



# IDS WORKING PAPER

Volume **2012** No **397**

## **Strategies of Feminist Bureaucrats: United Nations Experiences**

Joanne Sandler and Aruna Rao  
with Preface by Rosalind Eyben  
July 2012



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IDS Working Paper 397  
First published by the Institute of Development Studies in July 2012  
© Institute of Development Studies 2012  
ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-78118-065-5

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# **Strategies of Feminist Bureaucrats: United Nations Experiences**

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with Preface by Rosalind Eyben

## **Summary**

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities for feminists working as women's rights and gender equality specialists in the United Nations as analysed from a practitioner perspective. Part 1 by Joanne Sandler analyses the experience of feminists struggling with the institutional sexism of the UN bureaucratic machine and shows how this played out in the difficult but ultimately successful negotiations around the creation of UN Women. In Part 2, Aruna Rao describes how cross-agency UN Gender Theme Groups worked together through a process of reflexive inquiry to strengthen the gender equality programming of three UN Country Teams, respectively in Morocco, Albania and Nepal.

**Keywords:** United Nations, gender mainstreaming, feminist activism, gender and development

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# Acronyms

CEB	Chief Executives Board
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women
DESA	UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs
EFG	External Forum on Gender
GDCF	Gender and Development Cooperation Fund
GEST	Gender Equality Sector Team
GFP	Gender Focal Point
GRB	Gender Responsive Budgeting
GTGs	Gender Theme Groups
NSGE-DV	National Strategy for Gender Equality and Eradication of Domestic Violence
NDPC	National Development Planning Commission
NETRIGHT	Network for Women's Rights in Ghana
OSAGI	Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
SG	Secretary-General
UN	United Nations
UNCTs	UN Country Teams
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UN Women	UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

# Preface

Rosalind Eyben

Every day, in international development organisations feminist bureaucrats make use of strategy, tactics, wisdom and skill to act for their principles. Most of their strategies are invisible and their tactics subtle. They draw on networks of friendships and relationships that create ripples of effect in enabling their organisations to be pathways of women's empowerment.

Feminists' potential to convert any bureaucracy into an instrument of social change remains a matter of debate. It is a particularly piquant question in relation to the complex bureaucratic architecture of international development whose shared normative discourse is, as the World Bank puts it, 'working for a world free of poverty'.<sup>1</sup> This question was the basis of a collaborative project between 2007–2010<sup>2</sup> in which I brought together a group of feminists working inside the head offices of multilateral organisations, government aid agencies and international non-governmental organisations. From my prior experience as a policy practitioner and a bureaucrat in large international organisations I knew that feminist bureaucrats find it difficult to communicate their experience: they are busy in their jobs, often unfamiliar with academic discourse and possibly even cautious about revealing to the outside world the realities of their workplace. Hence, it made sense to design the project as participatory action research, offering them a safe space to reflect upon and improve their own practice. The project had a conversational approach. I was doing research *with* instead of *on* my subjects (Pillow 2003). Towards the end of the project, some of those involved decided to write their own accounts of their experience. The present working paper contains two of these accounts from a United Nations perspective.<sup>3</sup>

The paper contributes to a stream of research that has examined the nature and challenges of gender mainstreaming in international development organisations (Goetz 2003, Prugl and Lustgarten 2006, Rao and Kelleher 2005). Klugman (2008) and True (2003) emphasise the significance of the role of supportive individuals positioned within the bureaucratic system for action on gender justice. However, since most scholars have had little or no regular informal access to the organisations they were studying they have been unable to describe and analyse the political processes of everyday bureaucratic life in which people assert their agency and creativity. Thus the micro-political strategies of feminist bureaucrats have received little attention in the wider literature about what makes change happen in global policy spaces (Tickner 2001, Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002, Parpart et al 2002, True 2003, Moghadam 2005, Molyneux and Razavi 2005, Sen 2006). The knowledge that *is* available is rather dated. A collection of brief memoirs from those active in the 1970s and 1980s provides some fascinating insights into the challenges of establishing 'women in development' sections in organisations such as USAID, the World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat (Fraser and Tinker 2004). Jain (2005) and Skard (2008) recount how those who established the Commission for the Status of Women were former WW2 resistance fighters, who used that experience to fight their corner in the newly formed United Nations. And an analysis of the 'bureaucratic mire' (Staudt et al 1997) provides a perspective on the years between the 1985 Nairobi and 1995 Women's Conferences. However, since Miller's and Razavi's illuminating edited volume of case studies (1998), little has been published about

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<sup>1</sup> See the home page of the World Bank [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org).

<sup>2</sup> The project was within the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme (2006-2011) funded by the UK Department for International Development, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Norway and Sweden, and UNIFEM.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Naomi Hossain and Laura Turquet for their useful comments on this paper.

what happens inside development bureaucracies, including in United Nations agencies which are the subject of the present working paper.<sup>4</sup>

Joanne Sandler, previously a senior official in UNIFEM in New York, vividly portrays the experience of feminists struggling with the institutional sexism of the UN bureaucratic machine and shows how this played out in the difficult but ultimately successful negotiations around the creation of UN Women. She writes 'Documenting the types of systemic institutional sabotage that UNIFEM faced throughout its life is a hedge against history repeating itself with UN Women' (page 12). UN Women, she argues, must insist on institutional equality if it is to play its role in transforming the UN system as an advocate and instrument of gender justice. She makes the point that it is essential to maintain strong links with a vibrant 'outside' constituency and that it is also essential for feminist networks to stay connected with UN Women and stay focused on the bigger question about whether the bureaucracy is providing UN Women the promised space and demanding from UN Women the support for change. UN Women's success should be measured in part by the extent to which it is able to change the very institution that it was established to become part of.

We leave the head office politics of New York to return to the country level – Morocco, Albania and Nepal – in Aruna Rao's description of how the cross-agency Gender Theme Groups worked together to strengthen the gender equality programming of three UN Country Teams (UNCTs) through an action-learning approach facilitated by Gender at Work.. Through the lens of each country context she examines the importance of inter-organisational co-operation between gender equality staff in UN agencies, and looks at why this has been difficult to achieve in the environment of institutional discrimination that Sandler analyzes. She concludes that 'Rather than burdening GTGs with resource manuals focusing on planning and monitoring mechanisms and processes', it may be far more effective to enable them to organise and develop joint solidarity strategies with government and the women's movement, to enhance their voice within.

Much of the debate concerning the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming is about whether it is understood as working within or changing existing paradigms. Is it possible to secure the desired policy action 'infusing' gender into existing ways of doing and organising things – and by so doing to incrementally secure real gains for women? Or will transformative policies for women's empowerment only be achieved through discursive and organisational transformation? (Rao et al 1999, Rao and Kelleher 2005; True 2003; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; Walby 2005; Daly 2005). One recent conclusion from these debates is that gender mainstreaming, understood as integrating women's issues into existing ways of working, has only made modest gains, while the more radical approach of transforming the paradigm and thus the policy agenda has had even less success (Porter and Sweetman 2005). However, I suggest we approach this debate from another angle. Gender mainstreaming can be effective when it is both about working within *and* changing existing paradigms at one and the same time. Through their every day experience of successes, failures and compromise as they navigate complex arenas of power, politically astute feminist bureaucrats have learnt to be effective strategists. If we want to understand better how gender mainstreaming works in practice we need to pay closer attention to analyzing what they do and how they do it.

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<sup>4</sup> Other than an interesting study of gender specialists in Canadian development agencies (Hendriks 2005).

# 1 Inside the UN bureaucratic machine: what prospects for UN Women?

Joanne Sandler

## 1.1 Introduction: interrogating the architecture to promote gender equality and women's empowerment

I remember vividly the day in 2004 when I uttered the phrase 'gender architecture' for the first time. I had attended a UN inter-agency meeting to hear a colleague from the OECD-DAC brief us about something called 'aid effectiveness'.<sup>5</sup> His briefing carried a strong warning to the UN: either get on this train or get left behind. He kept referring, messianically, to the critical necessity of recognising that the 'aid architecture' was irrevocably changing.

I zoomed upstairs to UNIFEM, and burst into the office of then-Executive Director, Noeleen Heyzer, parroting the same doomsday overtones as my OECD-DAC colleague: 'Noeleen,' I gasped. 'The aid architecture is changing. And the gender architecture is unprepared, inadequate. What are we going to do?'

Noeleen understood immediately. A review of UNIFEM had recently been undertaken by an independent advisory committee,<sup>6</sup> pointing out in stark terms how inadequate UNIFEM's structure and positioning in the UN system were for the ambitious mandate that had been assigned by member states of the United Nations. This review – requested by UNIFEM's Consultative Committee which was chaired by the Ambassador to the UN from Jordan and overseen by an external advisory committee headed by Nafis Sadik, former Executive Director of UNFPA – pointed out how UNIFEM's lack of high-level leadership, autonomy and authority, resources, and its fragmentation from the three other UN gender-specific organisations<sup>7</sup> were systemic obstacles to its ability to fulfil its mandate. The underlying question that the committee overseeing the assessment posed was: how can UNIFEM engage in high-level policy advocacy, when the low hierarchic level of its leadership means that it cannot even enter the rooms where high-level policymaking is taking place?

Many reviews of gender mainstreaming in multilateral and bilateral organisations had revealed similar patterns. Gender units are established without adequate human resources or budgets. Gender theme groups that bring so-called gender experts from various organisations together are composed of junior staff with little access to or influence on decisions. Gender advisors are marginalised from mainstream decision-making, and their advice is not taken into account. UNIFEM was an autonomous organisation – not a 'unit' or an 'advisor' – but it was part and parcel of this highly under-valued landscape.

