

# Can NGOs Make a Difference?

*The Challenge of Development Alternatives*

---

**edited by Anthony J. Bebbington,  
Samuel Hickey and Diana C. Mitlin**

**FLACSO - Biblioteca**



ZED BOOKS  
*London & New York*

*Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives* was first published in 2008 by Zed Books Ltd, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF, UK and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA  
[www.zedbooks.co.uk](http://www.zedbooks.co.uk)

Editorial copyright © Anthony J. Bebbington, Samuel Hickey and Diana C. Mitlin 2008  
Copyright © the contributors 2008

The rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of this work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

Designed and typeset in Monotype Bembo  
by illuminati, Grosmont, [www.illuminatibooks.co.uk](http://www.illuminatibooks.co.uk)  
Cover designed by Andrew Corbett  
Printed and bound in Malta  
by Gutenberg Press Ltd, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of Zed Books Ltd.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library  
Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 978 1 84277 892 0 hb

ISBN 978 1 84277 893 7 pb

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

# Contents

List of Figures and Tables	viii
Acknowledgements	ix

## PART I Critical Challenges

- 1 Introduction: Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives 3  
**Anthony J. Bebbington, Samuel Hickey and Diana C. Mitlin**
- 2 Have NGOs 'Made a Difference?' From Manchester to Birmingham with an Elephant in the Room 38  
**Michael Edwards**

## PART II NGO Alternatives under Pressure

- 3 Challenges to Participation, Citizenship and Democracy: Perverse Confluence and Displacement of Meanings 55  
**Evelina Dagnino**
- 4 Learning from Latin America: Recent Trends in European NGO Policymaking 71  
**Kees Biekart**

- 5 Whatever Happened to Reciprocity? Implications of Donor  
Emphasis on 'Voice' and 'Impact' as Rationales for Working  
with NGOs in Development 90  
**Alan Thomas**
- 6 Development and the New Security Agenda: W(h)ither(ing)  
NGO Alternatives? III  
**Alan Fowler**

**PART III Pursuing Alternatives: NGO Strategies in Practice**

- 7 How Civil Society Organizations Use Evidence to Influence  
Policy Processes 133  
**Amy Pollard and Julius Court**
- 8 Civil Society Participation as the Focus of Northern NGO  
Support: The Case of Dutch Co-financing Agencies 153  
**Irene Guijt**
- 9 Producing Knowledge, Generating Alternatives? Challenges to  
Research-oriented NGOs in Central America and Mexico 175  
**Cynthia Bazán, Nelson Cuellar, Ileana Gómez, Cati Illsley,  
Adrian López, Iliana Monterroso, Joaliné Pardo, Jose  
Luis Rocha, Pedro Torres and Anthony J. Bebbington**
- 10 Anxieties and Affirmations: NGO–Donor Partnerships for  
Social Transformation 196  
**Mary Racelis**

**PART IV Being Alternative**

- 11 Reinventing International NGOs: A View from the Dutch  
Co-financing System 221  
**Harry Derksen and Pim Verhallen**
- 12 Transforming or Conforming? NGOs Training Health Promoters  
and the Dominant Paradigm of the Development Industry  
in Bolivia 240  
**Katie S. Bristow**

- 13 Political Entrepreneurs or Development Agents: An NGO's Tale of Resistance and Acquiescence in Madhya Pradesh, India 261  
**Vasudha Chhotray**
- 14 Is This Really the End of the Road for Gender Mainstreaming? Getting to Grips with Gender and Institutional Change 279  
**Nicholas Piálek**
- 15 The Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism of International NGOs 298  
**Helen Yanacopulos and Matt Baillie Smith**
- 16 Development as Reform and Counter-reform: Paths Travelled by Slum/Shack Dwellers International 316  
**Joel Bolnick**

**PART V Taking Stock and Thinking Forward**

- 17 Reflections on NGOs and Development: The Elephant, the Dinosaur, Several Tigers but No Owl 337  
**David Hulme**
- Contributors 346
- Index 351

## Is This Really the End of the Road for Gender Mainstreaming? Getting to Grips with Gender and Institutional Change

**Nicholas Piálek**

### **The Death of Gender Mainstreaming?**

According to a growing consensus among development academics and practitioners, we are witnessing the death of gender mainstreaming in development (Moser, 2005; Mukhopadhyay, 2004; Oxfam GB, 2005). Not ten years after the crystallization of gender mainstreaming at the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), it is being spurned not only by those it was supposed to change but by many who sweated and toiled to breathe life into the process. In failing to create substantial change in the practice of organizations and institutions both locally and globally, gender mainstreaming has at best been labelled as ineffective and at worst as another barrier to promoting social justice on gender, the very antithesis of its original conception.

Feminists are taking stock and are trying to move on. Academics and practitioners alike have started to wander away from the ambitions of gender mainstreaming as well as the explicit focus on 'Gender and Development' (GAD) with its prioritizing of the category of 'gender' over and above the category of 'women' in development. They suggest that the process has (inadvertently or not) resulted in the depoliticization of the feminist project (Mukhopadhyay, 2004; Porter and Sweetman, 2005; Standing, 2004; Subrahmanian, 2004). Gender mainstreaming has reduced feminist action in development to a technocratic approach devoid of any political content, making it something 'diluted, denatured, depoliticised, included everywhere as an afterthought' (Cornwall et al., 2004: 1). It has led to the overuse of 'gender', resulting in "the widespread tendency in academic, policy and activist contexts to ignore women and their needs while naming, and purportedly mainstreaming, gender" (Eveline and Bacchi, 2005: 496).

