

WOMEN ORGANIZING WOMEN – ‘DOING IT BACKWARDS AND IN HIGH HEELS’

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‘I do the same as Fred Astaire, only backwards and in high heels.’

Ginger Rogers

The metaphor of dance and particularly ballroom dancing is crucial to this article because of the clarity and fixed nature of the roles allocated to men and women when ballroom dancing. The idea of fixed roles which are part of a natural order, and the emphasis on the woman's ‘following’ and complementary (invisible) role, is crucial to the experience of women who enter into the ‘public sphere’¹ of work, and therefore crucial to the issue of ‘getting institutions right for women’. This article will examine how this issue affected women working in the Musasa Project, even though it was a working space occupied only by women, therefore illustrating in addition that even ‘women only’ jobs are gendered and that even in these environments, women can suffer from a gendered ‘dis-ease’ with their role.

Our interest in this topic is in the area of indigenous NGOs henceforward referred to as NGOs.² Broadly speaking, the question of ‘getting institutions right for women in development’ in NGOs falls into two areas: 1) getting institutions right for the women who use them or are in some way served by them (through advocacy, lobbying etc.); and 2) getting institutions that work for women right for the women that work in them. This article is concerned with the second issue, but the two issues are not unconnected and this is explored.

This article has three main purposes: 1) to describe the organizational and structural history of the Musasa Project, 2) to consider the question of gendered ‘dis-ease’ with certain organizational roles and 3) to consider how Musasa has scaled up and what light this may shed on the question of whether and how to scale-up organizations for women.

The Musasa Project, a Zimbabwean NGO, was started to tackle the problems of rape and domestic violence in Zimbabwe. The approach developed by the project has been one of fostering change from within various institutions in Zimbabwean society. (Stewart 1992). As part of this approach we worked closely with various branches of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and officials from the health and legal sectors eg the Ministry of Justice.

Musasa began as a nine month participatory training and research project; the objective of which was to establish an appropriate model for a project of this nature in Zimbabwe. The initial membership of the project was 10 trainees and the two founders. More than 70 Zimbabweans were interviewed about rape and domestic violence and appropriate ways of dealing with these problems. Interviewees included officials of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, doctors, lawyers and members of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP). This was followed by the ‘training exchange’ component which consisted of two three month training courses. The input from the ‘training exchange’ was crucial in determining the nature of the project. By the beginning of 1989, the project had opted for the name ‘Musasa’, ‘... a favourite resting place for tired and weary travellers ... a temporary shelter put up by a family while they build a permanent home ...’, (MATCH 1993: 2), was established in Harare, had a core membership of 22 women, a paid staff of three and relatively secure funding from international donor agencies. At the time of writing the project has a paid staff of 7; including a full time legal practitioner, a membership of 600, decentralized regional committees and is a household name throughout the country (Musasa 1993/4).

¹ For a general discussion of the issue of the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres, see Elshtain 1981.

² We have chosen in this article to refer to indigenous NGOs as NGOs because of our concern with language that represents Northern NGOs as NGOs and therefore the norm, whilst NGOs situated elsewhere are referred to as indigenous (I)NGOs,

Southern NGOs or by some other delimiter, representing them not only as different but different from the ‘norm’.

³ Of course the third question is that of getting mixed institutions right for the women that work in them, but this issue is beyond the scope of this article.

1 STRUCTURAL HISTORY OF THE PROJECT:

The original mandate for the project was to establish 1) whether rape and domestic violence were problems which a) the women in the project and b) the community at large felt strongly enough to take action on, and 2) how to take this action e.g. with a shelter – the Women’s Aid model, or in some other way.

1.1 Phase 1: is domestic violence a problem?/ Hierarchical leadership for the time being

This phase had two distinct components. The first was the training of a group of women who were to comprise the core membership of the project. Two groups of ten women were trained between May 1988 and January 1989. The training was conducted with two aims in mind: the first to acquaint the trainees with theories on rape and domestic violence⁴; the second, to formulate with these women strategies for dealing with the issues in the Zimbabwean context. There was a lack of knowledge on both sides which made this an exciting process in itself. By the end of the training of the first two groups, a number of decisions had been made about how to approach the problem. Decisions were based on three considerations: 1) the Zimbabwean cultural context, 2) strategies that had been successfully employed elsewhere, and 3) strategies which were likely to win backing from donors and the Zimbabwean Government.