Perhaps it was not surprising that despite valiant efforts by those who commissioned the assessment, it was largely ignored by the UN leadership. But the impediments now had a name, and naming is the first step. The reluctance to take any action was the wake-up call

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<sup>5</sup> This paper was finalized in 2011, during the early days of UN Women, before its governance and leadership structure were firmly in place and before it had completed its first full year of operation. We have included some recent developments – such as the announcement that UN Women would become a co-sponsor of UNAIDS – but have not attempted to update the article and reflect all of the structures and changes that have been put into place. For those interested in a recent update on UN Women's progress, see 'Progress Made on the UN Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women Strategic Plan 2011 – 2013, UNW 2012/4, Executive Board of the UN Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Annual session of 2012'. ([www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/EB\\_UNW-2012](http://www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/EB_UNW-2012)).

<sup>6</sup> A/60/62 and E/2005/10, 'Organizational Assessment: UNIFEM, Past, Present and Future (2004).

<sup>7</sup> The three other gender-specific organizations in the UN were: the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI) and the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) located in the Secretariat and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) with its own governing board.



that inspired UNIFEM to advocate for systemic and structural changes in the gender architecture of the UN.

On 2 July 2010 – almost six years after the UNIFEM assessment was met with a deafening silence – the General Assembly passed GA resolution 64/289, establishing the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women or UN Women. The resolution merged the four parts of the UN system that had been established over the past 60 years as ‘specialist’ gender equality organisations/departments:

- The UN Division for the Advancement of Women or DAW was established in 1948 and was the Secretariat for the UN World Conferences on Women.
- UNIFEM and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women or INSTRAW – the former a fund and the latter a research and training centre – were both established in 1976 in response to calls from women’s organisations and gender equality experts.
- The Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues or OSAGI was called for at the Fourth UN World Conference for Women (Beijing 1995) and was the gender equality ‘specialist’ with the highest position in the UN hierarchy.

The merger created an organisation headed by an Under-Secretary General who reports directly to the UN Secretary General, a giant step forward. It is intended to address the gaps of fragmentation, authority, inadequate leadership and voice, and resources that have plagued work on gender equality for decades. In September 2010, Michele Bachelet, former President of Chile, accepted the position of Executive Director of UN Women. Having a former head of state with such a distinguished record of accomplishment leading a more unified structure in the UN presents an unparalleled opportunity to put women’s rights on many more critical policy agendas and to elicit a more effective and robust response by the UN system to gender discrimination in the countries where the UN is present.

It will take some years to know if the results that emanate from the shifts in the UN gender architecture live up to expectations. Women’s and development organisations and networks around the world – from the Gender Equality Architecture (GEAR) Campaign to the UN Women Godmothers in the UK – as well as member states, other UN organisations and influential individuals, have been articulate about what they expect from UN Women.<sup>8</sup>

Will UN Women be able to meet the huge expectations that its creation generated? This is a question that certainly depends on member states and others significantly scaling up the financial and human resources required to advance women’s rights. But this paper focuses on the internal political dimensions. It posits that organisations or units tasked with promoting gender equality in mainstream organisations face pervasive institutional discrimination, with a complex impact on the individuals that work there – particularly on those who join because of their commitment to feminist organising and women’s human rights. It shows why UN Women must insist on *institutional* equality as a pre-condition for it to be able to foster change on the ground, space for women’s rights advocates, and transformation of the UN system based on gender justice. It describes the organisational roadblocks and propellers that UNIFEM discovered as an illustration of what UN Women might watch out for. But it goes beyond UNIFEM because the experience is familiar to any organisation or unit tasked

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance The Godmothers ([www.thegodmothers.org](http://www.thegodmothers.org)) and the Gender Equality Architecture (GEAR) campaign ([www.gearcampaign.org](http://www.gearcampaign.org)). Both the Godmothers and the GEAR campaign are coalitions of organizations that advocated for the establishment of UN Women and continue to advocate as it establishes itself, with the Godmothers involving U.K. based NGOs hosted by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and the GEAR campaign involving over 300 women’s, human rights and social justice organizations worldwide. Also see Oxfam’s study, ‘Blueprint for UN Women: What Does Civil Society at Country Level Expect of the New UN Women’s Agency’.

with promoting gender equality in the multilateral and bilateral system and in large government and non-governmental bureaucracies.

The gender architecture encompasses Ministries of Women's Affairs, gender units, equal opportunity offices, and women's organisations and networks. While they are often underfunded and inadequately staffed, the best of them figure out ways to build alliances and establish valued technical and political credentials that place them in high demand. But technical excellence is not sufficient. All must confront in their daily work systemic institutional discrimination and structures that seek to sabotage their success. All must undertake a political analysis that acknowledges the corrosive effects when power, elitism, patriarchy, politics and gender discrimination join together to hold back progress on women's rights. Confronting this is rarely explicit in their mandates, work plans or job descriptions. But, if left unattended, it is a path to almost certain irrelevance and extinction.

## 1.2 Toward re-structuring gender equality in the UN system

The establishment of UN Women is a victory for women's rights advocates. It also represents a step forward for UN reform, a longstanding effort to re-organise the UN to become more coordinated and coherent. It is probably true that never in the history of the UN did an organisation come forth voluntarily to be dissolved in the interest of its constituency, organisational effectiveness and UN reform. But the gender equality organisations have.

An unusual confluence of events happened to enable the creation of UN Women. In 2006, the UN Secretary General convened a high-level panel on system-wide coherence (system-wide coherence is the term that covers all things related to streamlining and making the UN more coherent). There was no mention of gender equality in the original terms of reference of the panel.<sup>9</sup>

Women's rights advocates – including UNIFEM and many civil society groups – used all of our networks in New York and in the countries that panel members visited to lobby for their attention. Noeleen appealed to one of the co-chairs during their first meeting in New York,<sup>10</sup> women's groups organised when the panel members travelled to Egypt and Pakistan, and Bandana Rana of SAATHI (Nepal) gathered a million signatures to present to the Pakistani co-chair of the panel, demanding that the panel pay attention to gender equality. Finally the GEAR civil society campaign started up, with initial UNIFEM support. It reached out to UN delegates and women's and social justice organisations worldwide. Ultimately, the panel's terms of reference were changed to incorporate gender equality.

The panel issued a set of findings about reforming the entire UN system, with a 'merged' gender equality architecture as part of the whole package. The report made a specific recommendation that the UNIFEM assessment could not make: to merge four entities into one, with an Under-Secretary General as its leader.<sup>11</sup>

While women's rights advocates greeted the November 2006 merger recommendation with jubilation, parts of the UN bureaucracy met it with a combination of shock and consternation. These reactions mirrored typical and inherent blockages to advancing gender equality – or other issues that challenge the power of elites – in bureaucratic institutions.

At the political level, many member states – especially the Group of 77<sup>12</sup> – rejected the entire coherence panel report. We heard from many delegations that they did not have substantive

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<sup>9</sup> See 'High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence – Terms of Reference' on UN website (<http://www.un.org/events/panel/html/page2.html>).

<sup>10</sup> There were three co-chairs: Shaukat Aziz (Pakistan); Luisa Dias Diogo (Mozambique); and Jens Stoltenberg (Norway). See A/61/583, Report of the Secretary General on System-wide Coherence, New York 2006.

<sup>12</sup> The Group of 77 is the largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations, which provides means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance

issues with the gender equality components, but they rejected the recommendation as an indication of their dissatisfaction with the entire high-level panel process. So, gender equality became a political 'hostage' to other issues, including the failure of the coherence panel report to push the boundaries of Security Council reform.

Some of the units and specialists that work on gender equality in the UN system formed another blockage. A number of them were roundly dismayed by the recommendations, seeing them as contrary to the gender mainstreaming approach that had been the centrepiece of the UN's overall gender equality strategy, as well as (for some) the death knell for their own units or jobs.

At the highest levels of the UN system, some Heads of Agencies were extremely supportive while others proclaimed that this was no time to start a 'new' UN organisation. The Secretary General's support was unswerving, as he noted publicly that 'The United Nations is investing in women because it is the right thing to do and because it is a smart thing to do – possibly one of the smartest things we can ever do. I will support UN Women in every way I can with every ounce of my energy and commitment.'<sup>13</sup> At the same time, however, one Head of Agency proclaimed during a briefing from staff on the status of inter-governmental debates on the entity prior to its establishment, 'Don't think for one minute that I want to compete with *another* UN organisation for funds'.

With multiple sources of opposition, political manoeuvring and misunderstanding, it is no wonder that a reform that could have happened immediately took four years. The four entities are now merged and the promise is significant. But at the end of the day, we must remember that the structure of the organisation was changed by merging the four existing institutions, and the level of leadership changed – which is a huge step forward in a bureaucracy – but the patriarchal and elitist structure in which the new organisation is embedded remains the same. That is part of the work that must be taken up by UN Women, with close vigilance from women's networks worldwide.

### **1.3 UNIFEM: a primer on structuring organisational inequality**

In her book, *Transforming Development* (1995), Margaret Snyder, the first Director of UNIFEM, catalogues some of the early strategies for confronting institutional roadblocks to the fund's work on gender equality. UNIFEM colleagues and their partners on the ground regularly demonstrated courage and creativity in confronting rules and organisational cultures that too often run counter to advancing women's human rights:

- Where gender equality was relegated to a 'cross-cutting' issue that did not receive funds commensurate with other issues, they worked with national partners and donors to develop grant making 'basket funds' at country level – where multiple donors contribute funds for a particular gender equality objective – thereby increasing the resources for women's rights organisations and issues and creating new, locally-owned knowledge on effective strategies.
- Where UN colleagues were frustrated because they could not get technical support from gender equality experts in the UN system, UNIFEM staff brought gender focal points and UN Resident Coordinators together to develop annual gender equality 'contracts' in specific sub-regions, so that the heads of UN country teams in a particular geographic area could identify, ahead of time, the kinds of technical support that they need, giving gender experts in the system the time to source this from the UN and its national partners.

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<sup>13</sup> their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the UN system, and promote South-South cooperation for development.  
Secretary General's statement for the launch of UN Women, 24 February 2011.

