

# **Making the Voices of the Invisible Heard: Challenges for Gender Transformative Change in Organisations**

**Prepared for the CGIAR Workshop “Gender Transformative Approaches in Agricultural Research for Development: Evidence, Experiences and Way Forward**

**Jeannette Gurung, PhD**

**WOCAN**

This paper is based on a case study of how organizational change occurs through the resistance and subjectivity of actors, within an international organization engaged in agriculture and natural resource management knowledge generation and sharing, where I was leading a gender mainstreaming program for five years. As such, it serves as evidence of the challenges to gender transformative approaches in one organization, viewed from the perspective of inside actors and points to ways to support such change processes.

## **Introduction**

Much of the research on organizational change – germane to any discussion of gender mainstreaming and women’s agency- has been conducted by organizational outsiders permitted inside only with management’s approval for short periods of time. This has produced a body of research that has, by and large emphasized the agency of managers over that of other organizational members, thus missing a source of cultural richness and varying perspectives that would allow a better understanding of the complexities that characterise organizational cultures and explain how they change. By studying only dominant groups within organizations rather than groups attempting to change society, social scientists provide a skewed image.

Scholars who write from the position of “Other” have long had propensities to study their own group, often emphasizing the practical uses of the research to support their own people. The production of narratives of “voices from within” - neglected groups such as women in organizations - provides us with specialized knowledge that can contribute multidimensional and alternative views of reality to enlarge the conceptual and epistemological basis of knowledge. This, in turn, throws up new possibilities and sources of guidance for change initiatives. When change is desired to improve an organization to meet goals of either efficiency or social justice and equality, knowledge of perspectives and forms of resistance and agency from non-dominant groups is critical.

The very act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change, because the paucity of research about certain groups accentuates and perpetuates their powerlessness. The views of groups whose needs and opinions are not widely known have less influence on the conditions perpetuating the status quo. The study of these groups is political because it “demystifies” and raises consciousness. Studies that ask questions that challenge vested interests are especially valuable to the process of change.

In-depth knowledge of the perspectives and activities of various female actors – including

myself- who occupied the position of “Other” by way of their gender and nationality in one international organization (called herewith ‘INORG’) serves to illuminate the often hidden ways in which such actors enact resistance to dominant views and forms of power. Those who can view organizations from this “subaltern” perspective gain a new way to think of organizations that incorporates a more holistic and complex reality. By emphasizing the unequal status experienced by some organizational members, such an approach offers possibilities for change.

Case studies of initiatives on behalf of women can illuminate why certain strategies succeed and others fail. Documenting the gendered nature of everyday practices inside a development organization makes the reader familiar with perspectives previously unknown to him or her - those of women professional organizational members – to reduce the resistance to women’s requests for equality in their organizational lives. As well, this may serve to give name and shape to the disempowering aspects of women’s professional lives, and by doing so, contribute to their abilities to resist practices that hinder gender equality. These insights are highly relevant to the gender transformative approaches now being planned in the CGIAR and other similar organizations.

### **Challenges to organizational transformation for gender equality**

The findings of the case study of INORG point to the challenges to organizational transformation posed by structures, cultures and strategies actively and sometimes, consciously, employed by senior men and some women in the organization to maintain existing inequities.

Structural features are significant determinants of gender differentiations within organizations. But without a close assessment of the power relations that determine these structures, one can conclude that they are gender neutral and easily “fixed” with the establishment of policies, committees and procedures. From the analysis, it can be concluded that these structures of inequality were in fact, actively maintained by senior men and a few women at INORG. Though individually these members may not have had the intention to control women consciously, through patterns of habit, communication, and the hierarchy itself, their actions collectively appeared as attempts to actively maintain structural barriers to women’s equal participation in the organization. Structurally, therefore, INORG was ill-equipped to transform itself into a gender equitable organization, not just because it reflected the gender relations in the wider society, but because of the hierarchy and system of power that itself was a gendering process.

An examination of informal processes, leadership and organizational norms within INORG demonstrated that cultural factors may provide a more insightful analysis of how gender identities are produced and replicated within an organization. Behind the scenes, actions by senior male staff enacting hidden forms of power contributed to the neutral appearance of power and served to blind the gender advocates and other staff to the internal processes of discrimination. This blindness became apparent late in the process, when it became clear that as the prominence of gender issues increased, so did the resistance. INORG’s formal leaders, far from being sources able to counter-act this

gender unfairness, were perceived by many women and men to be sources of ambiguity themselves, by giving mixed messages about policies that were not confirmed through their own behaviours and practices.