An example of an issue considered in this light is the question of establishing a shelter, which was considered because it had worked elsewhere. However, the idea seemed to be inappropriate in Zimbabwe at that time. The principle reason was evidence that if a woman was provided help outside the family structure the family might withdraw any future support for her (Taylor and Stewart 1989). Given the limited resources, it seemed at the time that this type of intervention would be doing more harm than good.⁵ Further reasons were that the severity of problems such as unemployment, lack of places for children in school and the lack of any social security support network, felt far too

overwhelming to be taken on by Musasa at the time. There was a strong message from donors that a shelter would not receive financial backing and indications from the Zimbabwean Government that they would not support the idea.

A number of other conclusions about strategies to be employed were reached during these training courses. There was very little discussion about how, organizationally, these strategies were to be implemented. A meeting of the project⁶ was convened in January, 1989 to discuss implementation. It was assumed by everyone that if funding was available, we would have an ‘organization’, but ideas about what was an ‘organization’ differed. This meeting is worth considering in detail as the issues that dominated the meeting have continued to affect the project.

1.2 Hierarchy, anarchy, democracy, ‘dis-ease’ and organizational dissolution

The question of why we had not considered the possible organizational structure is important, partly because it is a useful exercise in this context where we are (mainly) based in the north and considering how to get organizations right for women in less developed countries, and partly because it is a core issue in the project and its future development. The core organizational assumption operating for the project’s founders was that if women are to succeed in making fundamental change then they must by definition choose fundamentally different, i.e. non-hierarchical, democratic modes for organization. This assumption was so fundamental – both of us had worked in the Women’s Movement in South Africa - as to be invisible. This meant the meeting began with us presenting how we felt the organization should be structured. The basic idea was a flat structure with various sub-groups/centres of responsibility, each with a coordinator. Decisions were to be made on a consensus basis, with difficult decisions put to a vote requiring a two-thirds majority. The discussion about this way of organizing was, however, extremely negative. Flat structures were equated with having no structure at all whilst extreme unease was expressed at the idea that there

⁴ These theories were largely derived from similar movements in the developed world, but work conducted by Dr. Christine Jones in Papua New Guinea was crucial in the early stages as it dealt with issues such as bridewealth, which are important for understanding and strategising around the issue in Zimbabwe. (Report of the International Women’s Aid Conference, 1989: 61.)

⁵ Musasa has taken a recent decision to open a shelter on the basis that the general shift in public opinion on domestic violence is such as to mitigate against the withdrawal of support from the family. Furthermore the ‘nowhere to go if the source of the trouble is one’s partner’ problem is as intransigent in Zimbabwe as it is anywhere else.

⁶ Known at this stage as ‘The Counselling and Research Project on Violence Against Women’.

was no one individual to take absolute responsibility. The end of the discussion was that this option was rejected by a large majority.

A hierarchical structure was opted for with a clear delineation of authority and roles. Where we had envisaged the possibility of staff and members being able to work in a number of different roles, the membership was uneasy with this idea and generally uneasy with any suggestion of unclear roles. This was particularly marked in the area of management where members, and later staff, emphasized on a number of occasions, the need for extremely clearly defined positions and responsibilities in conjunction with clearly defined hierarchies. The view was expressed a number of times that 'those who are not professionals cannot do these things ...' meaning management. (Another possible reading of this was that only men could do these sorts of things that it was the wrong environment for women – arguably an internalization of the notion that they did not belong there, they belonged at home.) The project's bivalent beginnings are reflected in its early terminology – e.g. the Director was called the 'chief coordinator' in the early days of the project (Taylor and Stewart 1989).