Gender mainstreaming has become a process that draws attention away from tackling women's subordination rather than highlighting it. Such analyses have led to the suggestion that we should move beyond gender mainstreaming – feminists involved in development should not be diverted by the myth of institutional transformation but instead should focus on supporting grassroots feminists and go back to empowerment projects focused on 'women' (Porter and Sweetman, 2005: 5).

Such perspectives suggest that gender mainstreaming has gone the same way as so many other apparently 'alternative' approaches that have become co-opted within the mainstream of international development work. However, this chapter suggests that a more sanguine approach is required, and that this critique itself should be subject to closer appraisal. Gender mainstreaming (and those implementing and analysing it) should not lose sight of the fact that such a process is fundamentally political. Gender mainstreaming is a form of feminist politics and policy (Walby, 2005: 463) that challenges dominant modes of thinking and practice in organizations working in development. As a consequence, the question that becomes most pertinent to ask is not, 'is this the end of gender mainstreaming?', but instead, 'how are gender policies and strategies consistently silenced across a range of organizational and institutional contexts?' It was with this question in mind that I conducted a three-year research project into gender mainstreaming in development organizations, and in particular Oxfam GB.

Oxfam GB (hereafter referred to as Oxfam) formally adopted a gender policy on 16 May 1993. Prior to this formal recognition of GAD as a core aspect of development interventions, Oxfam had created a Gender and Development Unit (GADU) in 1984 to raise awareness of gender issues among staff and in the organization's activities. In one form or another, driven by feminists and gender advocates in the organization, Oxfam has over two decades of commitment to GAD approaches, with gender mainstreaming being a central concern within the organization for over a decade. As a consequence, levels of understanding and technical capacity to implement GAD approaches in development projects and programmes is good throughout the organization (Dawson, 2005: 82). However, by Oxfam's own admission, gender mainstreaming has failed to achieve as much as it should have in promoting gender within the organization's work.

Between September 2001 and May 2002 Oxfam undertook an internal review of progress in gender mainstreaming, which produced eight evaluations: institutional arrangements assessment, women's human rights evaluation, gender evaluation of the Cut the Cost Campaign, mainstreaming gender in advocacy work on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), gender and participation in Senegal, gender in humanitarian response, annual

impact report analysis, and Links evaluation (Oxfam GB, 2002). Within these reviews, Oxfam recognizes that gender is still an irregularly applied perspective in all areas of the organization. For example, the overall assessment of the reviews draws attention to a range of problems: 'gender policy is not fully enforced', the 'SCO framework does not consistently integrate a strong and explicit commitment to gender equality' and 'Oxfam does not employ sufficient staff with the necessary gender expertise to deliver high quality programmes'.

Translating Oxfam's progressive gender policy into solid practice has proven difficult and continues to be the subject of much internal research and debate (e.g. Oxfam GB, 1996, 2002, 2006; Smith, 1995; Smyth, 2005). The difficulties seem all the more perplexing given that resistance to gender mainstreaming is not significantly present within the organization. Most staff recognize the importance of gender transformative goals, not just for their instrumental value in creating broader and more sustainable solutions to poverty, but for the intrinsic value in them. This makes Oxfam a particularly interesting case study for understanding the significant challenges that face gender mainstreaming within NGOs.

### **Understanding Gender Mainstreaming in Oxfam GB**

Gender mainstreaming faces what many bureaucrats call the problem of policy evaporation. For example, most development organizations have policies on gender as well as detailed strategies on how to include gender approaches in their work (Moser and Moser, 2005). Yet, when it comes to assessing an organization's practice, even the best recognize that gender is usually poorly incorporated into projects and programmes, if at all (Khan, 2003: 5; Kusakabe, 2005: 1). This transition from gender-rich policy to gender-poor practice is frequently cited as an example of policy evaporation, which in turn has become the focus of much academic and in-house institutional research (e.g. Derbyshire, 2002; International Labour Organization, 2002; Khan, 2003; Mukhopadhyay, 2004). This literature reveals two approaches to analysing gender mainstreaming. The first is the 'technical approach'. This approach highlights direct problems in transferring policy into practice. In seeking answers and solutions, it asks questions along the lines of 'what knowledge is lacking among staff?' or 'how much/little money is allocated to gender work?' The second is the 'political approach'. This approach focuses on more fundamental issues associated with policy evaporation. It asks questions such as, 'in what ways are staff perceived to lack knowledge and why?' and 'why is gender work seen as something separate to budget for?' The technical approach is important as it provides

specific and direct advice for institutions trying to create change and is by far the most popular form of gender mainstreaming analysis. However, its level of analysis can be simplistic, whereas the political approach draws our attention to the more deep-seated problems that underlie the silencing of gender mainstreaming across institutional contexts.

In developing this political approach for analysing how GAD approaches evaporate at the policy–practice interface, and given the apparently positive environment that Oxfam offered for gender mainstreaming, I was keen to start my research at a point where no conflict over implementing GAD approaches was visible but where policy evaporation still occurred. Drawing on Lukes's (2005: 28–9) notion of potential conflict, I labelled these points as sites of 'non-conflict' (also see Piálek, 2007). This involved developing a multi-sited ethnography, which was carried out in three phases. The first phase was conducted from June to September in 2003 when I was based in Oxfam's South American (SAM) Regional Office in Lima, Peru, working with the Regional Gender Advisor. This experience was invaluable for understanding how gender was constructed, understood, analysed and incorporated into the work of staff in the organization. The second phase was conducted from May to December in 2005 when I was based in the Oxfam head office in Oxford, UK, supporting the Lead Gender Advisor (in the Policy Team). This work enabled me to survey the array of approaches Oxfam is using – and hopes to use – to overcome the problem of gender policy evaporation in the organization. The third phase of the research was conducted from January to November 2006; it was based on my involvement in a number of key meetings, planning sessions and workshops on gender issues. Such meetings brought staff together from across the regions and allowed me to assess the similarity of experience of gender mainstreaming with the South American region.