The view of power employed in the case study sees the organization as a set of discourses that contributes to the construction of gendered identities and behaviours affected by one's structural placement within the hierarchy and one's historical background. An understanding of gendered power requires an exploration of the ideologies, discourses and material relations that influence each other in a self-perpetuating way. Power is not only that coercive, gendered power of men to physically prevent women from entering into organizations and advancing on an equal basis, but also in terms of the use of discourse and communication to dissuade women from resisting that situation – the power of ideological conditioning. Almost perversely, women, or those in the margins, develop meaning from these very same ideologies that subjugate them, through a process that contributes to a multiplicity of identities (Ortner 2006).

Three events at INORG provided context-specific opportunities to observe acts of resistance and agency that both challenged and complied with existing gender norms in the organization as men and women engaged in “battles for meaning”. The chronological sequence of the events was significant, as it followed the changes in attitudes and behaviours of the DG, senior men and women, and showed the turning points in actor's strategies and behaviours as the gender agenda progressed from that of gender integration to women's empowerment. But without careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their agency, research on individual agency can be misleading, giving a perception that intention is all that is required for effective human agency. Organizations are arenas where gender politics are played out, sometimes in subtle ways. Anti-discriminatory policies may address the symptoms, but not the causes, which are maintained in the dominant ideologies and expressed under some conditions.

Strategies used by actors resisting and supporting dominant organizational ideologies and norms are explained by understandings of identity, agency and resistance; the three are closely linked and changing as the subjectivity of the actors interacts with the local context to activate behaviours that position the actors in a struggle for meaning. Individuals have multiple identities that are played out or hidden, depending on the salience of the setting and power relations. These appear as ambivalent and sometimes conflicting.

Identity was found to be a motive for resistance. Agency was examined through a discussion of individual and group acts of compliance and resistance, and actions of women resisting change. Resistance was aimed at the preservation of a balance between the valued selves, to reinstate a more or less stable state of mutual accommodation between opposing actors or groups of actors.

### **Implications for organizational transformation**

The gender identities of at least some of the women and men at INORG were affected by

acts of agency and resistance that were played out as part of the struggle for meaning over gender ideologies, symbols and interactions. Many members gained a gender awareness through the sessions and courses that served to heighten the gender differences within the organization and society at large. The continual process of reflection within the organization encouraged members to question their values and identities. The focus on gender difference in some ways polarised the staff to take sides. Some men and women were in favour of changing gender norms and the organizational structures and cultures that supported them; as described, some women responded to Management's increased levels of control through active resistance that evolved into agency; others chose to remain silent and supportive of the status quo. The gender identities of men were asserted more strongly, in response to the political actions for gender equality in ways both direct and indirect.

Despite heightened awareness and political action, these were not able to significantly transform gender relations, perhaps due to the hegemony of male power and management. And yet, given the symbolic value of resistance, women's acts of agency and resistance were laden with meaning, as women asserted their own views and identities. In this way, the women may have changed the organization in individual, fragmented and subtle ways that affected others as well as themselves, but the effects were small in scale and cultural more than structural.

The most significant change in gender identities occurred when women collectively resisted the DG's attempts to exert control over the meaning of their experiences as women in the organization. The anger and hurt they felt by his actions and remarks stirred many to question his knowledge and leadership, and brought about an assertion in their identities as women that was privileged over other identities as secretaries, Nepalese, Western, professionals, etc. This evolved into agency – a more proactive form of subjectification that apparently threatened the male power system enough to warrant a strong reaction from Management and several male professionals.

The most significant and effective strategy used by the dominant men in power was their attempt to control the meaning of events and behaviours of actors, through actions that either legitimised or delegitimised these based on their ideologies and strategies of power. The DG's verbal and literary statements that disaffirmed women's experiences by declaring them mere perceptions served to privilege rational, objective knowledge over the women's subjective knowledge that would have challenged his notion of fairness that he believed existed within the organization under his control. His use of censorship served the same purpose – to control the organizational discourse on gender relations within INORG.

Another strategy employed by both the DG and the senior men was to divide the group of women and break up the sense of solidarity that existed by denying them the recognition of their common identity as women. By questioning the Western women's abilities to understand women of South Asia, castigating Nepalese women for joining this "foreign" movement, and enticing the junior female gender staff to join their ranks, they influenced women to focus on those aspects of their identities that affirmed their differences based on nationalities, religion and class, rather than their common identities as women.

Exclusion was the simplest and most commonly used tactic by men at all levels to keep information, resources and power out of the hands of women. Stalling on compliance with requests from the Gender Unit, Gender Working Group and Gender Task Force was another means of avoiding action and slowing the progress on gender equality. When the Management Committee finally gave in to the women's demands for representation, they did so only under their own terms, not allowing women the same status as the men within the Committee by forcing them to rotate the representation. For this act of "inclusion", they devised a new set of rules that applied only to the women – another strategy to maintain the existing power and gender relations.