2 PHASE TWO – HIERARCHIES AND HIGH FINANCE

Phase Two of the project began in February 1989, with the training of a third group of ten members; the commencement of the counselling section; and the beginning of a formal working relationship with the Zimbabwe Republic Police which remains a cornerstone of the work done by Musasa (Taylor and Stewart 1989; Taylor and Stewart 1992; Stewart 1992; Musasa 1993/94; Stewart 1994b, forthcoming; Stewart 1995a). The way the project functioned in Phase Two was again a mix of the hierarchical and non-hierarchical models; there were sub-groups, but also sub-group 'chiefs'. The early months of the project's work were marked by sub-groups who needed both very clearly defined activities and a clear indication of the structure of who was in charge within the sub-groups. One concern voiced

by some members during this phase of the project was whether we could run the project without men. This particular concern was voiced less often as time passed. The current position is that regional committees include men and there is one male in a full time staff of seven.

This phase was also marked by increasing interest and financial commitment from international donors.⁷ The increasing impact of donors is reflected in the gradual movement to standard managerial labels for project positions e.g. Director, Administrator, etc. As the amount of money flowing through Musasa increased, so the pressure for us to have clearly delimited roles mounted. Pressure came from two sides – 1) the trend which had been evident in the beginning, for project members to feel uneasy with unclear roles became more evident; 2) the donors demanded accountability from one person – the Director, who had to sign all project grants.

The increasing role played by money in the organization also resulted in a squeeze on less-well-educated women in the project (Stewart 1995b). This squeeze was expressed overtly by some members, as being good for the project as 'professional women were needed to do the project work'. In some instances this may have been true – some types of work, particularly work with donors, (though not all donors) require professionals of various types. Nevertheless, this emphasis on educational requirements is problematic especially as in Zimbabwe, education was not generally available for any black person until 1980, let alone for black women. What is also problematic about this phase is that the pressure for financial accountability resulted in an organization headed, not facilitated, by white women in post-independent Zimbabwe. Given the context and the role of racism and colonialism in Zimbabwe's history, our politics and intentions are irrelevant. What is relevant is the recreation of the possibility of domination by race, and linked structural issues such as access to education and money.⁸

More generally this illustrates the conservative nature of aid structures and raises questions about

⁷ Seed funding for the pilot project came from NORAD. The Oak Foundation was the first donor to Musasa, and was followed by NORAD, SIDA, CIDA, and the Ford Foundation.

⁸ This raises a whole series of questions and issues about the politics and functioning of aid which are beyond the reach of this article, but crucial to the consideration of getting institutions right for women. In particular the question of whether and how the functioning of aid/money in development results in the replication of oppressive structures, (race in this instance being a glaring example), needs close examination.

whether and how it is possible to empower women in this context. Another issue is that the way that money is donated by Northern donors often has the effect of pushing projects into standard (hierarchical) organizational patterns.⁹

2.1 Organizational ease

More interesting, however, is to consider the one sub-group in the project where the members' dis-ease with structures and discomfort with taking a position of power did not manifest itself. This was the counselling component of the project. Members of the project were comfortable with flexible counselling roles and flexible management roles in this aspect of the project. In fact it was the only area of the project where members actually argued strongly for the need for flexibility, and roles which were not clearly defined. In terms of how the project was described to people outside the project, counselling was often portrayed by members as the most important/frequent activity of the project. This was not 'objectively' accurate – in fact public education and the educational work with the Zimbabwe Republic Police was the most frequent activity, and if impact is measured on a numerical scale, public education and the work with the ZRP clearly had the most impact on the most number of people.

Public education and work with the ZRP was not, however, work with which the majority of project members felt comfortable. We asked the then Deputy Director¹⁰ why this was and her answer is illuminating. 'Oh everyone here is used to counselling, we do it all the time at home – it is what women do. We feel we can work with other women but it is difficult to work with men and to do men's work – that's why everyone wants to know exactly what to do.' The issue of flat, non-hierarchical structures was discussed again recently with the current Director of Musasa, who commented that 'the women in the project were just not ready for those structures at that time'.¹¹

2.2 'It's what women do/backwards and in high heels'

Biology is destiny, it would seem, in the workplace as well as everywhere else. Has the pervasive nature of continuing training only for the private sphere and a perhaps Jungian memory of increased danger in 'public', rendered us dis-eased and uneasy with

the world 'out' there? Similar themes have long been explored in feminist writing on education and affirmative action. Kristen Golden, writing in an article called 'What do girls see?' comments

What do girls see? Less opportunity in the workplace for women than for men and greater responsibility in the home, the degradation of women in the media, an absence of girls and women in school curricula, conflicting messages about female sexuality, the prevalence of racism and violence and adults enforcing gender roles.

