

What Is Gender at Work's Approach to Gender Equality and Institutional Change?

Our work is underpinned by a commitment to transform institutions. We posit a conceptual framework that connects rights with institutions in a process of social change.

There is a growing consensus that to make significant impact on gender inequity, we must change institutions. By institutions we mean the rules (stated and implicit) that maintain women's unequal position in societies. The terms 'institution' and 'organization' are often used synonymously, but we find it useful to distinguish between the two. We understand *institutions* as the rules for achieving social or economic ends¹. In other words, the rules determine who gets what, what counts, who does what, and who decides. These rules include values that maintain the gendered division of labor, prohibitions on women owning land, restrictions on women's mobility, and perhaps most fundamentally the devaluing of reproductive work. *Organizations* are the social structures created to accomplish particular ends but which embody the institutions prevalent in a society.

Although much has been accomplished toward gender equality, it is still true that in no region of the world are women and men equal in legal, social or economic rights². We believe that this is because the bulk of development and human rights work toward gender inequality ignores the role of the institutions (formal and informal) that maintain women's unequal position.

One clear understanding that has emerged is that institutions change (in large part) as a result of the actions of organizations. Whenever an organization intervenes in the life of a community it has the on-going choice as to whether to challenge or support existing community gender-related norms. For example, when members of BRAC³ village organizations began to raise the issue of arbitrary divorces or unjust actions regarding inheritances, BRAC chose to start a para-legal program which was able to advise village women as to their rights and thereby challenge the authority of men in the village to act outside the law. This action and others like it require challenging the power of those who benefit from the status quo. Most organizations have neither the inclination nor the capacity to challenge institutional norms. This is why organizational change work is so critical to this enterprise.

Our work links organizational change, institutional change and gender equality. Our conception of institutional change is multi-factorial and holistic. It is concerned with the individual psychology of women and men, their access to resources and the social structures in which they live. From the point of view of an organization intervening to change gender-biased institutions, change must happen in two places - outside the organization and within.

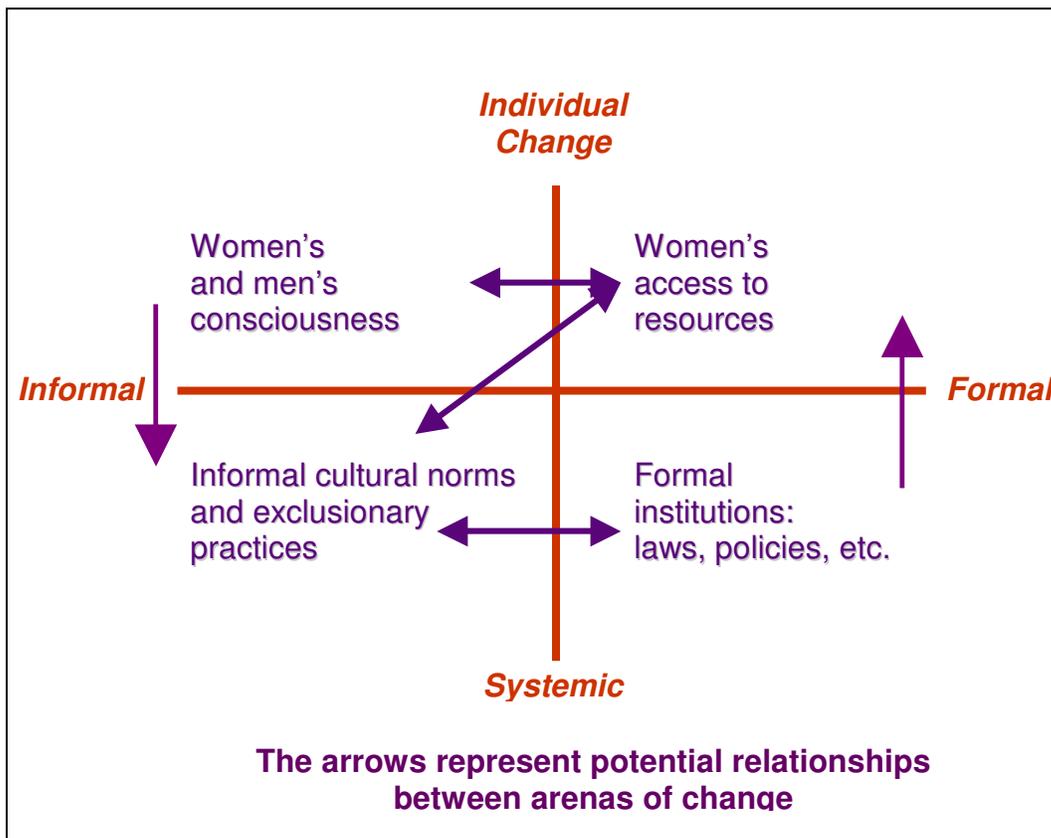
¹ Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London: Verso, 1994.

