MARITIME CENTRE of EXCELLENCE for WOMEN'S HEALTH

Promoting social change through policy-based research in women's health

Organizational Approaches to Building Gender Equity

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Executive Summary

This paper presents new concepts and strategies currently being applied in a number of organizations to build gender equity. Women and men working for gender equity have used a number of strategies. They began by naming the problem. Understanding that women's subordination was not 'natural' or 'divinely ordained' but socially created generated both anger and an imperative for change. In spite of efforts, change in the way organizations address or remedy gender-based inequality has been disappointingly slow, at least from the perspective of those who want to end it.

Efforts to analyse why change has been so slow led to the understanding that desire for change, knowledge of injustice, and even policies and training are necessary but insufficient for organizations to change. Independently, several groups of practitioners and academics have been developing new ways of working with organizations to become capable of creating greater equity both in the way they do their work and in their social impact.

The combination of insights from feminist theory and insights from organizational change theory and practice brings to the foreground useful and interesting ideas and potential approaches to gender equity issues in organizations. Four major dimensions of how organizations are gendered include: (a) valuing of heroic individualism, (b) splitting work and the rest of life, (c) construction of power by organizations, and (d) concept of mono-cultures and instrumentality. Reflecting on and changing these gendered dimensions of organizations as they are practiced in a particular context can lead to changes that enhance the organization's capacity to be effective, both internally for women and men staff, and externally, in achieving its goals with equity.

Since the early 1990s there have been a number of experiments in Northern and Southern countries in applying the concepts described above to help organizations wanting to improve both their equity and their effectiveness. While each intervention is unique, there are significant commonalities in the methodologies and approaches. Each of them looks at key issues of concern to the organization and links them with gender equity issues through the use of the 'gendered lens' to explore and come to grips with aspects of the organization's deep structure. Each of them has three phases – a start-up or diagnostic phase, change experiments that are often based on an action-learning model, and an evaluation/validation/dissemination phase, in which learning is collected, assessed and entrenched in the organization. And finally, each intervention used continual feedback to the organization and to change agents to modify the interventions and learn from them.

Examples of how these ideas have been put into practice to help organizations to change toward greater gender equity are provided, and while it is possible to abstract the commonalities, the particularities of each case led to a very different look and feel on the ground. In any given situation it is important to examine what the issues are, how they relate to the work of the organization, where change should star and at what level, which strategies are most promising, and what needs to be negotiated with the various interests involved. These approaches require people to work together to create new ways of seeing and acting within organizations that will lead ultimately to gender equity. It is from these new ways of thinking about and being in organizations that the future emerges.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents new concepts and strategies currently being applied in a number of organizations to build gender equity. Most of the organizations are not primarily health organizations, although some do health programming. Nevertheless, the ideas and approaches are transferable to a wide range of organization types and could be adapted. The paper provides a context for the development of these organizational approaches, and describes some elements of their application. An elaboration of the ideas and experience presented in this paper can be found in *Gender at Work: Organizational Change for Gender Equality* (Rao 1999).

Women and men working for gender equity have used a number of strategies. They began by naming the problem. Understanding that women's subordination was not 'natural' or 'divinely ordained' but socially created, generated both anger and a thirst for change. Consciousness-raising and creating public pressure for change through research were common strategies. Developing policies and laws against gender-based discrimination helped to create a framework for change. There has been a significant investment in training staff in organizations to be 'gender-sensitive' or to undertake 'gender analysis'. Such training has usually been oriented to changing the attitudes and behaviour of individual staff members, rather than changing the way the organization works. In spite of these efforts, change in the way organizations address or remedy gender-based inequality has been disappointingly slow, at least from the perspective of those who want to end it.

Efforts to analyse why change has been so slow led to the understanding that desire for change, knowledge of injustice, and even policies and training are necessary but insufficient for organizations to change. What, then, might be another path to change? Independently, several groups of practitioners and academics have been developing new ways of working with organizations to become capable of creating greater equity both in the way they do their work and in their social impact.

These change agents combine insights from feminist theory with insights from organizational change theory and practice. This combination brings into the foreground useful and interesting ideas and potential approaches to gender equity issues in organizations. The next section of the paper highlights these ideas. The following section gives some examples of how these ideas have been put into practice to help organizations to change toward greater gender equity. The final section offers some reflections on the work done to date.