### **What's Happened to Gender Mainstreaming at Oxfam?**

It seems from this research that the wholesale incorporation of GAD into the organization has resulted in a situation whereby creating real change around gender has become increasingly difficult. GAD approaches have become both mainstreamed and marginalized in Oxfam: 'mainstreamed' in the sense that they have directed a process of institutional change and have, in many ways, radically altered the organizational make-up in line with GAD beliefs about development; 'marginalized' in the sense that they are almost entirely excluded from the majority of Oxfam's actual programme and project work. Mainstreaming, subverted through sites of 'non-conflict' embedded within organizational structure and discourse, has

created an organizational reality whereby gender is both appreciated as a crucial aspect of development work and, at the same time, not seen as a personal responsibility among individual staff.

For instance, 'Gender Equity' in Oxfam is one of the nine strategic goals of the organization – the GAD approach can therefore be seen to have been directly incorporated into the most formal institutional structure in Oxfam – the Strategic Change Objective (SCO) framework. Incorporating GAD into this framework serves to place gender at the core of institutional policymaking and programming. Nevertheless, the benefits of this to creating positive transformation in practice have been questionable. In creating SCO 5.1, 'gender equity', gender issues are set up as a distinct aspect of Oxfam's development work. They become pigeonholed into some projects and programmes while at the same time being ignored or forgotten about within others. SCO 5.1 develops an appreciation of GAD among staff, but its very existence also propagates the idea that gender equity is something to be planned for and achieved within specific gender projects.

To overcome this problem, part of SCO 5.1's remit is to 'mainstream gender within other SCOs'. However, the interference of SCO 5.1 in other SCOs calls into question the validity of the SCO framework. The framework is designed to categorize and separate development work to make the organization more effective at tackling poverty and the use of resources more efficient. The framework does not operate to define and then merge development issues. As a consequence, rather than the validity of the SCO framework being called into question, and the ensuing confusion that this would cause, the logic of the system prevails – 'gender equity' is an issue that must be dealt with by SCO 5.1 programmes and projects and not other SCOs. In this form, then, gender mainstreaming becomes an aberration of the system to be skirted over. The impact of this upon staff is clear. Not only does this ambiguity provide a legitimate reason not to develop a GAD approach within SCO 1–4 projects and programmes, but it actually creates an environment that encourages gender issues to be ignored by staff in order to maintain consistency in organizational practice. This situation makes it increasingly difficult for those concerned with promoting gender equity in the organization to encourage staff to deliver on the gender policy – responsibility among staff cannot be promoted or developed if the underlying structure in which GAD is embedded acts to remove anything to be formally responsible for.

Oxfam did not initiate the process of mainstreaming with the intention of marginalizing gender in the organization. Yet this is the situation in which it now finds itself. This raises a number of wider questions and issues. Is the marginalization of a GAD approach in organizations an inherent danger in the mainstreaming process? Is the removal of individual responsibility

an inevitable consequence of institutional change? Despite an organization's commitment to raising the level of gender awareness among its staff, can it actually make its staff act on this knowledge? Does gender mainstreaming fundamentally require replacing all staff with 'gender experts' or 'feminists' to achieve its goal and would this be a productive or desirable solution? And, perhaps most crucially, does my analysis of gender mainstreaming in Oxfam give support to those who believe that the process of gendered institutional change should be put to rest as a well-intentioned but failed attempt at achieving social justice and creating an alternative type of organization?

I wish to broach some of these questions in this chapter. However, to explore some of the fundamental concerns around gender mainstreaming, there is first a need to take an analytical step backwards and pose a much more rudimentary question: what has my examination of gender mainstreaming in Oxfam highlighted about the nature of institutional change in development organizations?

### **Understanding Institutional Change: Master Plans or Misconceptions?**

Moser and Moser argue that 'an organizational culture which is male-biased, in terms of attitudes, recruitment, working conditions, and structures and procedures, discriminates against female staff and clients' (Moser and Moser, 2005: 16). As a consequence, institutional change, along the lines suggested by gender mainstreaming, is a process embedded within a patriarchal system – the organization (and society more generally) – and it is therefore inevitable that the interests of women will be marginalized. Change is constrained by a system that places the 'feminine' as secondary. But how far can this type of analysis of GAD, organizations and the process of institutional change take us?

Patriarchy is no doubt an important concept for understanding resistance to processes of change around GAD. However, I felt that such an analysis did not easily fit with the lived experience of gender mainstreaming in Oxfam. I found it hard to characterize Oxfam as an organization with a culture that is male-biased and essentially patriarchal. Rather, there is good evidence that it has nurtured and developed gender mainstreaming from the very beginning. To blame the failure of change upon an embedded patriarchal culture seems too simplistic as well as obscures the complexity of institutional change in the organization. Foucault has drawn attention to the idea that power is at its most persuasive and pervasive when it can no longer be 'substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it ...; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. ... It's a machine

in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised' (Foucault, 1980: 156). To blame the failure of gender mainstreaming upon a patriarchal system ignores the complex ways in which power operates in organizations.

