management tools enable women managers to articulate the different needs of women in the organization, and of women and men as external stakeholders. Another focus of the management development programme is to build bridges between the experience of middle class women civil servants, rooted in the culture of the bureaucracy, and their clients and users. Role play is used to make links between the experiences of women bureaucrats and women 'beneficiaries' of government services, in order to begin to analyse what is similar and what is different in their experience. 'I have discovered myself most privileged in the context of my sisters back home'. 'I see women as more oppressed than I thought before. Professional women are more or less a privileged group compared with rural women in Bangladesh but then even professional women are being controlled by men, everywhere from home to office.' Becoming aware of similar processes of invisibility and marginalization enables a new perspective on women as 'contributors' rather than 'beneficiaries' and as 'subjects' of the development process rather than 'objects'.

5 SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WOMEN

There is another concern about similarity and difference that arises in the context of this programme:

that is, the temptation to celebrate the similarities between women, particularly where there is the opportunity of sharing experiences across countries, cultures and continents, and to lose the sense of diversity of experience and of power between women. To quote Cockburn again, 'a further danger of subscribing too heavily to 'difference' is the implication that if women are all different from men they are all similar to each other' (1991: 162). Chandra Mohanty points to the dangers of a focus on finding similar cases to show that women are oppressed, rather than on uncovering the specific causes of oppression for a particular group of women (1988: 79). This is a particular danger when programmes for women from the 'South' are run in the 'North'.

6 OUTCOMES FROM THE MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The process of viewing through the gender lens is a painful one. Women commented on this during a follow-up session in-country nine months after the programme.

There is turmoil in my heart.

What was new was my sense of men's 'disappreciation' for women in the department. I came to realize that it exists.

I never thought that there was any discrimination. After we came back and having the [gender] lenses on, I can always feel that people [i.e. men] feel very differently about women colleagues. We are very much depressed about it, there is a great discrimination going on, we feel it very strongly now. I try to deal with it, I am still in the process.

What is clear is that there has been a major shift in beliefs about how the organization is structured. Many of the women have moved from collusion in their own oppression to the legitimation of their new perspectives on their experience. They become clear that their experience is not an individual one which is hard to recognize and name; but is due to the structuring of power by gender within the organization. This recognition has an immediate and dynamic effect on women's confidence. They also feel legitimated by developing their management skills: 'Never before had I so much confidence in myself, the confidence which

was supported by effective skills and techniques.' 'I am now able to analyse and assess my potentialities. We did not call these strengths; there was no methodical analysis of the situation.'

Those management skills enabled them to focus on women's and men's different needs, in terms of strategic analysis and goal-setting. Some women were able to influence outcomes outside the institution: for example setting up new women's programmes at village level. Other women are so buried within the layers of the institution that users of government services are remote. These women, however, have been able to influence the informal culture of the institution in a way which is fluid, relational and dynamic, looking for changes in the 'mini-climate' for themselves and their staff where they cannot make big or formal changes. Their colleagues clearly noticed a change: 'Their attitude is that this lady is now a changed woman, with new skills and techniques at her disposal. So we should be aware of her.'

Their own self image has changed, and with it the possibilities for action. A Bangladeshi woman observed: 'Whatever he [the manager] will feel about me, I must express my view. How far he will accept it or not will depend on him.' Another said: 'Now I am able to say to a man: 'This is my strength: asking for my legal rights. This is your weakness: you are not carrying it out.' A third commented: 'We're still looked down upon as women but we're fighting.'

The participants make this substantial shift in the their perceptions of the gendered structures of power in the organization by sharing their experience and theorizing anew from it to challenge accepted ideas. 'This process', wrote a Tanzanian delegate in an evaluation of the course, 'made us reflect and think deeply and explore possibilities, examine and scrutinize and be creative.'

A full account of this approach to management development for women will be found in Macalpine, M. and Williams, G., 1995, forthcoming, 'The gender lens: management development for women in developing countries', in C. Itzin and J. Newman (eds), **Gender, Culture and Organizational Change: Putting Theory into Practice**, London: Routledge.

This course is run at RIPA International, London.

With thanks to Gwendoline Williams, University of the West Indies, Trinidad, who jointly designed the course with the author, to Jennifer Barnes, who initiated the programme, (the term 'mini-climate' is hers), and to Sheena Matthews at RIPA International; also to Carlis Douglas and Sheila Marsh, and to Ruth McLeod from Homeless International.

Quotations are taken from delegates with permission. All names have been changed. National origin is not identified where this might serve to identify individuals.

REFERENCES

Acker, J., 1990, 'Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: a theory of gendered organizations', **Gender and Society** Vol 4 No 2

Cockburn, C., 1991, **In the Way of Women**, London: Macmillan

Goetz, A.M., 1992, 'Gender and administration', **IDS Bulletin** Vol 23 No 4: 6-17

Mohanty, C., 1988, 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', **Feminist Review** Vol 30