² World Bank, *Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*, Washington: World Bank, 2001.

³ BRAC is one of the world's largest indigenous rural development organizations working with over 2 million poor rural and urban women in Bangladesh.

The following diagram⁴ (Figure 1) is an effort to show the changes required outside the organization. The figure is called, “What are we trying to change?” and shows the four interrelated clusters of changes that need to be made. The top two clusters are individual (changes in measurable individual conditions -resources, voice, freedom from violence, access to health) and individual consciousness (knowledge, skills, political consciousness and commitment to change toward equality). The bottom two clusters are systemic. The cluster on the right is of formal institutional rules as laid down in constitutions, laws and policies. The cluster on the left is the informal norms and cultural practices that maintain inequality in everyday practices. Change in one quadrant is related to change in the others. The arrows show possible directions of relationship.

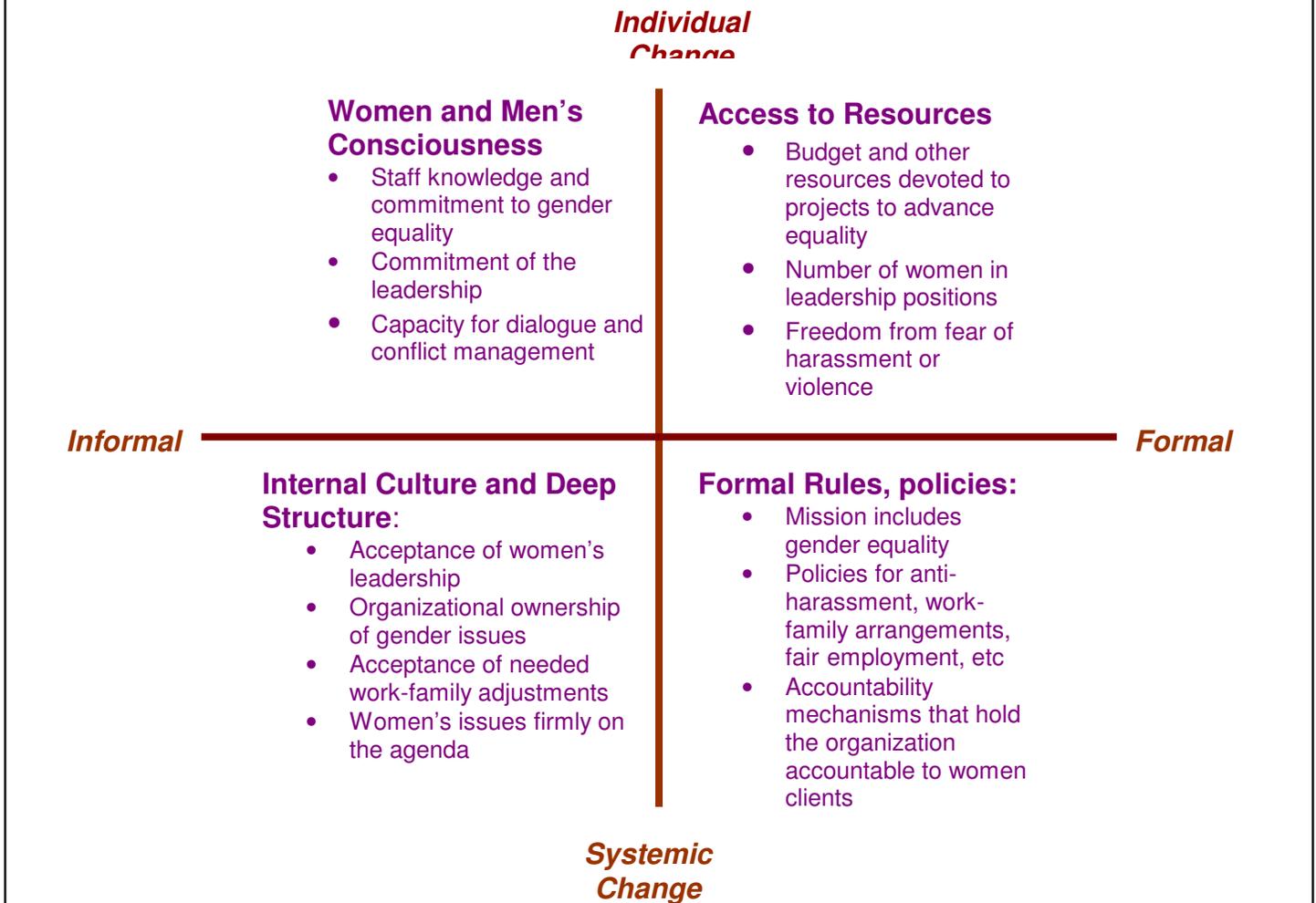
Figure 1: What are we trying to change?