Ferguson's analysis of the development apparatus in Lesotho highlights this point well. He states that

it is tempting to see in the discourse and interventions of such parties the logic that defines the train of events. Such a view, however, inevitably misrepresents the complexities of the involvement of intentionality with events. Intentions, even of powerful actors or interests, are only the visible part of a much larger mechanism through which structures are actually produced, reproduced and transformed. Plans are explicit, and easily seen and understood; conspiracies are only slightly less so. But any intentional deployment only takes effect through a convoluted route involving unacknowledged structures and unpredictable outcomes. (Ferguson, 1994: 276)

'Plans are explicit, and easily seen and understood; conspiracies are only slightly less so.' To question the relevance of patriarchy as an answer to the failure of gender mainstreaming in Oxfam is not to deny the idea of or belief in the masculine 'conspiracy' but to acknowledge that 'master plans' do not provide true accounts of reality. They merely place a façade of intentionality on reality after the fact. The failure of institutional change, in this instance, cannot and must not be seen as the result of intentional subversion by 'controlling minds'. Instead, the answers must be seen within the more mundane aspects of change. If an outcome – the failure of institutional change to support GAD approaches to development – is not the product of intentionality, then the fundamental process of change must in some serious way be conceptually and practicably lacking. It is this 'lacking' that will be explored in this section.

### **'Values' and 'values': organizations and their staff**

Gender mainstreaming is a process of radical institutional change. It is a process that must challenge the status quo in organizations, both in what they do and in how they do it. As such, it is a political concept that implicitly accepts that there is a dominant approach or idea to be altered. It is about changing what is considered important and creating the desire to act on this. Gender mainstreaming is essentially a process of value change. However, value change as a concept within organizations is not a simple one to understand or achieve. What are values? Can organizations hold values? Can there be more than one set of values within organizations? Making and understanding these distinctions are crucial. By ignoring them, a radical process of change can easily become deradicalized, technicalized and managerialized. Gender mainstreaming in Oxfam is a case in point.

For many, Oxfam can be seen to have transformed its values with a certain amount of success. Policies, reviews, performance management guidelines, organizational objectives, strategic frameworks, toolkits, concept notes and the wealth of other material and structures within Oxfam can be seen to express the values of an organization that has adopted GAD language and concepts. Perhaps most importantly of all, the adoption of a Gender Policy in 1993 is a clear and unequivocal statement of gendered organizational values:

Oxfam believes in the essential dignity of people and their capacity to overcome the problems or pressures which can crush or exploit them. Oxfam's principles apply across the gender divide – to allow women as well as men their essential dignity, and to work with women and men in its emergency and relief programmes in overcoming the pressures which exploit them. To achieve this, gender relations need to be transformed. (Oxfam GB, 1993)

In a break from the past, where organizational values could be considered sexist or at the very least unconcerned with women or gender, the gender policy redefines Oxfam. Oxfam is an organization that values GAD approaches both for what they can achieve in creating a lasting solution to poverty and because they tackle an unacceptable and unjust form of inequality. However, to expect this process to lead to substantive changes among staff practices suggests a model of institutional change whereby 'an organization can have values and that these values should be fully shared by the employees; the way to undertake strategy, then, is to have a strong vision for the organization ... and to find ways of airing this vision so that employees can commit to it' (Mowles, forthcoming: 1). However, this model for change has not unfolded around gender in Oxfam. Despite expressions of affirmation of the gender policy among staff, their sense of personal responsibility or motivation for implementing GAD approaches frequently stay at the level of rhetoric.

One of the ways to understand this problem in Oxfam is to distinguish between the organization's Gender Policy or the Aim 5 Strategic Framework, which are organizational 'Values', and the 'values' held more generally within organizations. 'Values' are not the same as 'values'; confusing the two prevents an understanding of how change occurs in organizations. Organizational 'Values' should more accurately be defined as norms. They are 'obligatory and constraining and provide moral criteria for assessing what ought to be done' (Mowles, forthcoming). On the other hand, 'values' held by individuals within organizations are 'compelling (in a voluntary sense) and uplifting at the same time, as they are freely chosen' (Mowles, forthcoming). Within this approach, individuals cannot be seen as components of organizations – miniature expressions of the whole – but

instead must be perceived as autonomous agents within that whole. Their free choice distinguishes them from the framework they are embedded in. Their 'values' cannot be set by the organization; they are the very thing that distinguishes the individual from the organization. Importantly, such values may be harder to shift, given that they are often both innately personal and extremely resistant to changes, especially large ones. This has three implications: first, successful institutional change requires a corresponding shift in both norms and values; second, shifts in norms within organizations cannot be assumed to change automatically an individual's values; and third, substantially changing an individual's values is a more negotiated and drawn-out process.

### **Ignoring 'values' and submerging conflict**

The establishment of GADU and the development of a gender policy in Oxfam are good examples of the problems that emerge when this difference is not recognized. At first this conflict will be visible, as two employees of Oxfam noted at the time. Bridget Walker noticed that an initial reaction to GADU by some colleagues was to refer to it openly as 'feminist thought-police', and to deride its role (Walker, 1999: 101), whereas Dianna Melrose was taken aback in a meeting of trustees and management when she was asked, 'why gender?' after using the whole meeting to argue for practice to be brought in line with the 1993 Gender Policy (Melrose, 1999: 110). Visible conflict, such as this, is in many ways a good thing, offering a clear target that can be reacted against. While conflict is visible, dialogue can occur and the need to tackle values is clear.

However, more serious problems occur when value change continues to be ignored in favour of reinforcing norms – once visible conflict becomes submerged and hidden. An individual will ultimately find it easier to agree and work within organizational norms than to contradict and fight them. Yet conformity to norms does not necessarily mean value change. An individual's values can essentially remain unchanged. They may accept the organizational norm as important within the context of the institution, but a personal belief in this norm as an important principle in their life may not exist. Oxfam's approach to institutional change has shown this repeatedly. The approach has tended to focus solely upon differing aspects of norm change and ignore the more difficult process of value change. For example, the Oxfam Gender Policy is a clear organizational norm and rightly so. The policy has also been complemented by a number of differing forms of norm change to increase its basis as an important and overarching 'moral' framework in the organization, such as gender objectives within the performance management system, gender indicators and targets within

monitoring and evaluation procedures, and the development of a 'Gender Equity' strategic framework.