- Where fragmentation and missed opportunities for creative partnerships impeded progress, they promoted innovative approaches that expanded space for other UN organisations to join in, whether through UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict<sup>14</sup> or through forging cross-regional and cross-national partnerships to promote and protect the rights of women migrant workers.

These achievements do not come easily, however. Documenting the types of systemic institutional sabotage that UNIFEM faced throughout its life is a hedge against history repeating itself with UN Women. What follows is a subjective, partial, but hopefully revealing, story.

It shows, firstly, how structural decisions, made on the basis of a combination of reason and the political climate of the UN inter-governmental process, have a far-reaching impact. There is no doubt that General Assembly delegates had the best of intentions when they established the UN Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women in 1976, which became UNIFEM in 1984.<sup>15</sup> The UN Voluntary Fund for the Decade for Women was located in the UN Secretariat, whose structure focuses on servicing intergovernmental bodies such as the General Assembly. For reasons of relevance, efficiency and cost-effectiveness – and to locate it in one bureaucracy rather than two – in 1984, UN member states placed the Voluntary Fund ‘as a separate and identifiable entity in autonomous association with UNDP’.

UNIFEM’s founding resolution was formulated in close consultation and with the approval of the UN’s legal experts. How it was interpreted is a dramatic manifestation of the preservationist power of patriarchy.

Other UN organisations – such as UNFPA – were also initially set up to be ‘administered’ by UNDP because they started off small and, as they grew, consistently became more autonomous. UNIFEM was following the same trajectory, but a combination of factors – from internal strategy to global politics to resources and UN reform – made the pace of that trajectory slower than it should have been. The UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA, which was home to the Voluntary Fund) and UNDP – which are no more and no less gender-blind or gender-discriminatory than most other multilateral organisations – had to play the unwitting roles of gatekeepers for the patriarchy. This offers important lessons for UN Women. There were three strategies for structuring this inequality.

The first strategy was silencing or at least reducing UNIFEM’s voice and ability to manage its own business. Until the last part of the 1990s, UNIFEM did not have full authority for signing its own cheques or approving recruitments of all staff. It often had to lobby for the opportunity to represent itself or speak out for gender equality and women’s rights in key policy venues and was often excluded with the response that its leadership was not at a high enough level to be included on the podium or at the meeting. In many venues, the Administrator of UNDP ‘spoke’ for UNIFEM. The Administrator of UNDP, according to UNIFEM’s founding resolution, was ‘accountable’ for UNIFEM (Snyder 1995:62 and 80).

As we more frequently raised to our governing and advisory bodies – both the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board and the UNIFEM Consultative Committee – the ways that our inability to make staffing decisions or to represent ourselves were impeding our effectiveness, we were told repeatedly that this was done in the interest of efficiency: why did we need our own systems when UNDP could run them for us? Like many marriages that hinge on inequality, UNIFEM had the lion’s share of responsibility, but insufficient authority to manage itself. The arrangement worked fine when there was an administrator or a head of finance or a resident representative who was supportive. But there were too many instances where this was not the case.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.stoprapenow.org/about/>.

<sup>15</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution GA 39/125.

I remember that, when I was working at the International Women's Tribune Centre in the 1980s, we received a phone call from UNIFEM, located around the corner. The staff had come to work on a Monday morning to find that, over the weekend, UN DESA (its host at the time) had unilaterally decided to take over their space and move UNIFEM to another location in a different building. No one had informed UNIFEM, whose Director was on mission in Japan. They simply left a note instructing staff to go to the new address, where they found their furniture and belongings chaotically piled up. The space taken from UNIFEM remained vacant for many months.

Ten years later, when I joined UNIFEM as a consultant, many facets of the situation were similar, and relate to the second strategy for structuring inequality: constantly questioning UNIFEM's right to exist, which meant huge amounts of time invested in digging up precedents just to prove why we were present. This included 'jabs' – like publicly questioning why UNIFEM field staff were participating in heads of agency meetings of UN country teams or questioning UNIFEM's right to have its logo alongside other UN organisations in a jointly-funded publication or web application. It also encompassed more serious threats, such as more powerful UN colleagues agreeing to absorb UNIFEM into their own organisations at the behest of a donor agency.

The third tactic was strategic public and private demonstrations of 'power over'. The administrative arrangements between UNDP and UNIFEM left many opportunities for the larger, more powerful organisation to show the weaker one who was boss. For instance, UNIFEM was dependent on UNDP to make payments; if UNDP decided to withhold payment requests or put them at the back of the line, UNIFEM had few options. UNIFEM recruitments had to go to a UNDP approvals board. When UNDP set the board's agenda and would 'run out of time' and fail to get to UNIFEM's requests for three sessions in a row, UNIFEM had no recourse. Power-holders can do this with their 'property'.

Many would ask: so why did you not assert your rights and protest to the UN's leadership or governing bodies? We did. And when we did, we paid an even higher price. We were labelled as 'not good team players', we were 'whiners', we were 'radical feminists', or the worst label of all: we were 'behaving like NGOs'.

Patriarchy was most effective at limiting UNIFEM's reach and influence by failing to address the level of UNIFEM's leadership. UNIFEM's Executive Director was (in UN terms) at the D-2 level, raised from D-1 in 1989 when requested by the outgoing founding Director, Margaret Snyder, when she retired. That is a lower level than many department heads in UNDP, lower than the Deputy Directors of UNICEF and UNFPA, lower than the heads of the liaison offices of some Geneva-based UN organisations in New York. Thus the head of a liaison office with a relatively small budget and a staff of less than 30 people in just one location had a higher level than the head of UNIFEM with a \$200 million budget and nearly 900 staff and consultants in 80 offices worldwide.

The UNIFEM Executive Director's level remained the same since 1989, despite the fact that UNIFEM's budget, its staff and consultants increased by more than 10 times and successive General Assembly resolutions gave it an increasingly broader role both geographically and thematically. Four UNDP Administrators and two Secretary Generals missed the opportunity to raise the level of UNIFEM's leadership to Assistant Secretary General (ASG) level, despite letters, justifications and lobbying by well-respected experts, friendly member states and UN colleagues. The reasons changed with each lobbying effort – 'We had an ASG for you but we had to give it to someone else' or 'We agree that UNIFEM leadership should have a higher level but if we raise yours, we'll have to raise that of other associated funds', and so on. The consequences were significant: keeping the unit or organisation responsible for gender equality at a lower and hence disadvantaged level is another pathway for restricting its influence and effectiveness in a hierarchy where organisational access is determined by the level of leadership.

The lower level of UNIFEM's leadership suppressed all other post levels, so UNIFEM Directors in the field were often one or two ranks lower than their counterparts. And for those who say, 'so what?' – you've never worked in a bureaucracy. You've never been told to move from your seat at the table (even when there are seats) because your rank is not equal to others. This really happens. You've never had to sit through meetings where, because of your rank, the legitimacy of your presence is debated. You've never been the only one asked to leave the room when a peer review of other directors is taking place, because your rank is too low. Some will say that these are all trappings. And that is partly true. But it means that continuously and systematically you and others are reminded that you are unequal, lesser, disadvantaged. It means that your voice is restricted and the issues you try to put on the table are easily dismissed. And you also happen to be 'the women's fund', a constant reminder of how women are treated in the larger world manifesting itself at decision-making tables within the UN.

UNIFEM fought this marginalisation without pause since its establishment, and at times was joined by women's rights networks at country, regional or global level. Over the past twelve years – and often in partnership with supportive UNDP leadership and colleagues – UNIFEM secured the right to sign its own cheques, appoint its own staff, and have representational status on the ground. These were small but significant victories.

The catalogue of strategies that UNIFEM's leadership teams – from its founding Director, Margaret Snyder, to its last Executive Director, Ines Alberdi<sup>16</sup> – formulated to enable it to survive and thrive is important to document, as each responded to the politics, challenges and opportunities of their time (Snyder 1995). During the last 15 years that I consulted with or worked inside UNIFEM, I was privileged to be part of an organisation, led by Noeleen Heyzer for the majority of this period, that not only survived but also grew exponentially in both presence and resources. This did not happen by chance. It was part of a strategy.

UNIFEM leadership understood three things: firstly, it had to build relevance within the UN by embracing UN reform and seizing the opportunities that it offered, opportunities like the High Level Panel or the pilots of 'Delivering as One'<sup>17</sup> Secondly, it had to expand resources and presence, because having staff on the ground and budgets to enable full participation in UN country teams were the only roads to expanding women's access and voice to influence the system where it mattered most – at the country level. Too often, like other bureaucracies, the UN is a 'pay to play' system and if your organisational resources are inadequate, so too is your organisational voice. Lastly – but most importantly – was partnership with a constituency. The importance of this cannot be overstated. I will never forget when a very irritated high-level UN official warned us, after yet another failed effort to dissolve UNIFEM, 'The only reason we can't absorb you is because you have a constituency. That is what is saving you.'

Over the past four years, the UN Secretary General and heads of agencies have been making an all-out effort to raise the numbers of women in the leadership of the UN. The leadership often understands their commitment to gender equality as a struggle to achieve greater gender balance, e.g. to get more women into higher-level positions. There have been significant advances. More women are now seated around the UN's highest decision-making tables than ever before, with 30.9 per cent of the highest level posts (Under-Secretary General and Assistant Secretary Generals) held by women according to 2009 figures (UN 2009). Keep in mind, as well, that the UN did not have a woman Under-Secretary General until Dame Margaret Anstee's appointment to that rank in 1987.

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<sup>16</sup> UNIFEM had four Executive Directors: Margaret Snyder (1976 to 1988); Sharon Capeling-Alakija (1989 to 1994); Noeleen Heyzer (1994 to 2007); Ines Alberdi (2008 to 2010).

<sup>17</sup> UN High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence (2006b). The pilots are those countries where the UN agencies are trying to operate in a fully joined up manner.