In order for an organization to act as an agent of change in one or more of the clusters it must have certain capabilities and cultural attributes. Among these are a particular type of leadership, accountability to women clients, and a capacity for dialogue and conflict resolution. We have developed a similar framework for the changes required within an organization (see Figure 2 below). Similar to the earlier framework, the quadrants affect each other in a variety of ways.

⁴ This framework is an adaptation of the work of Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*, Boston: Shambala, 2000

Figure 2: What are we trying to change within Organizations?



Of particular interest to us is the bottom left quadrant or the “deep structure”.

In our work, we have described the ‘deep structure’ of organizations that, like the unconscious of individuals, is largely unexamined, but constrains some behavior and makes other behavior more likely (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher 1999). The deep structure is the collection of taken-for-granted values, ways of thinking and working that underlies decision-making and action. Power hides the fact that organizations are gendered at very deep levels. More specifically, women are prevented from challenging institutions by four inter-related factors:

- **Political access:** There are neither systems nor powerful actors who can bring women's perspectives and interests to the table;
- **Accountability systems:** Organisational resources are steered toward quantitative targets that are often only distantly related to institutional change for gender equality;
- **Cultural systems:** The work-family divide perpetuated by most organisations prevents women from being full participants in those organisations, as women continue to bear the responsibility for child and elderly care; and

- **Cognitive structures:** Work itself is seen mostly within existing, gender-biased norms and understandings.

It should not come as a surprise to learn that the deep structure of most organizations is profoundly gender biased, and acts as a brake on work for gender equality. For example, one aspect of the deep structure is the separation between work and family. As Joan Acker pointed out, a key assumption in large organizations is that work is completely separate from the rest of life, and the organization has first claim on the worker. From this follows the idea of the 'ideal worker', dedicated to the organization, unhampered by familial demands, and ...*male* (Acker 1990). Another aspect of the deep structure is the image of heroic individualism. As organizations were originally peopled by men they are, not surprisingly, designed and maintained in ways that express men's identity. Heroic individualism can lead to a focus on winning, and noticeable achievement. This contrasts with the largely processual, and sometimes long-term, business of understanding gender relations in a particular context, and acting for equality. As well, given stereotypic gender roles, heroes tend to be men, further contributing to the idea of men as the ideal worker and women as 'other'.