Work on value change is less clear, however. Gender training is a key part of the induction process for new staff, as well as a part of the ongoing development of staff in Oxfam. Yet can it seriously be contended that a one-, two- or three-day course on gender creates value change? Value change is a long-term process, involving dialogue and negotiation, not a 'quick fix' session on policy, gender analysis frameworks and monitoring and evaluation techniques. Such courses can only really be seen as mechanisms for disseminating organizational norms, rather than a serious attempt to develop values among staff. Furthermore, other more explicit attempts at value change among staff have also failed to do little more than reinforce norms. The Gender Action Research project in Oxfam is a good example of how a strategy that could have potentially developed staff values on gender through practitioner-led research merely became a distorted form of norm change. For instance, the organization's need to generate 'good practice stories' (in an attempt to produce a new 'tool' for mainstreaming) overrode any real concern for personal development among practitioners. As a consequence, by the end of the set-up phase the 'action research' aspect (designed to stimulate consciousness-raising among staff) was scrapped in favour of helping project staff develop an elaborate gender monitoring and evaluation system. Any loose attempt to promote value change among staff through the process of 'research' was further undermined when it was agreed that project staff could partner a local research institution to do the work. As a consequence, the project merely became a mechanism for reinforcing norms on gender.

How, then, has my analysis of gender mainstreaming in Oxfam developed an understanding of institutional change around gender? Effective change in organizations requires changes to both norms and values. The processes associated with each tend to be quite different. Norms are the 'moral' criteria or boundaries by which individuals within organizations must abide. Values, on the other hand, are the 'freely' chosen beliefs of individuals that motivate their actions. As a consequence, strategies to create change are essentially different, depending on whether they are tackling norms or values. Norm change is a managerial process of technical change, involving changing policies and human resources strategies, disseminating rules and regulations, altering language and terms used in the organization, and the like. The process may be contentious, and even construed as political, but it is still essentially technical and managerial (non-political) – the organization has no 'personal' relationship to its norms, it has no particular preference or bond with them, norms can be changed (but not necessarily accepted) rapidly and easily. This is not the case with values. Individuals are intrinsically attached

to their values, as the individual is, in a sense, a sum of the values he or she holds. Value change is therefore intensely personal and intensely political. It is rarely, if ever, technical and managerial. However, if institutional change goes against or is not supported by commonly held values, then norm change alone is not sufficient. The more radical the nature of change, the more focused the process must be on values. If norms become the focus at the expense of values, then the process of change will become subverted, as conflict, far from disappearing, becomes submerged within the institution. It is with this more nuanced understanding of institutional change that it will be possible to produce a clearer picture of how gender mainstreaming has consistently failed across organizational contexts.

### **Gender Mainstreaming: Some Critical Reflections on Ideas and Activists**

How did 'doing gender' become something different to 'doing feminism'?  
(Cornwall, Harrison et al., 2004)

In seeking to explain both the failure and the success of alternative development approaches in retaining their radical and political character, there has been a belated recognition of the critical role that ideas and activists play here. A similar realization emerges here, whereby questions are being raised about how the 'gender and development' project has become increasingly detached both from the wider feminist project from which it emerged, and from feminists themselves. For example, Smyth (1999: 17) highlights that, with few exceptions, 'most of the literature generated by Northern development agencies on gender and on women shares one characteristic: the absence of the term feminism.' This absence of any reference to feminism within NGOs that claim to be mainstreaming gender is a worrying point given the fact that GAD is an approach developed out of the ideas of feminism and the critiques of development by feminists (Rathgeber, 1990). Smyth states that

we write and talk about gender-sensitive policies and strategies, of gender work and gendered activities or approaches, and even of engendering or genderizing (!) this or that aspect of our work. But on feminism, feminist policies and strategies, or on feminists, there is a resounding silence. (Smyth, 1999: 17)

Oxfam has been no exception to this trend. It has readily adopted GAD concepts, ideas and frameworks. However, it is hard to find any direct reference to specific feminist ideas or even reference to the more general ideas contained within feminist literature. For instance, one particular member of staff I interviewed stated that he was attracted to Oxfam because it was

concerned with gender issues but also because it was not 'one of those feminist organizations'. Having valued the importance of a GAD approach in the organization, he paradoxically goes on to disassociate it from the ideas and beliefs of feminists. Is such a dislocation between GAD and wider feminist literature and ideas a healthy basis for a development organization attempting to mainstream gender?

The concern for achieving social justice, particularly for women, is what primarily binds together even the most divergent feminist thinkers. To this end, it is possible to say that feminism is 'essentially activism against gendered inequality and injustice' (Porter, 1999: 4). From this common ground, feminists often take radically differing viewpoints and approaches to how gender inequality and injustice can best be perceived and overcome. The feminist literature and practice surrounding the issue of women/gender in the development process, such as WID, WAD and GAD, is a case in point (Rathgeber, 1990). However, despite this diversity, there are critical ideas that bind advocates of feminism together into a coherent approach. Perhaps most importantly among these are those I will term epistemological issues. Establishing how we know what we know is a key aspect of the feminist approach, and a constant theme here is that of 'positionality'. For instance, Haraway states that 'feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*' (Haraway, 1997: 57) – the belief that it is possible to see only partial truths about the world as knowledge is dependent upon the viewer's own position in the world. This understanding about the nature of knowledge is a common assumption among feminist academics. As a consequence, the concept of 'positionality' forms a central theme throughout feminist literature, research and activity (Grosz, 1986; Haraway, 1997; McDowell, 1997; Stacey, 1997). For instance, feminists aim to recognize that they are not detached impartial observers of the world, but are deeply embedded within the social structures and cultural frameworks they are trying to understand.