This change in percentages is important, but it is only a part of the picture. The dynamics of structured inequality can only be understood through an analysis of the 'deep structures' of organisations (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999). Much of the work on transforming the deep structures that perpetuate gender discrimination in institutions is focused on making organisational life more conducive to the different realities of women and men at the individual level: e.g. having more flexible hours, day care, providing employment to male spouses who follow their wives overseas, mentoring programmes, and positive action.

But while the UN is taking some steps to address structural gender inequality at the individual level and retain more women in leadership, recognition of *institutional inequality* – that is positioning an entire organisation or unit and the people in it at a structural disadvantage because they work on gender equality – is far less obvious. And that is the trap that UN Women must avoid.

#### **1.4 A battering effect on staff**

There are an increasing number of women – and more men as well – who are passionately committed to women's empowerment and rights in the organisations and units that work on gender equality in large multilateral or bilateral organisations. Some had been working in feminist NGOs and joined these organisations to work on change from the inside. Despite legitimate complaints from women's organisations that better-paying jobs in international NGOs and multilateral or bilateral organisations are reducing the talent pool for them, it is absolutely essential for women's rights activists to be located in these bureaucracies. It is one of the ways that change happens.

I also now meet an increasing number of 'career' civil servants – from within the UN system or from government or academia – who join UN Women or gender units of other UN organisations to advance their careers. But after feeling the full weight of institutional gender discrimination and after seeing the enormous demand for support from governments, the UN and civil society, their consciousness and ire get raised.

This is systemic. I have seen it happen equally to men and women who worked at UNIFEM and other organisations or units that advance gender equality. The men that I've met who work on gender equality issues in multilateral organisations have told me about the snickers and the teasing that they encounter from other men. Relatively innocuous comments like, 'What does the gender man have to say about that?' to far more sexist and misogynistic remarks. Recently, I was at an international conference on gender-responsive budgeting (GRB), with robust participation from many male and female colleagues working in Ministries of Finance. One of the African men – who is the GRB champion in his country's Ministry of Finance – told me that he had recently been meeting with a European donor representative. When the Ministry colleague informally told the donor representative about the way that GRB was strengthening internal systems of accountability and transparency, the donor representative laughed and said, 'Why would a smart and capable guy like you want to spend time working on gender issues?' These comments are, depressingly, not uncommon. But, in most cases, they strengthen the resolve of my male colleagues to make a difference for women's rights.

After twelve years at UNIFEM and reflecting on its effect on individuals – and my own entry to feminism through organisations and centres addressing violence against women – I see the parallels between what happens to some staff of these organisations and battered women's syndrome, with four stages of response: denial, guilt, recognition/awareness and empowerment. The problem is that many individuals stop at the first two stages, and never reach stages three and four.

This is how it works:

### **1.4.1 Denial**

Like the singer Rihanna being beaten up by her boyfriend, Chris Brown, and publicly excusing his behaviour,<sup>18</sup> there are a surprising number of apologists for institutional sexism amongst those who work on gender equality. Gender units in large development organisations that have to write reports to governing bodies about the progress their organisations are making on gender equality regularly hyperbolise, hide or tweak information in their reports, at the oft-unspoken behest of their supervisors or colleagues. Rarely can an 'employed' gender expert or a gender unit unveil the sexism inherent in their organisations without facing the consequences of being designated someone who is not a good 'team player'. More powerful colleagues will turn the blame around and pin the inadequacy on the gender unit for failing to provide good capacity development or technical support.<sup>19</sup>

For instance, it is denial when we affirm statements of UN resident coordinators, both male and female, who come to open or close a meeting on gender equality and then (often saying, 'let me be provocative') observe that there are too few male participants and that the women in the room have to try harder to 'attract' men to this work. We nod our heads, rather than ask them if they raised the same question about women's absence when they were in a room full of predominantly male Heads of Agencies or ask them to what extent they are using their power to change the incentive systems so that men will want to work on gender equality.

We rarely talked publicly about the similarity of UNIFEM's organisational arrangements and relationship with UNDP – or the relationship of a Directorate of Women's Affairs to the Ministry for Social Welfare or of the gender unit to its overarching policy unit – to the situation of disenfranchised women worldwide, who are subjugated by both the state, their male family members, and more powerful women 'agents' of men in the family. And when we did point out the structural inequalities to those who could have easily done something about it, more often than not the response was silence, embarrassed guffaws, supportive 'oh, they're just pulling your chains', or recrimination... but very little action. You soon learn to stop raising it, except in the safest spaces.

### **1.4.2 Guilt**

When we are in denial about the structure being irrepressibly and unapologetically discriminatory, we have only ourselves to blame. When we cannot get our colleagues to implement agreed guidelines for promoting and protecting the rights of women and girls in refugee camps, we think we did not strategise properly. When an evaluation of a mainstream programme or unit shows gross inadequacies in their work on gender equality, we feel that we did not produce the right technical support. When we try to mainstream gender equality into a Poverty Reduction Strategy or a large-scale programme and are asked to produce a clear evidence base for strengthening commitments to women, we feel inadequate that we could not present the magic piece of evidence to convince our colleagues to include a result and a budget to advance women's rights. We fail to realise that no such evidence will do so. We fail to assign accountability where it actually belongs.

I recently attended the final workshop of a two-year action learning process for three UN country teams to reflect on and document, based on their own experiences, what actions can support effective joint programming on gender equality, as discussed by Rao in the second part of this working paper. I was quite struck by the initial reflection provided by one of the

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance: <http://feministing.com/2012/02/17/what-if-rihanna-and-chris-brown-get-back-together>.

<sup>19</sup> There are legitimate criticisms from colleagues about the inadequate technical support they receive from gender units and from the former UNIFEM and other specialist organizations. The placement of individuals who lack the knowledge base, networks and substantive skills to provide high-quality and timely expertise on gender equality to those who are asking for assistance undermines overall efforts to create a conducive environment for advancing gender equality in policies, programmes and budgets. As one supportive UNDP senior manager once said to me: 'Every time UNIFEM places an advisor or representative who is at too low a level or who has inadequate expertise, you lower the bar for all of the other UN organizations' efforts on gender equality.'



teams. By all counts, they had managed to build on the comparative advantage of UN organisations in that country to produce stunning results in a short period of time, successfully supporting national efforts to get more women into political positions and to extend the country's first network of shelters for women into the provinces. National decision-makers were extremely satisfied and it was widely known that the UN's accomplishments on gender equality had positive spin-off effects on the overall reputation of the UN country team.

Yet, in their presentation on their learning process, the four women who made up this team pointed out that they had 'failed' when it came to gender mainstreaming and therefore other programmes supported by the UN country team were not sufficiently gender-responsive. The irony was inescapable. Here was a relatively small inter-agency team consisting of only five or six people that had helped to deliver quantifiable, tangible benefits to the country, was deeply appreciated by national partners, and had improved the reputation of the entire UN country team. But their sense of success was marred by their feeling that they had not spent a sufficient amount of time 'helping' their other UN colleagues to incorporate gender equality into their work.

This should be a warning to UN Women. Many supporters still talk about UN Women as the panacea for the UN system's shortcomings regarding gender equality and 'holding the system accountable'. But it must be crystal-clear that, while UN Women can play a specific role, each UN organisation remains accountable for its own performance on gender equality. Clarifying lines of responsibility and accountability is essential.<sup>20</sup>

The sexual division of labour that so blithely accepts women's dual productive and reproductive roles is alive and well in international organisations, justified in the name of 'gender mainstreaming'. And the dynamic that perpetuates the mentality of 'blaming the victim' continues as well. Staff in gender units – like others who feel powerless and turn their frustration inward rather than strategising to overturn what is oppressing them – are much more likely to publicly criticise each other than to say anything about those in power who fail to change inequitable gender arrangements.

### **1.4.3 Recognition/awareness**

There is that liberating moment when you realise that the institution itself – not your inadequacy – is the greatest impediment. And the even more liberating moment when you realise that it is possible to make creative use of any political space that the institution provides for advancing women's human rights. For me, this moment came when we were trying to organise a global videoconference on ending violence against women in the UN General Assembly in 1999.<sup>21</sup> The resistance to using the General Assembly for a global advocacy initiative on violence against women was monumental and came from many different directions. We were challenged by our peers and decision-makers in other parts of the UN: what if descriptions of violence against women were so graphic that they embarrassed the delegates? How would we avoid stigmatising specific countries? What if the technology did not work properly and we embarrassed the Secretary General? The excuses were never-ending. The concerns were all for the institution, rather than for women and girls.

It made me realise how closely patriarchy guarded its sacred policy spaces in the United Nations. And it affirmed what I knew as a feminist but what is so easy to forget in bureaucracies: logic, evidence and common sense have only a limited influence. When the going gets tough, only a well-orchestrated inside/outside political strategy will work.

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<sup>20</sup> UN Women and the UN system have already taken some steps in this direction, including through the Chief Executive Board (CEB) agreement to the System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (SWAP) which institutes a system-wide accountability framework.

<sup>21</sup> This took place about one year after I joined UNIFEM as staff, in 1998.

The advocacy and expectations of women's movements and networks were critical to our argument for holding the videoconference in the first place. But to secure the General Assembly, we needed powerful inside champions. In this case the Deputy Director of UNICEF, a woman from the Staff Council, and several other colleagues made the difference. They guided us behind the scenes and made crucial phone calls when they were needed. They told us which levers to pull and prepped us for meetings. And we got the General Assembly. Women from Kenya and Mexico and India spoke directly to the General Assembly about their experiences of violence. The Secretary General said he would come for 20 minutes and he stayed for 90 minutes, visibly moved. Ten years later, almost every UN organisation works on ending violence against women and, in 2008, (a different) Secretary General launched his global campaign, including his male leaders network to speak out against this violence.

The struggle to bring testimonies from women and men about violence against women to the General Assembly in 1999 made us realise that the Security Council – another hallowed policy space – needed to be the next point of policy advocacy. We joined with a vast network of women's peace and security advocates, and one year later, Security Council Resolution 1325 was agreed.