THINKING ORGANIZATIONALLY ABOUT GENDER EQUITY

Organizations have cultures that are largely unconscious or hidden, that shape meanings and understanding, action and reaction. The values, history, culture and practices of an organization form the unquestioned and unquestionable 'normal' way of doing things. Because modern organizations were largely created by men, to be peopled by men, they reflect masculine ways of seeing and being in the world. Examining organizations from a gender perspective – with a 'gender lens' as the Simmons College group defines it (Bailyn 1996b) – highlights the gendered aspects of organizations in order to bring them to consciousness. These hidden dimensions of an organization, which we call its 'deep structure' are uncovered and reflected back to people in the organization to discuss and keep, discard or change. This process provides a basis for changing work practice; the way people do their work, both individually and collectively. Efforts to change work practice can be sup-

ported and monitored, and lead to further change.

We have come to understand four major dimensions of how organizations are gendered. The first is the valuing of heroic individualism. Organizations 'see' and promote individuals who act as heroes – who work day and night against tremendous odds to resolve a crisis. The invisible work of preventing crises, of maintaining relationships and webs of knowledge and information that allow work to progress smoothly is less understood and valued. Although both women and men can be 'heroes', it is more difficult for women because of their socialization and because of their family roles to take on such roles. Organizations therefore need to recognize and acknowledge the contribution both of 'heroes' and of those who accomplish their work without drama or fanfare.

The second dimension is the split between work and the rest of life. Organizations assume that work can be completely separated from the rest of one's life, and that work has first claim on the worker. Workers who bring their personal emotions or their family needs to work are not seen as 'ideal' workers – and are more likely to be women than men. Job descriptions and evaluation systems subtly reinforce this split and the privileging of work over life. Arlie Hochschild, in a recent book, outlines a disturbing phenomenon where workers find camaraderie and community on the job, and use long work hours to escape the intimacy and pressures of home life (Hochschild 1997). Only when people in organizations can 'see' this division can it be bridged without damaging work effectiveness (see the example of an intervention at Xerox Corporation, Bailyn 1996a).

The third dimension is how organizations construct power. Power is often practiced in organizations as if it were a limited quantity held mainly by the organization's formal leaders – the power to decree, to make things happen. But power, like life, is more complicated than that. Margaret Wheatley describes power as energy, which expands as it is shared. For example, a manager who enables her staff to exercise initiative and judgment can have more and better results, resulting in more 'power' in the organization, than one who controls and monopolizes power (Wheatley 1992). Whether power is understood as a limited commodity, like a pie, or as something which expands as it is shared, tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy in an organization, reinforcing dominance or opening the door to a range of perspectives and participation.

Stephen Lukes draws our attention to more subtle exercise of power (Lukes 1974). He describes an aspect of power as setting agendas. For example, in many organizations, it is illuminating to see what is not discussible – taboo topics such as harassment, or abuse of power – topics that never make it onto the organizational agenda. What is not on the agenda is often of interest to those with little power. What is not on the agenda is often the important questions.

Another characteristic of power is that those who are constructed as powerless collude in their own oppression. They are not able to 'see' that they are oppressed or powerless, often for sound reasons of self-preservation. 'The way things are' is unquestioned and unquestionable – even within the privacy of one's own head. Acceptance of injustice as necessary or inevitable, or even as good in the larger scheme of things is essential for its continuation.

Understanding, naming, and expanding the practice of how power 'plays' in organizations is key to change. Practicing the exercise of power in inclusive ways is key to expanding gender equity.

Finally, a fourth dimension of how organizations' 'deep structure' is gendered can be found in the concept of mono-cultures and instrumentality. Often organizations focus on aspects of a situation they can influence or affect, to the detriment of broader goals such as the well-being of people or environmental sustainability. For example, some development organizations offer nutrition education that focuses on how to cook nutritious food, because it is easy to teach, without coming to terms with the fact that the barriers women face in providing adequate nutrition are often economic or status-related. Micro-credit for women is often diverted for the use of men in the household, leaving women charged with making repayments. Narrow quantitative targets tend to devalue qualitative aspects of the work, including such 'invisible' and 'relational' activities as building teams, agreement, and partnerships. No organization would say "well, we did accounting last year, we don't need to do it again". Yet, this is often how investment in learning new ways of working together – like concerns for gender equity – is construed in an organization, as a one-time event rather than an ongoing process.

Reflecting on and changing these gendered dimensions of organizations as they are practiced in a particular context can, we believe, lead to changes that enhance the organization's capacity to be effective, both internally for women and men staff, and externally, in achieving its goals with equity.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Since the early 1990s, there have been a number of experiments in Northern and Southern countries in applying the concepts described above to help organizations wanting to improve both their equity and their effectiveness. These experiments have taken place in a wide range of organizations, including large governmental and para-governmental institutions (department of justice, social housing organizations) as well as voluntary organizations (development NGOs, social justice groups, research institutions), and for-profit corporations. While each intervention is unique, there are significant commonalities in the methodologies and approaches.