Recognizing 'positionality' does not prevent feminists from making inferences about or acting in the world; rather, it requires feminists to qualify inferences or reflect on actions with a certain degree of introspection. McDowell and Sharp raise this issue in their review and discussion of research methods literature in geography (McDowell and Sharp, 1997). Such a perspective requires the researcher to ask him- or herself who they are, what are their assumptions, what is their position in society, how do these factors influence the people around them, and so on. Critically locating yourself within your own research or activity is a key aspect of feminist thinking and stems directly from an epistemological assumption of 'partial truth'. In turn, the ideas and beliefs formed by feminists are very much a product of this process and cannot be fully understood, appreciated or

acted upon in isolation from this perspective. Ignoring the introspective process of feminist understanding is detrimental to embracing successfully ideas and practices stemming from feminist thought.

Attempting to promote a GAD approach in an organization, therefore, has implications that go far beyond the specifics of development work in itself. To understand how an organization's work can create change among men and women and alter current gender relations in a community, the organization must first reflect upon itself and understand its own embedded power dynamics. Kabeer highlights that

[Organizations] are relations of power. Very few institutions are egalitarian: they allocate decision-making power in a hierarchical way and they give authority to some people over other people. They give command over resources and command over people, and determine structures of power within institutions. (cited in Macdonald, 1994: 31)

Nicholson (1994) takes this perspective further and suggests that if organizations fail to examine themselves in a critical fashion, they tend to make do with inherited institutional structures and routines, rather than develop more appropriate new ones to meet the organization's changing needs and objectives – an interesting point given my own analysis of Oxfam. Staff within organizations must recognize that they are not neutral actors in the development process, but are located in 'rules, resources, practices and hierarchies of command' that place gender in a relationship of inequality through silences on gender issues more often than through direct discrimination (Kabeer, 1994: 87). Gender mainstreaming that fully embraces its feminist underpinnings must go beyond trying to change practice and attempt to look critically at and change the organization and the individuals therein. Mainstreaming is political and challenging because it fundamentally deals with challenging one's own personal values and relations of power. It is a process that values change for its intrinsic rather than its instrumental value. However, without embracing these feminist roots, the political element to mainstreaming is lost. Institutional change is no longer valued in itself and is only willingly accepted for its potential instrumental possibilities. Gender mainstreaming becomes synonymous with 'GAD', and the politics of change is externalized onto the communities with which an organization works. Oxfam provides a clear example of this problem.

### **The case of Oxfam: avoiding feminism, losing change**

In failing to acknowledge gender mainstreaming's roots in feminist thinking – and therefore the fundamental ideas and beliefs upon which the concept rests – Oxfam staff have overlooked the most important aspect of the institutional change process. Up to the present day, gender mainstreaming in

the organization is peppered with the understanding that external change, change in the 'real world', is of primary concern. Mainstreaming, or any issue for that matter, must primarily focus upon what it can achieve in the projects and programmes of Oxfam. A departmental meeting set up to discuss a review of an 'Oxfam International Identity' was a good example of this. During this meeting a number of staff members raised the need for more than just a 'paper identity'. They suggested that there was a need actually to cultivate shared identity and beliefs among staff, as this would be a key mechanism for getting policies, such as gender, implemented. When these comments were aired, they were met with responses (from the manager running the meeting) in the order of 'too much to do to deal with direct organizational change' and 'we don't want to open that box', expressing a clear belief that external needs should and will be prioritized over and above internal change.

Although understandable given the stated mission of the organization, this prioritization of 'real world' change has tended to denigrate the need to tackle internal issues, such as working with staff to develop a sense of common purpose or identity on gender. At the Oxfam Global Gender Meeting in March 2006, the scorn for internal matters was openly expressed. Following a brainstorming session, three key members within Oxfam's management were upset that the vision of what a gender-mainstreamed organization would look like was too inward looking, one going so far as to suggest that 'always thinking about ourselves is pathetic ..., we need to look at what we can change in the world' (Oxfam GB, 2006). This outlook on gender mainstreaming reflects a wider devaluation of the need for internal reflection and changes to the organization. Even Oxfam's own definition of gender mainstreaming highlights the organization's continual focus on the external. Three of its four objectives look at changes in the communities in which Oxfam works, while only the fourth and final objective refers directly to Oxfam and only then to say that it should make strategy consistent with the other three (externally focused) objectives. Gender mainstreaming is not seen as a process primarily focused upon changing the organization and staff per se, but as a process that promotes GAD approaches in the organization's projects and programmes – the 'real world'. The difference is subtle but nonetheless crucial.

### **Putting feminism back into gender mainstreaming**

What are the implications for putting feminism back into the process of gender mainstreaming? For some, embedding a gender perspective into the heart of an organization is not enough; organizations need to be 'reconceptualised and restructured' (Rao and Stuart, 1997: 10). Such an idea fits well with Haraway's conception of feminist accountability (based on

ideas of positionality). She suggests that there should be a certain degree of 'resonance' between researcher and the researched (Haraway, 1997). GAD approaches intend to transform society, within the context of development projects, by essentially nurturing values of equality among people. However, this process of value change needs to apply equally to both elements in the process: the development participant and the development agent. An organization that fails to recognize and challenge the influence and power of unequal relations, whether they be gendered or not, within its own structure and discourse is woefully unprepared for recognizing and transforming gender relations in society at large.