Do not mistake the short-hand way I just presented the changes above as an indication that they happened quickly. They all resulted from years of advocacy and the efforts of countless women and men. The struggles represent what happens when one recognises that patriarchy is not immutable and that your role as an inside feminist change agent is to challenge the institutions of patriarchy and exclusion, whether in the Security Council, the justice system or in macroeconomic policymaking. That change is only possible, however, when one stops making excuses for those in power, stops apologising for being oppositional, and stops taking the blame for others. It is only possible when you use your position in the institution to bring in the voices of those who are most affected to speak directly to power-holders.

#### **1.4.4 Empowerment**

Empowerment comes when recognition and awareness become part of your DNA. You become entrepreneurial at using the unique opportunities that an international organisation offers to stimulate reverberating changes for women's human rights, whether that means using your 'position' to create space for HIV-positive women to secure a space at the policymaking table in a country that is deciding on its national HIV and AIDS strategy, or invoking Security Council Resolution 1325 to pressure your UN colleagues to include women's rights activists as part of mediation teams. You figure out how to use the rules on which bureaucracies run in support of – rather than against – gender equality. You use your power to press for incentives for positive action to advance women's rights and consequences for failing to adhere to hard-won policy guidelines. You figure out how to stimulate internal and external changes without being dragged down into the routine of gender mainstreaming checklists. You identify others within the organisation similarly committed to transformation and with whom you can build alliances. And you are ultimately far more effective for both women's human rights, for development and for the organisation that employs you, even as it tries to stop you.

Institutions like the UN can be an engine of positive change in support of gender equality. Despite all of the grousing and hand-wringing about whether or not we should give up on international institutions as sites of potential change for women's rights, there is a definite link between agreements made in the General Assembly, follow-up to human rights conventions and treaties ratified, and concrete changes on the ground, whether these are more women in positions of power in municipal councils, more funds to repair obstetric fistula, or more girls in school. There is a definite link between the *increasing number* of resolutions that the Security

Council has agreed to which recognise women as agents of peace-building or condemn rape as a tactic of war, and increased protection for women from sexual violence.

Those in international institutions who are tasked with promoting women's rights must understand that they are in privileged spaces and should use their power and position to continue pushing for better policies and bigger budgets, and to call for unswerving commitment to their implementation. They must speak truth to power. They will be lampooned and called names – from 'gender police' to 'radical feminists'. They will wonder if they may lose their jobs or pensions. Sometimes they will be isolated. My colleagues at the former UNIFEM know all too well the punishing marginalisation that comes from UN colleagues – most of whom had more power and status than they did – when they spoke out for larger budget allocations for women's empowerment in Afghanistan, for insisting that women's rights advocates from Sudan should have a place at the table at donor conferences, or for insisting that the resources of UN Women should be equal to those of other UN organisations. It is uncomfortable. But it goes with the territory.

### **1.5 The promise of UN Women**

I should confess here – half-jokingly – that I long harboured a fantasy of bringing the UN to some type of World Court of Justice for pervasive institutional gender discrimination towards UNIFEM. I would think about the grievances and examples that we would document as evidence in the war room where we built the case. I would see the court room itself, with the plaintiff (UNIFEM) being represented by a multi-national team of brilliant male and female lawyers. I would imagine powerful individuals who had been particularly callous and denigrating about gender equality having to defend their policies and actions. And then I would envision the precedent that it would set and how colleagues who work in gender units, national machineries for women, and other gender 'machinery' would stand up in all parts of the world to resist and change their status and impact. This fantasy has rescued me during the low points in the lack of support for gender equality during my dozen years in the UN.

UN Women is cause for optimism. There is a rightful expectation that the visionary leadership and political courage of Michelle Bachelet – in partnership with the significantly increased number of women heads of agencies that the Secretary General has appointed over the past couple of years and a growing number of supportive and articulate male leaders – will melt the most egregious forms of obstruction and create a newly-paved pathway for the UN's work on gender equality. There is rightful hope that having a place for UN Women at the UN's highest decision-making tables will build the leadership's understanding and commitment to put real muscle behind the piles of policy guidance and gender equality strategies that to a great extent have remained paper tigers.

The creation of UN Women is happening at a time when there is greater acknowledgement – at least in discourse and analysis – that social and economic justice depends on the involvement of both men and women. It happens at a time when mainstream institutions – from the World Bank to the Economist – are proclaiming that women are critical engines of economic development. It is happening at a time when we see women standing side by side with men bringing down entrenched authoritarian leaders, when record numbers of girls are going to school, and when new technologies are making an unprecedented level of connection and activism possible for women of all ages, races and classes.

Nevertheless, the gestation period has shown quite clearly that the pace of change may not happen in the time period envisioned. On the positive side, UN Women's core resources increased by 60 per cent in 2011, reaching \$125 million.<sup>22</sup> However, despite the projection in

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<sup>22</sup> Progress Made on the UN Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women Strategic Plan 2011 – 2013, UNW 2012/4, Executive Board of the UN Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Annual session 2012, 29 May – 1 June 2012.

the Secretary General's comprehensive proposal on UN Women<sup>23</sup> that \$500 million was required for start-up, the 2011 total budget reached only \$227.2 million. Without additional resources, change – though not impossible – will be challenging.

But, I would contend again, these are early days. The radical potential of UN Women is to be more than the sum of its parts and more than just about the UN system. The conundrum for UN Women is to become equal in power to other UN organisations that are inherently bureaucratic and patriarchal, while at the same time triggering a transformation of the system of which it is a part. This has mundane aspects to it, like challenging every day procedures for procurement and contracting that impede partnerships with women's organisations, and it involves taking on more entrenched power structures, like those that grant impunity to UN leaders who fail to protect women from sexual harassment and violence or who perpetrate it themselves.

UN Women's power will come from its ability to challenge and change the system and, as a result, impel a vastly strengthened backbone. For this, it needs people on the inside who are empowered, entrepreneurial and able to take calculated risks. People who have a support system within UN Women that enables them to push back when the patriarchy tries to silence their voice, tries to make them invisible, or abuses its power – as it most definitely will. And it needs broad-based alliances and partnerships within and outside of the UN.

It will be crucial to have partnerships with the women's rights networks that played such a fundamental role in calling for its creation. The fact that UN Women has a global and articulate constituency is one of its primary sources of strength and influence. These networks cannot disengage now that UN Women is established. That is just the first step. We must hold UN Women to account. But more importantly, we must work with UN Women to use our collective voice to hold the UN system – its member states, agencies and leadership – to account and to demand change. Even with its powerful leader and its access to higher-level decision-making venues, UN Women is still one of the smallest UN organisations and it is compelled to follow procedures that are not of its making.

There are early signs that new opportunities will emerge for UN Women's leadership to make a concrete difference on the ground. Doors that open for UN Women have the potential to open other doors for more and more women, from grassroots groups working at village level to women's caucuses in parliaments.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

What has happened in the Arab Spring of 2011 should inspire us and also alert us. The men and women – young and old, rich and poor, Christian and Muslim – standing shoulder to shoulder in Tahrir Square secured a breathtaking result. But, as power has consolidated itself, as norms and standards for governance are shaped, the presence and influence of women has dropped precipitously. This has happened in numerous liberation struggles worldwide and in many local and institutional transformation processes. What can organisations like UN Women, in partnership with and in support of others, do to change this predictable march of history?

This brings me back to the conundrum I began with. We cannot under-estimate the complexity of UN Women's task, since it depends on and must be an effective member of a development assistance system that operates, all too often, antithetically to many of the values and goals that UN Women espouses. UN Women's ability to be an effective champion for women's rights at country level and within the UN itself will be proportional to its ability to engage and grow the considerable constituency that called for it to exist in the first place.

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<sup>23</sup> Comprehensive Proposal for the Composite Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (A/64/588)

I shared a draft of this paper with a number of colleagues within UN Women. One colleague challenged me to disentangle which of the obstacles to UNIFEM's and the gender architecture's effectiveness were linked to patriarchy and which were linked to the power of elites in the UN – and elsewhere – to prevent any changes to the status quo. A handful urged me to be more solution-oriented and to put more emphasis on the institutional progress we have witnessed, including better performance by UNDP and other UN organisations. They acknowledged the importance of speaking 'gender truths', as one observed, but also wanted more on what UN Women can do to turn the situation around. They noted that we cannot wait decades; we need to see a much faster pace of change and UN Women has to lead this process.

In addition to thanking my colleagues for their very insightful comments, I would have to say that I am not aspiring to offer prescriptions or solutions; I only highlight some of the potholes on the path to gender equality in bureaucracies, in hopes that UN Women might recognise and swerve to avoid them or confront them head on. And I offer a hope: that the constituency that struggled so valiantly to advocate for creating UN Women can look back a decade from now and feel gratified that they had put in place something that made a real difference.

# 2 Moving pieces and unpredictable results: feminist activism in development bureaucracies

Aruna Rao

## 2.1 Introduction<sup>24</sup>

Feminist theorists and gender equality activists have long known that what actually gets done in the name of feminist activism varies widely by institutional context and current gender politics, as well as the actors involved – individual beliefs, skills and influence or the combined consciousness and skills of activist groups. The intentions underpinning the model of gender equality that feminists or gender equality actors in development bureaucracies pursue also range widely. They may be promoting equity in pay and working standards, or equality in opportunities, assets, voice and participation. Some may work to make sure their institutional resources are used to directly deliver to women; some aim to transform gendered institutions. Often, they combine aspects of all. We also know that their choices will be circumscribed by the room to manoeuvre within their organisations and across multiple mandates, capacities and cultures if they are working in partnerships or through networks. And while global discourses inform country-specific debates, the local contexts and gender politics as well as the priorities of key stakeholders play a more prominent role in determining what issues are articulated and how. With so many moving parts, gender mainstreaming ‘may be understood as the result of essentially contested processes that inevitably produce varying outcomes in different contexts’ (Walby 2005).