### **Strategies to Counter Resistance**

Those women and men who resisted the dominant gender ideologies and norms initially used reflection and awareness to build support for their agenda, and to attract more staff to the group. This was done both formally through gender training courses and in-house sessions and informally through discussions with both women and men. As the group of women professionals was small in number, an approach to build the numbers of supporters, both women and men was employed.

In addition, the leaders tried to build a common identity of women as a group to build support for political action, by privileging gender above other categories of identity that seemed more salient to women in the organization. Groups such as the GWG, Gender and Workplace Committee, and the Gender Task Force were formed to cut across the hierarchical lines of divisions, levels and class to build trust and solidarity. At times the leaders would purposefully position themselves in the back to allow other women to speak and take leadership roles in ways that felt comfortable to them, in their own style.

The strategy included the elicitation of men's participation in key groups and committees, and transparency with the whole staff through open communication of the activities and reports of these groups and the Gender Programme. In this way, women attempted to form a subculture of gender sensitive members to encourage reflection and articulate alternative views. A major strategic push by this group was to attain a space for women in the Management Committee, to gain a voice and access to information and decision making processes.

The use of outside allies was a strategy attempted by the group of women, but one that was not effective. One particular donor could have been a powerful force to back INORG's gender equality initiative, as it matched closely with its own values and articulated goals, but its managers chose not to go against INORG's managers, though some of the donor staff understood that by doing so, they forfeited the agenda for transformation that they had articulated.

A strategy NOT commonly employed by women was to confront the humiliation and abuse by the DG and men of the organization. With the exception of my one-time confrontation with the DG, and one woman's extensive use of memos, women did not voice their feelings of hurt and anger generated by men's jokes and putdowns. Women were without the internal resources - mentors or trusted advisors – who could have

assisted them in the “art of resistance” or in how to lead others.

A comparison of the strategies used by the groups dominated by men and by women, respectively, showed that men’s strategies were based on their position of power in the hierarchy, allowing them to determine the rules and set the public discourse. Women’s strategies tended to focus on social relations, building power through inclusion and a sense of common identity rather than formal, authoritarian base of power. In retrospect, the strategies employed by the DG, and by men in a group were far more effective and long lasting than those used by the women and their supporters to gain a stronger position for women. This may be due to the relatively short term of the gender “movement” or its limited success in making structural changes.

In sum, the powerful men of INORG allowed women’s agency on terms they themselves dictated and controlled. When women’s actions moved beyond what was considered acceptable, the result was a backlash against individual women and the gender mainstreaming agenda in general. In this way, the full extent and potential of women’s agency was suppressed, and its significance therefore limited in impact. But the challenge to existing notions of gender identity that altered many women’s sense of self and sense of gender fairness in the organization may never be erased, sowing the seeds for a future realisation of gender transformation in this organization or any other where these INORG women may join.

### **How Change Occurs**

But can such transformative change occur through purposeful manipulations of organizational structures and cultures, or does it occur through unforeseen and unplanned events that may enter the organization from outside due to economic, social or political shifts in the society-at-large?

Drawing on practice theory, I argue that individuals do play a determining role in the reproduction and change of structural features of organizations. Individual perceptions of gender relations offer the possibility for change, as members gain a consciousness of the everyday practices that maintain gendered oppression and act in ways to resist and modify the cultural assumptions that underlie the asymmetries of power and resources. The exercise of power at the individual level can erode or transform embedded power relations at the organizational level.

The organizational culture assumes significance because of the type of people in power, the cultural norms that uphold their positions of power, and the structures and systems that reflect dominant ideologies about power. The masculine nature of these notions and systems reinforces organizational members’ resistance to challenge these deeply embedded features, and allows gender mainstreaming to exist as an “add-on” programme. In this context, organizational leaders can be assured that such an initiative can never grow beyond its marginal status. The feminist ideals of empowerment cannot be realised in such an environment; a weakness of the movement within INORG was the absence of an outside constituency that could support us by putting pressure on Management to fulfill its rhetorical promises.

Individual subjectivities are key to the process. Identity is contingent upon a set of social relations; it is not fixed, but neither is it purely arbitrary in that some meta-narratives have deep historical resonance and durability. A psychological need for a positive identity motivated women at INORG to break a long period of silence under a punitive authoritarian manager to make a commitment to change and to take constructive action in a hostile environment. Without such motivation, a gender mainstreaming agenda is nothing more than a structural tool that cannot be relied on to meet gender equality objectives. Yet the “serious games of life” – (Ortner, 1996:12)- the betrayals, shifting loyalties and alliances that comprise women’s relationships at the workplace – make such an agenda problematic and stressful for those engaged in the process.