Rather than going 'beyond' gender mainstreaming, as many feel is necessary, the process needs to be reinvigorated and become a process that is more inclusive of and more explicit with broader feminist ideas and beliefs. Gender mainstreaming at present is all too reminiscent of the 'add women and stir' approach of WID. Organizations are frequently found taking what could be termed an 'add gender and stir' approach, leaving GAD approaches sandwiched among inappropriate organizational structures and discourses, with the inevitable consequences that follow. With this in mind, Goetz suggests that, instead of the term 'mainstreaming', there should be a movement towards the term 'institutionalization'. She stresses that

in the politics of institutionalizing gendered perspectives on development policy, different experiences of policy according to gender are taken to represent a challenge, not of political interest revolving around the question of *inclusion*, but rather of involving divergent meanings of social and economic change. In this sense, efforts to 'integrate' women into development policy are not necessarily transformative, so the concept of 'institutionalizing' women's interests in policy processes is used here to indicate a more transformative process. Sometimes the term *mainstreaming* is used to indicate this process, but the term 'institutionalizing' will be preferred here because it puts the accent on institutional change. (Goetz, 1998: 17)

Such a shift in terminology more accurately reflects the requirements demanded of an organization that wishes to adopt a GAD approach in its work. Institutionalizing gender implies a process that above all else both seeks and requires the organization to remodel itself around the needs of the GAD framework. Adopting a GAD perspective becomes not just an objective to be achieved in an organization's work, but a guideline for how relationships and structures should be cultivated and developed within an organization. Any organization that is attempting to transform gender relations in society must necessarily start with understanding and transforming structures and discourses of power that discriminate against gender and on the basis of gender within itself. The importance of the internal 'community' of an organization must be recognized and reasserted within

the mainstreaming process if gender policies in development organizations have any chance of being put into practice.

However, recognizing the internal focus of gender mainstreaming is just the first step. Creating a shift in terminology to account for this may be appropriate, but it is far from enough. In fact, shifting terminology in this way without fully accounting for what is actually necessary to create an organization that implements GAD approaches may do more harm than good. A shift in terminology that refocuses attention on the internal – that puts the accent on ‘institutional change’ – but fails to examine what the actual process of institutional change involves, continues to make the same definitional mistakes as those who have defined gender mainstreaming. The process of institutional change – and the consequent need to recognize explicitly the differences between norms and values in the change process – is key to gender mainstreaming. It is the actual process of change that needs to take centre stage.

### **Making Institutional Change Central to Gender Mainstreaming**

Only when organizations, and those implementing change in organizations, fully acknowledge the feminist roots of gender mainstreaming and recognize that the process of change is primarily concerned with the ‘self’ – the internal dynamics of organizations and not the external impact of the organization – will the accent on ‘gender mainstreaming’ shift. No longer will the principal focus of ‘gender mainstreaming’ be on ‘gender’ (or rather GAD approaches) per se, but on the process of organizational change – ‘mainstreaming’. In recognizing this, the puzzle of institutional transformation will demand greater attention, and the differing pieces of that puzzle will have to be placed at the fore of this process. In my discussion of institutional change, I noted that the process, to be successful, requires an understanding of three elements: the nature of change, the organizational context (its norms), and the individuals within the organization (their values). Thus far, gender mainstreaming in development organizations has not seriously examined and acted upon these elements. Gender mainstreaming has not been recognized for what it is – a process of radical political change within an organization – and the implications of this for developing both the norms and the values in organizations have been neither appropriately distinguished nor seriously examined.

The example of gender mainstreaming in Oxfam is a case in point. Values and norms have not been recognized as separate issues requiring separate approaches in the organization. As a consequence, gender mainstreaming

has failed because the process of change has failed to challenge directly and develop the values of individuals in the organization. This failure to tackle value change has become less clear as the continual focus upon norms within the organization has submerged previously visible conflict within the underlying organizational culture – its structure and discourse. A situation now exists where acceptance of GAD approaches is widespread, yet acceptance of responsibility for implementing GAD approaches is elusive.

The fundamentally political nature of gender mainstreaming's needs to be acknowledged, and the distinction between the technical process of norm change and the political process of value change needs to be made and acted upon in the organization. As Tiessen highlights, gender mainstreaming is both a technical and a political process (Tiessen, 2004: 690). Both elements need to be recognized and placed within the context of the organization. Gender mainstreaming must come to represent and promote a new maxim for feminists in development organizations. In the words of a friend who has worked for many years in development organizations on gender equality, 'as it came to be that *the personal is political*, it must now be recognized that *the professional is political*.' It is now the task of those promoting gender mainstreaming to establish this.

## References

- Cornwall, A., E. Harrison and A. Whitehead (2004) 'Introduction: Repositioning Feminisms in Development', *IDS Bulletin: Repositioning Feminisms in Development* 35(4): 1–10.
- Dawson, E. (2005) 'Strategic Gender Mainstreaming in Oxfam GB', *Gender and Development: Mainstreaming – A Critical Review* 13(2): 80–89.
- Derbyshire, H. (2002) 'Gender Manual: A Practical Guide for Development Policy Makers and Practitioners', Social Development Division, DFID, London.
- Eveline, J., and C. Bacchi (2005) 'What Are We Mainstreaming When We Mainstream Gender?', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7(4): 496–512.
- Ferguson, J. (1994) *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Foucault, M. (1980) 'The Eye of Power', *Michael Foucault: Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. G. Colin, G. Fraise et al., Harvester, Brighton.
- Goetz, A.M. (1998) 'Mainstreaming Gender Equity into National Development Planning', in C. Miller and S. Razavi (eds), *Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions*, UNRISD, London.
- Grosz, E. (1986) 'What is Feminist Theory?', in C. Pateman and E. Grosz (eds), *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Haraway, D. (1997) 'Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Partial Perspective', in L. McDowell and J.P. Sharp (eds), *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, Edward Arnold, London.
- International Labour Organization (2002) *The ILO Gender Audit*, ILO, Geneva.