Bureaucracies play a limited role in engendering social change and there is a long road to walk from victories for women in bureaucratic spaces to gains for women on the ground. Yet, sometimes the kaleidoscope moves in such a way that significant changes emerge – significant to the actors involved as well as positive for the women they are meant to benefit. This paper draws on Gender at Work’s experience in strengthening gender equality work with UN Country Teams (UNCTs) to examine the configuration of lenses and processes that led to such changes.

Gender at Work<sup>25</sup> is an international network that strengthens organisations to build cultures of equality and social justice with a particular focus on gender equality. We support local and global social change organisations to analyze and change unequal and exclusionary norms and practices in their structures, processes, and programs by introducing new analytical tools, ways of thinking, and practices. In 2006 we conducted a review of 2005–06 United Nations Development Frameworks (UNDAF) for the UNDG Task Team on Gender Equality led by UNIFEM<sup>26</sup> and UNFPA. The review highlighted significant gaps between the analysis and proposed action in country programs relating to gender equality. We recommended *inter alia* an in-depth, action-learning process to build holistic programming for gender equality. This recommendation was accepted by the UNDG and in 2009 we were invited to begin a two-year programme with three UNCTs – from Morocco, Nepal and Albania. The objective of this UNDG project became: ‘To contribute to strengthened knowledge and action on holistic and replicable joint UN programming on gender equality and women’s empowerment that, ultimately, support countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and other

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<sup>24</sup> The ideas reflected in this paper are the joint analysis of the Gender at Work Team (Aruna Rao, Kalyani Menon-Sen and Rieky Stuart) involved in the Action Learning for Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality of the United Nations Development Group (UNDG)..

<sup>25</sup> For more information see [www.genderatwork.org](http://www.genderatwork.org).

<sup>26</sup> As of January 2011, UNIFEM has been merged into UN Women.

international commitments'. Our role was to lead the action learning process, serving as technical and process facilitators for the UNCTs and to recommend coordination processes and tools to improve the UNCTs' ability to build a vision of and capacity to support well-coordinated work for gender equality.

Essentially, this was a project about doing better by learning better. The choice of the UNCTs was meant to build knowledge about how to strengthen gender equality work in very specific contexts: in Morocco, it was in the context of a large Spanish MDG-funded programme involving multiple stakeholders; in Nepal it was about how to actualise gender equality as an outcome in the UN development framework; and in Albania, it was about how to work specifically in a One UN context<sup>27</sup> where the intent is to strengthen national ownership and enhance development results by bringing together the UN's comparative advantages into one strategic programme with one leader, one budget, one programme and one office.

## 2.2 The contextual lens

The contextual lens in each of the three countries was markedly different, but each provided an opening for action. In Morocco, the women's movement has been active for a long time, and remains deeply rooted in feminist activism while it operates in the context of Islam. As such, the terms 'equal opportunities' or 'human rights of women' are more frequently used than 'equality between men and women'. Although the principle of equal responsibility for the family is enshrined in law, in practice women and men do not have the same rights and duties at home. In Morocco women's illiteracy rate remains at 54.7 per cent; maternal mortality is 227 deaths per 100,000 live births and child mortality is 35 per 1000 live births for children under 1 year. Cases of sexual and gender-based violence remain under-reported – a problem compounded by a lack of national data on the forms and prevalence of gender-based violence. Existing cultural norms have tended to organise social roles of men and women into a hierarchy and to legitimise gender-based violence. Vulnerability to violence is higher among women from migrant and Sub-Saharan communities.

In Morocco the movement towards gender equality was facilitated by several political changes: leadership at the highest levels of governance that advanced the fight against gender-based violence. The adoption in 2004 of a new family code, the '*Moudawana*', spearheaded by the women's movement, marked the starting point of important legal reforms, such as ensuring the welfare of all parties in the case of divorce, especially of the children.

The first steps towards achieving gender equality and empowerment in Morocco, led by the feminist movement, entailed raising awareness in the general population of the vulnerabilities faced by women. Next came the institutionalisation of mechanisms to facilitate more equitable gender relations, which included the creation of the Ministry of Social Development, facilitated by the work of UNIFEM and a strategic involvement of NGOs. The period 2000 to 2005 was marked by legal battles for women's human rights; international agreements like CEDAW led to a debate on national laws. In 2005–2008 the gender equality movement entered its operational phase, integrating gender issues into national policies and strategic plans. The political will by the current government to address gender issues has been important to facilitate the movement towards gender equality. The national mechanism to address women's needs – the Ministry of Social Development, Family and Solidarity – was expanded by creating a department to work on gender equality issues.

Whereas in Morocco the contextual lens was shaped by an active women's movement and a new political opening, In Nepal political upheaval enabled the articulation of a broad framework of social justice and human rights by a majority Marxist government. Nepal has

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<sup>27</sup> The United Nations launched the 'Delivering as One' pilot initiative in 2007 in order to test how the UN family can provide development assistance in a more coordinated way in eight countries.

emerged from ten years of intense political upheaval and violent conflict, rooted in persistent inequalities based on class, caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. This turmoil nevertheless presented opportunities for change and progress, including for gender equality. The interim constitution has strong provisions on gender equality and the *Three-year Interim Plan* includes programs for policy and legal reform on women's participation, gender awareness and support services. There are several ongoing policies and programs within the government, UN agencies and civil society which address different facets of gender equality, including a *National Plan of Action on Implementing CEDAW* and a *Gender Equality Act*. In 2002 a major advancement was made with the 11th amendment to the Nepali civil code, which expanded women's rights in the areas of abortion, divorce and property. A *Domestic Violence Bill* was passed by Parliament in 2009. There are also institutional mechanisms, such as the Women's Commission, which are meant to oversee implementation of these policies.

Albania too has experienced years of political transformation, beginning with the collapse of communism after the death of Hoxha and moving since the mid-1990s toward democratic reform. EU membership is a high priority for the government and this entails alignment with EU policies, including EU gender equality policies. Years of political, economic and social instability in the region has given rise to numerous changes which have affected the women's movement in several crucial ways, including the revision of laws so as to increase the visibility and participation of women in society, and the introduction of anti-trafficking legislation. Equally important it is that in 2006 Albania became a One UN pilot country. Regarding women's empowerment and gender equality, the UN in Albania has prioritised improved implementation and monitoring of core legislation and policies (including gender equality and domestic violence), more inclusive participation in public policy and decision-making, increased and equitable access to quality basic services, and regional development to reduce regional disparities.

Although women's educational levels in Albania are on the average higher than those achieved by men, their participation falls behind that of men in many areas. Their level of unemployment is substantially higher and women's salaries are lower than men's in both the private and the public sectors. At least one third of all women in Albania have experienced physical violence within their home, although activists repeatedly stress the need for a comprehensive national review of the prevalence of domestic violence and the services in place. Minority women, such as the Roma, face further marginalisation and vulnerability to gender-based and domestic violence.

Albania now has its first national law to prevent domestic violence. Further, in July 2008 the Government (with UN support) adopted a comprehensive gender equality law. In December 2009 the Government incorporated the nation's first women's quota within the National Electoral Code. In 2007, again with support of the UN, the *National Strategy for Gender Equality and Eradication of Domestic Violence (NSGE-DV)* was adopted. It encourages a safer and more equal environment for women and girls in Albanian society. Domestic violence is one of the eight main components of the National Strategy; the others address various dimensions of gender equality such as health, education, political participation, institutional and legislative frameworks. The NSGE-DV and the new gender equality and domestic violence laws have laid the groundwork for Albania's gender equality programming.

### **2.3 The institutional lens**

Within the UN system, as in many other places, work on women's empowerment and gender equality has operated in an environment of scarcity. This not only hampers progress but also generates 'territorial' sensitivities among agencies with similar or overlapping mandates and clients. Devaki Jain, who was involved in carrying out an external assessment of the UN's Development Assistance Framework in 1998–1999, reports that 'recipient countries felt somewhat assaulted by the multiple fingers of UN Development assistance thrusting into



their countries, often competing for space and legitimacy' (Jain 2006:2) and that special agencies focusing on women that were set up both as international agencies and as national machineries have suffered from '... marginalization, ghettoization and the demeaning gaze that excluded peoples and women have experienced at all societal levels worldwide' (ibid). It has been difficult for feminist activists and gender staffers within the system to nudge what she calls the 'hard rock of entrenched patriarchy'. Some years later Thoraya Obaid, the outgoing Executive Director of UNFPA, underscored this point. 'Gender concerns', she said, 'are still considered 'soft', marginal issues and because of this they are often pushed down near the bottom of the list of priorities, thereby jeopardising chances for greater progress'.<sup>28</sup>

This frustrating scenario is not new. Not only has the work on women's empowerment and gender equality been woefully underfunded,<sup>29</sup> but also the mechanisms charged with carrying out, coordinating and monitoring this agenda are toothless. Scarce resources in an uncertain environment breed competition. UNIFEM, which was mandated both with supporting innovative and catalytic programming in countries and with strengthening gender equality activities across the UN system, was much smaller both in human and in financial terms than other agencies which also have a gender equality mandate.<sup>30</sup> Larger agencies such as UNICEF and UNFPA jostled with UNIFEM for leadership and visibility on the elastic gender agenda; staffers ardently defend institutional turf and all vie for attention and funding from donor governments, where the same fight repeats itself.

It is not surprising that inter-agency cooperation and coordination on gender equality and women's empowerment is difficult under these circumstances. Perhaps for this reason there are numerous mechanisms in the UN system, both at headquarters and at the country level, to promote coordination. The UN Chief Executives Board (CEB) is the system's highest-level coordinating body; it leads in coordinating system-wide follow-up activities and highlighting a number of broad principles to guide the elaboration of inter-agency collaborative arrangements. According to the CEB's policy on gender equality, 'gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women is intended to work in conjunction with women-specific actions', and 'coherence and coordination of efforts in the implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy' are seen to be 'essential for achieving results'.<sup>31</sup> At the level of the UN Country Team, the Gender Theme Group is a key driver of the gender agenda and is usually led by UNIFEM or UNFPA. But the work on women's empowerment and gender equality has some unique features which provide insights into how the turf battles play out on the ground today.