(Golden 1994: 53)

More particularly, Juliet Mitchell writing in 'Woman's Estate' comments

Women's absence from the critical sector of production historically, of course, has been caused not just by their physical weakness in a context of coercion – but also by their role in reproduction. Maternity necessitates withdrawals from work, but this is not a decisive phenomenon. It is rather women's role in reproduction which has become, in capitalist society at least, the spiritual 'complement' of men's role in production. Bearing children, bringing them up, and maintaining the home – these form the core of women's natural vocation, in this ideology. This belief has attained great force because of the seeming universality of the family as a human institution.

(Mitchell 1981: 106)

In Zimbabwe the clearly demarcated position of the sexes is exacerbated by the extra level of discrimination faced by black women under the colonialist regime (Mitchell 1981: 103; Gaidzanwa 1993). The underlying problem is the position of women in Zimbabwean society, the actual problem confronting policy makers is women's internalization of the belief in their inferiority outside the role assigned to them. Obviously women's perception of their position in society affects the way that they will operate in an organizational context.

The general conclusion which one can draw from this is that 'getting organizations right for women' in cultures where there are very strictly defined roles for men and women is complex. One can

⁹ This is the subject of Stewart's current research (1995).

¹⁰ Personal conversation with Priscilla Mudzovera, New York, 1990.

¹¹ Personal conversation with Eunice Njovana, Zimbabwe, September, 1994.

propose interventions which aim to boost women's confidence, but these take time and may have little effect.

Another option is to accept that in countries where gender roles are rigid, this dis-ease with management may well apply, and to work towards models of organization which can accommodate this to a certain extent while still providing space for women to learn management skills. In this connection, we turn now to consider the third 'scaling-up' phase of Musasa, and how it was accomplished, as a possible model for accommodating both the need to get larger without losing the input of those women who in many ways are closest to the core of the problem and at the same time keeping close to the needs and concerns of the constituency.

3 PHASE THREE – 'SCALING-UP':

'Scaling-up', in the NGO world is rapidly becoming one of those vogue terms that is never really discussed or analysed. It is just something that southern NGOs must do once they have reached a certain point in their development. Clark, one of the most commonly quoted authors on the issue of scaling up, illustrates this clearly in his book: **Democratizing Development** (1992). Clark begins his chapter on scaling-up with the statement that 'An NGO typically starts a programme in a particular country to respond to a specific need' (1992: 73). He continues that having worked in the area of this specific need 'successfully',

[t]he inevitable question following success is, "How can we do more?" Only a complacent organization would be content to continue with the same job in perpetuity when it is self-evident that its contribution is not more than a drop in the ocean, however excellent a drop it may be.'

Putting aside all questions of whether an organization which chooses to carry on doing a good job on a small scale is 'complacent' and whether growth is in fact the answer, it is clear that this statement dictates looking for the route to scaling-up in certain areas. Increased professionalization is one of these areas, 'seeking to influence rather than do' (Clark 1992: 74) another.

There are a number of potential dangers in this for women. The first is the question of who are the professionals in a world where women have systematically been denied access to education which qualifies them for the label 'professional'. The second danger in many ways is a core issue in the whole question of 'getting organizations right for women in development'. It is the question of how to create organizations which can at one and the same time balance a number of complex and often contradictory needs, most importantly, a balance between getting bigger and more formal and keeping close to the constituency.

David Brown and Covey's 1987 article on their comparative study of four Private Development Agencies, (PDAs)¹² is an excellent consideration of this issue. The study had three aims: i) to consider whether there were characteristics which distinguished PDAs from other organizations; ii) to ask if such organizations posed specific management problems; and iii) to design management strategies which take account of differences found in the study.

In answering the question about how PDAs should be organized, the authors point out that tensions inevitably arise from the shift to more bureaucratic organization (implied by Clarke's definition of scaling-up); but furthermore that this method of organizing was widely perceived by staff and volunteers in the organizations as indistinguishable from a move away from the value-base. This perception – that a way of organizing is not politically neutral – but may change the value-base of the organization is crucial when considering the question of scaling-up and still getting institutions right for women.