If the above framework is a picture of what an organization must become, the next question is how does an organization change toward this ideal.

We believe that there is a web of five spheres in which power can be generated to move an organization toward transformation⁵. These five spheres are:

1. Politics
2. Organizational Politics
3. Institutional Culture
4. Organizational Process
5. Programmatic Interventions

The political sphere: This is based on the assumption that because they live within gendered societies, few organizations will devote the time, energy, and resources to effective gender equality work unless pressured to do so. But is there a women's constituency that is exerting sufficient pressure for gender equality to be noticed by the organization as an issue requiring attention? In some cases donors or boards of directors have been the source of some pressure, but local, political pressure has more potential for holding organizations accountable. The key skills required are organization and advocacy. The pressure generated by this sphere may have many results, but they are dependent on work in the other spheres.

Organizational politics: This refers to the day-to-day bargaining that goes on between bureaucratic leaders as they struggle to make their particular views a reality. This sphere is about access of gender advocates to power, their bargaining ability, and skill in the use of power. Power is built from position, coalitions, clarity of analysis and purpose, and assets such as access to senior levels, and the ability to provide valued goods (information, technical expertise, material resources). The strong voice of an outside constituency is a tremendous asset, but far from all that is needed for a bureaucratic

⁵ This framework owes much to previous work in this field, but particularly to Graham Allison (1969) and Caren Levy (1996).

player. The outcome of bureaucratic 'victories' may be stronger policy, or increased resources, or even the evolution of an alternative organizational culture.

Institutional culture: Institutional culture is that collection of values, history, and ways of doing things that form the unstated rules of the game in an organization. Most importantly, culture defines what is valued as being truly important in the organization (often at odds with official mission statements). This sphere is important because of its capacity to make things happen as well as to block them. Another way to describe culture is as organizational ideology: 'Ideology is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of perceiving and analyzing social reality — virtually, ways of thinking and perceiving' (Batliwala 1996, 2). Culture then, can be a powerful ally in making work on gender equality a valued part of the organization's work: the normal, the reasonable, 'just good development' (Rao *et al.* 1999). Similarly, culture can exclude — making the organization difficult for women — and force a focus on 'harder', more 'real', outcomes (such as infrastructure projects). Cultures are generally changed by the influence of leaders, and by the understanding of others that the new directions are valuable.

Organizational process: This is the vehicle that turns the intangibles of bureaucratic politics, organizational culture, and political pressure into organizational action. This happens through programmes, policies, and services. The question is whether there are sufficient resources, and sufficient skilled and knowledgeable people, to lead the process of learning and change. Ultimately, knowledge must be spread through the organization, and gender equality must become part of the organizational skill set, along with other aspects of development. If resources and expertise are the grease of organizational process, then approval mechanisms that require gender analyses are the drivers. For example, some development agencies require a gender analysis and strategy as a component of all projects. Finally, because gender equality has never been achieved, organizational learning needs to be seen as a key capacity. This leads us to work on the ground.

Programmatic interventions: These constitute the last (and first) sphere of power. It is here that the work of the other spheres is validated. It is also here that the organization delivers value or not. In the area of gender equality, what is of value is still contested. What used to be thought of as good practice is now challenged as insufficient. What this means is that this sphere must be energized by applied research, and by the development of new methodologies that can make a difference. These methodologies must also capture the attention and support of other parts of the organization, as well as its partners.

Figure 3 shows some of the relationships between these spheres of power. Even when the focus is at this level, however, we have reservations regarding the usefulness of organizational change strategies for making large organizations more interested in working towards gender equality. These strategies are helpful when managers feel strong and continued pressure to change. But in many cases, in large multilateral organizations, the pressure for work on gender equality is intermittent and muted. The difficulty with governmental systems is similar: seldom is there significant pressure to take gender equality seriously, and many government officials are in any case isolated from the pressure.



Our approach builds on these understandings of what needs to change and how organizations can facilitate change. It stresses collaborative reflection and analysis, action and evaluation in ways that put power relations and women at the center of the change project.