Each of them looks at key issues of concern to the organization and links them with gender equity issues through the use of the 'gender lens' to explore and come to grips with aspects of the organization's deep structure. Each of them has three phases – a start-up or diagnostic phase, change experiments which are often based on an action-learning model, and an evaluation/validation/dissemination phase, in which learning is collected, assessed and entrenched in the organization. Each intervention uses continual feedback to the organization and to change agents to modify the interventions and learn from them.

Initially, the change agents take the time to develop images of how the organization works, gained through interviews and discussions with a wide range of organizational actors. These images, which aim to surface the deeply held values and ways of working within the organization, are crystallized and fed back to the organization to help people discuss how they would like to change. Usually this start-up work is done in collaboration with a diverse group of organizational insiders, and allows the change agents to listen to a wide range of organizational voices, particularly those whose perspectives are usually silenced. In CIMMYT, the international wheat and maize research centre in Mexico, the change agents developed several 'mental models' (Senge 1990) of the organization, which they shared with a large organizational meeting. One of the models of a successful researcher was that of Norman Borlaug, father of the 'Green Revolution' technologies. He was a traditional 'hero' who

worked long and hard to isolate genetic materials and field test modified varieties. This model of individualistic scientific research and publication was the dominant view of how a CIMMYT worker should function, and downplayed collaboration, particularly with 'client' government ministries and farmers, and even with other researchers. In a climate of diminishing resources, collaboration rather than competition is becoming a much larger factor in success and, combined with the time pressure on individual researchers, CIMMYT leaders agreed to experimental changes which could foster gender equity as well more effective ways of working.

At BRAC, a large Bangladesh development NGO that wanted to improve the quality of its work as well as its gender inclusiveness, the needs assessment showed a picture of an organization that functioned with a 'culture of silence'. Subordinates waited for orders from superiors – orders that changed often – and were given little scope to exercise initiative as the organization strove to offer consistent programming in widely dispersed offices across the country. Authority was vertical, and often viewed as arbitrary. Local norms made it more difficult for women to be treated as full colleagues. Problems were handled by 'shifting' responsibility to someone else for their cause and their solution. Workers said village clients or superiors were responsible, while middle managers blamed workers.

South Africa's National Land Committee found that there was a gap between fieldworkers, who organized and advised groups driven from their traditional land base by apartheid, and researchers who were responsible for documentation and for policy work. This gap grew larger in the early 1990s during the preparation for national elections and democratic rule, as the importance of advocacy for a new land policy became more important on the NLC's agenda. This gap provided an opportunity to shift the focus of the NLC from 'land rights' to 'land rights for women and for men' in their policy and advocacy work.

These initial diagnostic phases led to experiments for change. Most often these were 'action-learning' experiments, focusing on changing how work was actually done and could be done differently, in order to instill the new values in day-to-day work practice. These experiments were usually the responsibility of particular work units, sometimes supported by change agents.

For example, one CIMMYT experiment was with evaluation of staff. In order to promote teamwork and lessen the need for 'heroism', CIMMYT felt that including colleagues and subordinates as well as superiors in performance evaluation would help to highlight the collaborative contribution of individuals, and surface the invisible crisis-prevention as well as the crisis-management skills people brought to their position.

A second CIMMYT experiment was to offer women professionals in the system the opportunity for leadership training – a chance to develop their own networks and reflect positively on their leadership styles and strengths as women.

BRAC decided that they would start a series of action-learning experiments in their field offices. Workers in an office were asked to name a gender-related problem that they could ameliorate and follow a cycle of planning/action/evaluation. In a number of primary health programs, workers found that women seldom chaired meetings and were not listened to in meetings. One of the reasons for this was that men usually wrote the monthly reports and therefore had a better overview of what was going on in the offices. When women started to share the report writing (they had always been responsible for providing information for the reports) they also gained an over-

view. Offices successfully rotated chairing of meetings, and women and men were better able to 'fill in' for each other when needed.

Other offices tackled issues of 'teasing' (subtle harassment) of women workers, particularly about their eligibility for marriage. In some offices, the pressure of work hours and workload – BRAC workers live together as well as work together in field 'campuses' – meant that there was little opportunity for leave to visit family. This proved particularly difficult for single women, who needed time to arrange for family duties as well as pre-marriage arrangements. Surfacing these problems meant that there could be continuous feedback on how behaviour was or was not changing.

In yet other offices, workers were concerned that loans to women were oppressing women as their male heads of family urged them to take out loans for men's use. They began to address this issue with men in the village, where the previous focus had been only on BRAC's women members.

In an experiment at a corporate data-processing site in Texas, women and men worked in 'teams' which collectively took responsibility for achieving work targets. They were able to use differing individual strengths, as well as compensate for women who took time off to accommodate such family needs as caring for sick children.