- Kabeer, N. (1994) 'Gender Aware Policy and Planning: A Social Relations Perspective', in M. Macdonald (ed.), *Gender Planning in Development Agencies: Meeting the Challenge*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Khan, Z. (2003) *Closing the Gap: Putting EU and UK Gender Policy into Practice – South Africa, Nicaragua, and Bangladesh*, One World Action, London.
- Kusakabe, K. (2005) 'Gender Mainstreaming in Government Offices in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos: Perspectives from Below', *Gender and Development: Mainstreaming – A Critical Review* 13(2): 46–56.
- Lukes, S. (2005) *Power: A Radical View*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Macdonald, M. (1994) *Gender Planning in Development Agencies: Meeting the Challenge*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- McDowell, L. (1997) 'Doing Gender: Feminism, Feminists, and Research Methods in Human Geography', in L. McDowell and J.P. Sharp (eds), *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, Edward Arnold, London.
- McDowell, L., and J.P. Sharp (eds) (1997) *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, Edward Arnold, London.
- Melrose, D. (1999) 'Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Experiences of Senior Management', in F. Porter, I.A. Smyth and C. Sweetman (eds), *Gender Works: Oxfam Experience in Policy and Practice*, Oxfam, Oxford.
- Moser, C. (2005) 'Has Gender Mainstreaming Failed?' *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7(4): 576–90.
- Moser, C., and A. Moser (2005) 'Gender Mainstreaming Since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions', *Gender and Development* 13(2): 11–22.
- Mowles, C. (forthcoming) 'Values in Organizations: Negotiating Non-Negotiables', *Development in Practice*.
- Mukhopadhyay, M. (2004) 'Mainstreaming Gender or 'Streaming' Gender Away: Feminists Marooned in the Development Business', *IDS Bulletin: Repositioning Feminisms in Development* 35(4): 95–103.
- Nicholson, T. (1994) 'Institution Building: Examining the Fit between Bureaucracies and Indigenous Systems', in S. Wright (ed.), *Anthropology of Organizations*, Routledge, London.
- Oxfam GB (1993) *Gender and Development: Oxfam's Policy for its Programme*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Oxfam GB (1996) *Learning about Gender and Change: Report on the Gender Policy Implementation Workshop*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Oxfam GB (2002) *Executive Summaries of the Gender Review Evaluations*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Oxfam GB (2005) *Beyond Gender Mainstreaming: Understanding Mechanisms for Improved Impact on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Oxfam GB (2006) *Aim 5 Gender Equity Global Meeting Notes*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Piálek, N. (2007) 'Gender Mainstreaming in Development Organizations: The Perils of Organizational Change', in N. Payne (ed.), *Building Feminist Movements and Experience: Lessons from Diverse Experiences*, Zed Books, London.
- Porter, M. (1999) 'Caught in the Web? Feminists Doing Development', in M. Porter and E.R. Judd (eds), *Feminists Doing Development: A Practical Critique*, Zed Books, London.
- Porter, F., and C. Sweetman (2005) 'Editorial 2', *Gender and Development* 13(2): 2–10.
- Rao, A., and R. Stuart (1997) 'Rethinking Organizations: A Feminist Perspective', *Gender and Development* 5(1): 10–16.

- Rathgeber, E. (1990) 'WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice', *Journal of Developing Areas* 24 (July): 489–502.
- Razavi, S., and C. Miller (1995) 'Gender Mainstreaming: A Study of Efforts by the UNDP, the World Bank and the ILO to Institutionalize Gender Issues', *UNRISD Occasional Paper* 4.
- Smith, S. (1995) 'People, Programme and Policy from a Gender Perspective', Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Smyth, I.A. (1999) 'NGOs in a Post-Feminist Era', in M. Porter and E.R. Judd (eds), *Feminists Doing Development: A Practical Critique*, Zed Books, London.
- Smyth, I. (2005) 'Report on the Gender Action Plan Review', Oxfam GB, Oxford.
- Stacey, J. (1997) 'Can There be a Feminist Ethnography?', in L. McDowell and J.P. Sharp, *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, Edward Arnold, London.
- Standing, H. (2004) 'Gender, Myth and Fable: The Perils of Mainstreaming in Sector Bureaucracies', *IDS Bulletin: Repositioning Feminisms in Development* 35(4): 82–8.
- Subrahmanian, R. (2004) 'Making Sense of Gender in Shifting Institutional Contexts: Some Reflections on Gender Mainstreaming', *IDS Bulletin: Repositioning Feminisms in Development* 35(4): 89–94.
- Tiessen, R. (2004) 'Re-inventing the Gendered Organization: Staff Attitudes Towards Women and Gender Mainstreaming in NGO's in Malawi', *Gender, Work and Organization* 11(6): 689–708.
- Walby, S. (2005) 'Introduction: Comparative Gender Mainstreaming in a Global Era', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7(4): 453–70.
- Walker, B. (1999) 'Changing the Rules: Implementing a Gender Policy through Organizational Procedures', in F. Porter, I.A. Smyth and C. Sweetman, *Gender Works: Oxfam Experience in Policy and Practice*, Oxfam GB, Oxford.