Like other complex social dynamics, there is no common analysis of the causes of inequality or consensus on the actions required to advance equality. This on the one hand encourages creativity, but on the other hand allows mediocrity. Because the field does not have universally acceptable standards for gender expertise, a grab bag of various experiences can masquerade as professional qualifications – a weakness that can result in ineffective negotiation of institutional space and recognition for gender equality work, as well as poor policy analysis and programming. Even worse is the assumption that because one is a

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<sup>28</sup> Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA, UNICEF with the participation of WFP. Statement by Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, UNFPA Executive Director, 20 January 2005 <http://www.unfpa.org/public/News/pid/2637>.

<sup>29</sup> Evaluation after evaluation have shown that countries, bi-lateral donors and the multilateral system consistently fail to prioritize, and significantly under-fund, women's rights and equality work (see for example UNIFEM Assessment: A/60/62 – E2005/10; UNDP Evaluation of Gender mainstreaming, available at [http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/EO\\_GenderMainstreaming.pdf](http://www.undp.org/eo/documents/EO_GenderMainstreaming.pdf)).

<sup>30</sup> In 2002, UNIFEM's resources totalled \$36 million. In comparison, UNFPA's budget for the same year was \$373 million; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' budget was \$64 million and UNAIDS' budget was \$92 million. UNICEF's budget in the same year totalled \$1,454 million.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations, 'United Nations system-wide policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women: focusing on results and impact,' CEB/2006/2, 15 December 2006.

woman, one must be knowledgeable about and motivated to effectively address gender equality issues.<sup>32</sup>

When you do find committed and knowledgeable staffers, they have often honed their understandings in the trenches of social movements or critical feminist academic contexts. When opportunities for action come together with their efforts to open spaces for women's voices, the work sings. For the most part, however, gender equality staffers toil away within the system where this work is only part of their mandate and receives low priority. 'According to a 2002 UNIFEM/UNDP scan, of the 1300 UN staff who have gender equality in their terms of reference, nearly 1000 ... were gender focal points that are relatively junior, have little substantive expertise, no budgets, and who deal with gender as one element of a large portfolio'.<sup>33</sup> With few exceptions, addressing gender equality is an add-on job. This was also true for many of the UN staffers involved in the UNDG programme.

The key institutional arrangement for the UNDG project work in Morocco, Nepal and Albania is joint programming, which involves various UN agencies in partnership with government and civil society. In Morocco the Joint Programme on gender-based violence is called '*Programme Multisectoriel de Lutte contre les Violences Fondées sur le Genre par l'Autonomisation des Femmes et des Filles au Maroc*' (Multi-sector Programme to Fight Gender-based Violence by Empowering Moroccan Women and Girls 2008–2010). The Ministry of Social Development, Family and Solidarity serves as coordinator for all national initiatives, including the Joint Programme. On the UN side, UNIFEM is the lead agency. The implementation and monitoring of this programme involves many actors: 8 UN Agencies and 13 national partners, as well as NGOs, representatives from the women's movement and national institutions. The UN Gender Theme Group acts as a point of collaboration for UN Agencies and often involves national experts and representatives from government ministries. UN Agencies, led by UNIFEM, have been working with NGOs and national institutions for several years. This facilitated the coming together of these diverse groups under one umbrella programme.

Despite the participation of UN staff in the Joint Programme on gender-based violence, some of the challenges in implementing the programme can be traced to inadequate capacity and knowledge on gender issues, compounded by the different understandings of gender equality and gender priorities, and by lack of a collaborative culture for joint work. With so many partners involved in decision-making, the processes take a long time and programme implementation requires rigorous monitoring. The turn-over of representatives also threatens the ownership of the programme, since there are different cultures, interests and priorities among partners who are competing for money and inputs into programme design. That is why working together, for instance in the Gender Thematic Group, was crucial for sharing visions and creating a common understanding.

In Nepal, when the programme started the UN agencies were involved in several joint initiatives on gender equality. They were pursuing several target strategies which aimed to empower women, girls, and communities to prevent and address gender-based violence; enhance services and build capacities of service-providers; and create a supportive policy and planning environment. The *Multi-Sectoral Gender-Based Violence Response at the District Level*, for example, involved UNFPA, UNICEF and UNIFEM. Its objectives were to raise awareness, strengthen availability and quality of services, build the capacity of multiple service providers and ensure government support via an improved legal framework.

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<sup>32</sup> See for example Torild Skard, 'Promoting the Status of Women in the UN System: Experiences from an Inside Journey', in *Forum for Development Studies*, 36 (1) 2009, pp. 155-191, Norwegian Institute for International Affairs.

<sup>33</sup> Aruna Rao, 'Gender Equality Architecture and UN Reforms', Paper submitted to the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on System-wide Coherence by the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) and the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), July 17, 2006.

In Nepal it has in general been difficult to successfully integrate gender equality into national programs; even trying to increase the number of women in government ministries has been difficult. Nepal has a strong base of grassroots women's groups and the role of women NGO representatives has been important in joint programming, because they fight to focus attention on grassroots demands and provide real-life examples from the field. Also, because they work directly with communities and can implement programs more efficiently, their work adds immediate value to gender equality programs. In the context of Joint Programs, various UN agencies have leveraged government and NGO strengths by bringing various actors together on a common platform to complement each other's work. The caretaker government's increasing reliance on the UN system eased this path.

In Albania, the four agencies (UNICEF, UNFPA, UNIFEM and UNDP) have collaborated to work on gender equality in the country and were the main supporters in the formulation and implementation of the NSGE-DV. All four are involved in Albania's Joint UN Programme on Gender Equality. The aims of this programme are to strengthen capacities, legal frameworks and systems in government on gender equality; coordinate and service support at the local level; increase women's capacity to hold decision-makers to account (this includes strengthening women's participation to ensure that women as a 'constituency' can demand certain services and better public sector performance); and support improved coordination among UN, donors and national partners on gender equality.

## **2.4 The process lens**

The challenge for us working with the UN system in these three countries was to create within a non-reflective context a formally recognised space for reflection, in order to increase the learning, effectiveness and sustainability of change. UN agencies and government departments are hierarchical structures built around sectoral and programmatic silos, where decision-making power is concentrated at the top and where gender equality is one of many priorities at the bottom of the organisational totem pole.

Creating a 'bubble of reflection' was harder to achieve than in other organisational contexts. As Standing forcefully argues, 'bureaucracies are not engines of social and political transformation' and 'the main myth in gender mainstreaming ... is a mythic relocation of the possibility of political transformation to an inherently non-transformatory context' (Standing 2004:2). Bureaucratic mainstreaming not only changes the meanings of empowerment; it also does not encourage and motivate a systematic cycle of experimentation and learning, which is essential to understanding complex social phenomena. But over and above the obvious characteristics of bureaucracies (hierarchy, routinisation, standard operating procedures, log frame planning and control mechanisms) that make them less conducive to organisational learning, we found that UN bureaucracies have some peculiar characteristics that further complicate the issue.

Using Pickering's matrix for work settings built on the level of cross-functional or cross-organisational collaboration required by the job and the degree of judgement or improvisation that is required (described in Pasteur 2006) we believe that the nature of the work on women's empowerment requires deep understanding of participants and an ability to improvise rather than carry out routines. This suggests that a 'network' model with its associated interactive formats, as well as individual expertise based on reflection on experience, would be better suited than standardised work planning and 'how to' training. Yet UN practices reinforce the opposite by emphasising planning and monitoring procedures (human rights approach, gender analysis, log frames) to address complex problems without the requisite investment in helping staff interact with this information and socialise it to their circumstances. The UN operates with little accountability to women on the ground for delivering results, but it does require staff to comply with standardised procedures.

Like many other large organisations, UN agencies are 'loosely coupled' (Weick 1976) systems. This can increase the organisation's sensitivity to the environment, allow local adaptations and creative solutions to develop, and foster greater self-determination by actors. There is considerable autonomy at the periphery to maneuver a course of action and build supportive alliances. In such an environment, strong and well-resourced advocates who have senior management support might achieve gender equality outcomes. This was our hope in igniting the Gender Theme Groups (GTGs) as empowered and important drivers of this process within the UNCTs.

The key role of the Gender Theme Groups (GTGs) was most evident in the case of Morocco, where clear strategising, integral links to the women's movement and feminist activism of UNIFEM wove seamlessly with the genuine ownership and persistent diligence on the part of the lead government agency of the project to keep the programme on track and deliver results. Monitoring of the Joint Programme was chosen as the entry point for improving the coordination and efficiency of the programme implementation in order to strengthen the efficacy of the UN system's joint assistance and so result in positive programme benefits for women. We developed a simple tool to help the Output Monitoring Committee keep track of the level of participation in coordination meetings and the quality of that participation. Once or twice during every monthly meeting, the meeting monitor made a sketch outlining the different interactions recorded during this time, emphasising the duration and frequency of those speaking, the interaction between participants (particularly the frequency of exchanges between the lead institution and others), showing to whom the exchange was directed (whether to the wide audience or only a few); and assessing whether it was facilitating the discussion or blocking it. This data was tabulated into a summary based on the type of interventions – those promoting group work, those strengthening group unity, and individual interventions providing information or blocking it. It enabled an objective assessment of the frequency, duration and intensity of the interventions made during coordination meetings, mapping the interaction among participants, and analysis of the interventions and the role played by each. It was a seemingly innocuous but in fact quite potent way of mapping how power was practised – and gendered – in that decision making arena. By consciously observing this pattern, it nudged participants to be conscious of their own roles and encouraged constructive engagement. At a micro level it built on Foucault's conception that power circulates and is exercised rather than held, and that power exercised to dominate or exclude needs to be effectively countered and structures and practices should be built to allow 'transgressions' (Rabinow 1984).