These experiments in changing how men and women work in organizations and in how the purpose of the work is understood need careful follow-up. In the cases described in this paper, there was careful monitoring and support, which led to a phase of evaluation, validation and broader dissemination, in order to entrench the gains made. In CIMMYT, the evaluation was adopted for all staff. In BRAC, the action-learning experiments moved from a pilot phase to full implementation, as offices reported better working relations and increased ability for staff to co-operate in service delivery and to solve problems.

At NLC, the national shift toward democracy and away from apartheid, coinciding with the pressure for women's inclusion, led to women's issues being 'heard' by fieldworkers and researchers, addressed and included in the formulations of a major national conference on land policy.

REFLECTIONS TO DATE

Each of the interventions using the approach and concepts described in this paper has been careful to respond to the particular context of the organization they are working in. The initial diagnostic period offers time to build relations with a wide range of organizational actors, and to develop a strategy that responds to the needs, the means, and the particularities of the organization concerned. While it is possible to abstract the commonalities, the particularities of each case led to a very different look and feel on the ground. In any given situation it is important to examine what the issues are, how they relate to the work of the organization, where change should start and at what level, which strategies are most promising, and what needs to be negotiated with the various interests involved.

These interventions also started with a broad mandate to 'do something' about gender equity linked with organizational effectiveness, rather than with a narrow definition of the problem, or a cookie cutter recipe for a solution. This gave the organization and the change agents permission to learn as they went along, to invent, to experiment, to adapt, and to make mistakes. While this can be troubling for those who want proven solutions, and can increase pressures for accountability and results in the short term, it also permits the intervention to be tailored to the particular organization and therefore to increase the likelihood of success.

It also increases the opportunities for 'political knitting', making sure that key organizational actors at all levels of the organization know what is going on and are consulted about next steps.

The process needs to involve those actors who are usually silenced in the organization – whether those are the people in the field, as opposed to the head office, the women, as opposed to the men, the support staff as well as the leaders. It means that the methodology used must protect their confidentiality as well as airing their perspectives, and that the scope of the change must be palatable to all the actors. Hearing these multiple voices often initially leads to cacophony, and it is important to distill the information into generative themes that resonate for the organization, that express both values and practice, and offer the potential for change.

Key to making change happen – so that the work 'feels different' – is transforming the reflections from the diagnosis into new work practices. Inventing, accompanying, modeling and reflecting on new ways of working help people to feel that change can happen, that this intervention is not just the flavour of the month emanating from the executive suite.

This approach to organizational change and gender equity is based on ideas from process consulting and from organizational learning (Schein 1988; Senge 1990). It relies on ownership of the change process resting within the organization. Methodologies for change include dissemination of information, continuous feedback, and require ongoing negotiation of the scope and timing of the change with the organization's leaders and staff. Yet it is up to the change agents to push the boundaries of what is thinkable – and therefore possible. Without this persistent pressure to look at alternatives to established ways of doing things, it is impossible to uncover, let alone change, deeply entrenched gender inequitable ways of working. While changes toward customer service or product quality have become part of organizational culture in for-profit and not-for-profit alike, gender equity is so deeply counter to the culture that most organizations have neither the interest nor the capacity to think about it.

In all of the interventions we know of, combining change for gender equity with other key organizational issues is both a source of great strength, and at the same time, a source of weakness. It is all too easy, in most of the interventions, to 'lose' gender and to focus on the other issues – organizational quality, teamwork. One of the key roles of the change agent is to keep returning the focus to the differential impact on women and on men of the intervention.

At the same time, rigid beliefs about what gender equity looks like will hamper the success of the intervention. The change agent is one actor among many, and it is crucial to listen to how organizational insiders understand gender equity and to use that as a starting point. Without a willingness to negotiate the speed and approach of the change with organizational insiders, there can be no progress. This process of change relies on negotiation and learning, not on compulsion or pressure to conform to a preconceived notion of gender equity.

The interventions described in this paper and others using similar approaches are internal strategies to the organization. Yet in many instances, pressure for organizations to pay attention to gender equity comes from outside the organization – from changing laws, from funders, from unions for example. The point is not that an internal strategy is the only one, but rather that internal strategies rely on external pressure points – the two reinforce each other. And finally, large gains that are

possible in one context – such as the end of apartheid in South Africa, for example – may be much slower in another context, like social housing in a period of fiscal conservatism in Canadian cities. The gains described in this paper are fragile, but promising. This approach requires people to work together to create new ways of seeing and acting within organizations that will lead ultimately to gender equity. It is from these new ways of thinking about and being in organizations that the future emerges.

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