Perhaps even more importantly, it is a crucial issue in the question of scaling-up and still maintaining effective contact with the target constituency of the organization. The question of NGOs accountability to their target constituencies is well-considered in the literature¹³, but practical strategies for ensuring that the target groups do not get lost when the organization expands are thin on the ground. As women represent a particularly disempowered group, the question becomes even more crucial. The way in which the Musasa Project has scaled-up is one possible model for women's organizations

¹² For the purposes of this article, this term is used interchangeably with the term 'NGO'.

¹³ See for example, de Coninck 1991; DGIS/NOVIB 1988; DGIS/NOVIB 1990; DGIS/NOVIB 1993; Edwards 1992; Fowler 1988; Lecompte 1986; and Muir 1990.

which have a combination service provision and advocacy role. The next section will consider how this has been done without compromising accountability.

3.1 The scaling-up process:

3.1.1 Expansion

By the end of 1991, Musasa was well established in Harare, and was doing extensive education work in Bulawayo, though it did not have a separate presence there. The relationship with the ZRP was also well-established. However, a recurring problem was that women in remote rural areas had little recourse to the services of the project.

Faced with the need to try to reach women in these areas, the project had to choose between trying to expand itself or using the relationship with the police with all the advantages of the logistical capability of a state funded organization with an extensive network of outposts. The second choice had obvious advantages, but obvious problems in that the ZRP's commitment to the cause was not guaranteed. Local organizations were needed to work with the police on an ongoing basis. The project therefore set itself up as a membership subscription organization and regional committees were established in all nine administrative districts of the country. Each committee consisted of a number of volunteer/members familiar with the area and well-known enough to have credibility both with the local population and with the police. In many instances this meant that committee members were women who were senior in their community, rather than younger professionals. These committees operate in conjunction with regional police representatives to deal with problems, counselling and other initiatives in their areas. Although the committees work with the Harare office and meet regularly with them, they are not employed and enjoy autonomy in their own areas. The Harare office has only taken on four extra staff since the project was established. The expansion through networking with the police and regional committees has meant that the coverage of the project has increased exponentially, whilst the budget has expanded only to accommodate the costs of three extra staff at head office.

3.2.2 Impact on Accountability

Broadly speaking, disadvantaged groups have only two options in a power game: 1) to get their voices heard; 2) to exit if their voices remain unheard. Exit is not a realistic option where there is

only one option i.e. only one organization dealing with violence against women. The structure of Musasa has therefore worked to reinforce the voice of the women who need the project in the following ways:

- the regional committees are aware of particular issues in their areas and can adjust the way that they operate in accordance with these requirements. In terms of maintaining contact with the target group this is important as is the presence of Musasa-trained police men and women in police stations all over the country.
- the budget has been kept low, the project has relatively modest financial requirements and therefore can choose or lose donors who make unreasonable demands.

The regional committees and the network of members are powerful enough in the structure to demand that the project stays closely in touch with its constituency. The importance of activities apart from fundraising is continuously stressed through contact with the constituency as is the need for initiatives such as the a shelter. More broadly, because needs other than donor needs are constantly being highlighted, donor needs, and therefore the type of staff who can service them (well-educated and male), do not get prioritized at the expense of other staff with other skills.

- there is a triangular power relationship within the overall power structure, the head office, the police and the regional committees, all wielding considerable power, and therefore creating a situation where the staff and managers are continually looking to balance this power.

4 CONCLUSION

There are particular problems in getting southern NGOs 'right' for the women who work in them, especially for disempowered non-professional women. One of the most difficult problems is the contradiction between the organizational needs of a project which is handling large amounts of money, and a project which is trying to keep contact with, and accountability to, extremely disempowered women. One of the principle issues therefore is ensuring a balance between professionals and women who can maintain easy contact with beneficiaries.

Another important issue is dealing somehow with the 'dis-ease' that women feel with certain organizational roles that they are asked to play in the context

of an organization dealing with the increasing complexity of managing the requirements of funders and the (often hostile) wider environment.

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