In Albania, clear and ambitious strategising on the part of the GTG led by UNIFEM gave the process substance with clear objectives. Using the space provided by the action learning process, the GTG decided to plan strategically how to comprehensively address gender equality in the upcoming UNDAF, based on an analysis of learnings from the implementation of the Joint Programme within the One UN context. They agreed that they should organise for a gender audit of the UNCT as part of the UNDAF preparation and cooperate jointly on other activities pertaining to gender equality. But unlike in Morocco and Nepal, the action-learning programme opportunity in Albania was not used for any deep analysis or reflection on power dynamics in the programme, across agencies or among GTG group members. However, the UN considers the Albania Joint Programme on Gender Equality under the One UN framework a success because it delivered results and improved coordination between the different agencies, which in turn led to improved coordination among national partners and a greater sense of national ownership.

In Nepal, the action learning process built a sense of solidarity among the GTG members by breaking down the pernicious interagency competition and programmatic silos in which they had been placed. Engagement in action-learning has catalysed the work of the UN Gender Theme Group and helped it in moving ahead on the work plan, taking up joint advocacy and leveraging resources. Joint action and 'one voice' by the UN on gender issues contributed to

increased visibility of issues and stronger partnerships with national counterparts. The GTG 'think piece' which was developed with our facilitation elucidated the connections between gender equality, human rights and social inclusion. It was endorsed by the UN System as an intersectional programming tool for testing and application. And the commitment, coordination and personal relationships among core group members became stronger through the process. Personal bonding has helped to overcome territorial tensions – members became comfortable with advocating on gender issues across agency boundaries. Our work in this was critical in helping the group to question assumptions by encouraging people to express their views and their fears, to keep the group together, to break down barriers and move the group to consensus building. As a result, the GTG felt that they built a better project using the action learning process than would have been if it had been developed by one agency. Moreover, close coordination of UN agencies, both among themselves and with government partners, put leadership back in the hands of the government. The government now deals with the UNCT as the representative of the whole UN system and no longer asks individual agencies to independently represent the various parts of the UN system.

## **2.5 The outcome lens**

What do these experiences of Gender Theme Groups in three UNCTs tell us about the politics of gender mainstreaming in the UN context? We often separate the picture of feminist strategising and activism in civil society contexts from the long slog of bureaucratic pen-pushing which we have come to associate with gender mainstreaming in development agencies. Certainly, there is ample evidence to show that gender equality policies get lost in bureaucratic black holes en route to implementation. Yet this experience validates a different picture. We see the potential for organising for women's empowerment and gender equality by the GTGs. This is the UN parallel to women's organising in civil society – in other words, for gender mainstreaming to be effective in a bureaucratic context, it needs much the same collective thought and strategy as women's organising outside it and can deliver similar results. Rather than burdening GTGs with resource manuals focusing on planning and monitoring mechanisms and processes, it may be far more effective to enable gender theme groups to organise and develop joint solidarity strategies with government and the women's movement, to enhance their voice within the system and do their part in pushing forward a change agenda.

In all the three countries, the GTGs had concrete projects around which to focus their energies, some resources and senior management support. These were critical success factors, but most important was the experience of collective reflection, relationship building and strategising. Senge (1990) suggests that through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. The action-learning process enabled this kind of re-learning which fuelled the collective entrepreneurship of the GTGs with this highly politicised institutional context.

## **2.6 The reflexive lens**

What did we do and what did we learn? Going into this process we knew that, unlike much of the work on gender equality in the UN system, these programs were well resourced and there was a concrete piece of work in all three contexts around which to organise reflection and action. Learning is difficult to do in the abstract.

Our work links organisational change, institutional change and gender equality. We understand institutional change to be multi-factorial and holistic. It should be as concerned with the individual psychology of women and men as with their access to resources and with the social structures in which they live. From the point of view of an organisation that intervenes to change gender-biased institutions, change must happen in two spheres –

outside the organisation and within. Our starting point in this process was to work *within* the organisational system in order for them to effect change on the outside.

There is no dearth of ‘how to’ training in the UN context and we needed from the start to build something different. How do you help these ‘groups’ to actually coalesce as groups? How do you help them to move beyond problem-solving to asking some of the deeper ‘why’ questions about existing practices, examining goals and assumptions, relationships – what the organisation literature calls ‘double loop learning’ (Argyris 1977) and beyond that – expanding collective knowledge about underlying paradigms? We used an action learning process specifically to uncover and challenge informal systemic barriers to gender equality – i.e. the invisible beliefs, norms and practices that underpin and perpetuate gender-based discrimination at the individual and the organisational or societal level. Our interventions with the Nepal GTGs, by facilitating a reflection on their ideas and values, helped them to break down agency silos and end up speaking in one voice. In Morocco, our interventions provided to the Joint Programme core team the means to collectively analyze power relations. In Albania, they provided an opportunity for the GTGs to collectively analyze their strategies and plan.

In terms of Gender at Work’s framework (Rao and Kelleher 2005) shown in Figure 1, the action-learning was directed to the lower left quadrant – changing the culture and norms that underpin and perpetuate gender-based discrimination – by supporting people to use analytical tools to highlight these practices and engage collectively in transforming them.



**Figure 1. What are we trying to change?**

Addressing the left side of the framework – particularly the lower left quadrant – is important for moving processes of social change from a minimal compliance, or ‘box-ticking’ mode toward a results-oriented, problem-solving approach. Capacity-building directed toward individual change is insufficient to shift bureaucratic practice. Although it may permit individuals to perform more effectively, they will continue to battle against norms and ways of working that can obstruct rather than help their efforts.

For us, this initiative highlighted the usefulness of action learning as a means to move a process of building gender equality from the purview of some dedicated and exceptional individuals within a bureaucracy to the expected and accepted practice of the entire bureaucracy. This requires changing the cultural norms, relationships and work practices that block bureaucracies from paying sufficient attention to gender equality. Just because an agency has a policy on gender mainstreaming does not mean that its staff or the ways it works will automatically change. And just because an agency offers gender awareness or gender analysis training does not mean it will henceforth contribute effectively to gender equality. Similarly, resource allocation alone, although important, is not sufficient. Action-

learning processes can build positive synergies between these elements by generating change in organisational beliefs and practice. However, coming to grips with issues of culture and norms requires certain preconditions. The group members must be ready to engage constructively with their own behaviour and that of their colleagues. Both the cultural context and the bureaucratic context may militate against readiness for engagement: people may feel it is threatening, requiring them to expose their own vulnerability, or they may see it as irrelevant to bureaucratic action, which mainly works with the dimensions on the right hand side of the framework.

Most of our previous work has involved civil society groups; this was the first time we worked in this manner with the UN system. Consequently, this experience prompted a reflection on the differences between civil society actors and the UN system. Civil society actors who participated had several key characteristics: commitment to change, need for resources, greater flexibility in engaging in 'learning' opportunities, and the participation of individuals within those organisations who had the capacity to make those changes. The UN system, by contrast, does not easily allow for and resource a collective reflective space. Organisational silos and lack of space for reflection perpetuate a piecemeal way of addressing systemic issues of exclusion. By creating spaces for reflection, taking down the walls between agencies and building a framework for coordination, the GTGs were able to work politically and strategically. While every gender focal point (GFP) has a clear analysis of why their issues are marginalised within the UN system, the GTG is traditionally the place where GFPs come together and see that the oppression of their issues is not unique. Therefore, by resourcing the GTGs the space is transformed from being a place for collective victimisation to one where the GFPs may be empowered to develop a shared vision, implement and produce results. In Nepal, the conceptual framework on gender, social inclusion and human rights is a good example of an integrated product that came out of the willingness of representatives from various UN agencies and government to sit together and work to generate this result.

These reflective processes are also tangled up with complex emotions; emotion drives action and triggers learning. If, in addition, we believe that deep meaning can only be made with connection to personal experience (Fook 2006), then it not surprising that the 'personal is political' politics around gender equality issues is deeply felt. People who get involved in such intense processes are forced to re-examine their own personal beliefs and behaviours – to walk the talk. And they do so in an environment which is rife with politics but where no other issue except human rights is politically framed.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In summary, we have learned that as in any political process, gender mainstreaming in the UN context requires a string driver – the Gender Theme Group – to achieve results. GTGs need to have the profile, and competence to use the available space to promote gender equality; develop a sense of the collective in the team as well as mutual accountability and joint ownership. They also need to actively involve both national and international staff.

Joint Programmes can work if they are collectively designed and collectively monitored and if disagreements are ironed out before launching. They tend to be successful when they have strong connections with the women's movement in the country and when gender equality advocates within government are included in the process in pivotal roles.

Collective spaces for learning are essential for building cohesion and programme sustainability. These spaces need to be consciously created, be safe and be externally facilitated. The action learning needs to be grounded in experience where the GTG analyzes and develops solutions to real programme issues and organisational problems. They need to learn how to ask questions that will bring unstated assumptions to the surface; learn about

themselves as they work on a problem together and be accountable to each other for their decisions and programme implementation.

The spaces of critical reflection we have described above are fragile. When the lens of the kaleidoscope moves again, a new pattern will emerge. These spaces are inherently subversive, both because they unearth deep assumptions that collide with dominant organisational cultural norms, and because they focus on how power dynamics within the institution influences practice. Given the size, weight and enormous inertia of the development bureaucracies which these activists inhabit, there is no guarantee that these spaces will survive. Members of the groups will move on and the new composition will need to create anew their own voice and cohesiveness. The GTGs and their feminist agendas are constantly at risk of being overwhelmed by their own institutional compulsions. But this programme gave us a glimpse of how collective learning and women's organising within the system can re-define what gender mainstreaming looks like on the inside to deliver on women's rights on the outside.



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