Using this theory, organizations can be understood as just a backdrop, a historically-situated context wherein actors shape and reshape, create and recreate identity through formal and informal policies and practices. These new subjectivities are expressed under conditions perceived to be favourable to the actor, or “hidden” when not favourable. Without a leader to continually keep the change agenda alive, women’s agency there may go into a dormant stage. Resistance may still lie within, having simply become less observable. Even if they go unwitnessed, acts of resistance have tremendous symbolic value, and the power to challenge the normative order.

The hope is that these small acts of agency and resistance will create spaces – both structural and cultural – that will pave the way for more significant acts of transformation in the future. Narratives are key elements of the change process, as part of sense making. Subversive stories resist and subvert hegemonic narratives by breaking the silence (Ewick and Silbey, 1995), recounting experiences rooted in an encompassing cultural, historical, material and political world that extends beyond the local. Because such narratives make connections between individual experience and the gendering processes within the organization, their transformational potential is high.

### **Moving Forward – A Political Process**

Transformative change cannot occur simply through a tinkering with structures and practices but requires challenging the existing systems of power. Power is not only mobilised by actors, or social structures, or discourses but is all of these things. Strategies of interventions must take all of these sources of power into account in order to transform gender relations in organizations.

But how does cultural resistance foster such political engagement? Vital to the process of transformation is an understanding of its temporal aspects. It is a sequential process, unfolding over time. First, by freeing minds from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture, it provides a space ideologically to create new language, meanings and visions of the future, and materially as a place to build networks and a focal point for a “community of resistance.” Within this space, a group of actors can develop the skills and resources for resistance.

Once new visions, skills, confidence and alliances are in place, the step to collective forms of political resistance is made easier. This can take many forms, suited to

individual actors and their self-perceived identities.

Political self-consciousness is the next step in transformation. This arises from a personal and emotional experience that links consciousness to a larger frame of meaning, thus uniting members behind a common cause. Given a conceptual frame of understanding, like that provided in a gender training, actors can break the sense of isolation they feel as outsiders to the dominant culture, and diminish the psychological strains of maintaining “loyalty” to organizations that do not value their subjectivities as women, ethnic minorities, etc. This is a critical step, as in many organizations, the requirements of conformity and loyalty stifle all voices of alternative views and dissent, and so diffuse the power of their adherents.

And yet the “common cause” that is used to build support for the gender movement is based on a structural view of power that this case study has shown offers only a partial explanation of how an organization is gendered and why resistance is so deeply embedded. This points to a problem in the use of poststructural views of power by those who lead an agenda for change.

My own understanding of the nature of power that has changed through the production of this thesis is a significant part of the “sense-making” process that I engaged in. My understanding of the poststructural aspects of power evolved only after leaving the organization to write up this thesis. Initially, in 1995. I was more likely to believe, along with the DG, that a combination of right policies, training and guidelines would, in a functionalist way, “balance” the gender relations and remediate gender unfairness within the organization. By 1999, after years of long delays by Management and increasingly hostile conditions for some women, my belief that decisions and behaviours were being influenced by rationality and authoritarian leadership broke down; if power could be described in such a functionalist manner, I thought, we should have had a unit to coordinate the crosscutting theme of gender long ago.

For some time, the view of power as a structural impediment, expressed through patriarchy and male power seemed more accurate. Certainly this view is well-supported in South Asia, and there are many narratives, opinions and incidents that guide one to think of power in this way.

It was not until I stepped out of the context and started writing that I was able to see the gendering of INORG as a poststructural drama, complete with the on-stage and off-stage enactments of its members. It was particularly a few events and the incidents of surprise that pointed me in this direction. Shifts in behaviours and friendships, inexplicable actions of men and women who I thought I knew well at the time created a great deal of pain and confusion for me and served as further motivation for this sense-making exercise that I engaged in at the PhD level. Stepping out was critical, and provided me with an opportunity to see the ambiguity, the fluidity of human action and therefore the possibilities for (and constraints to) change.

Resistance can be performed by various social units –from individuals who try to challenge the system alone, to subcultures that create a space for shared, inclusive set of



cultural values and practices, to societies that completely overthrow the dominant system in a revolution, at which time the culture of resistance becomes the dominant culture.

Leaders play a key role in this process of moving from cultural resistance to political transformation. They cannot change cultures, but can appropriate cultural resources and create spaces for agency, allowing shifts in consciousness and subjectivities that WILL bring about cultural changes. This is what appeared to have happened within INORG to bring about the perceived change at the cultural level. There is no data to show that these results were due to my actions. If the changes in culture cannot be attributed to actions of the DG or senior men, as is postulated in this thesis, then neither can the “successes” be credited to acts of leadership. Much of it seems, on reflection, to be based on the combination of personalities, personal histories, and forms of power enacted by the key actors. For instance, had the DG not been a man who used authoritative power in combination with male power so effectively, it is dubious that women of the region for whom patriarchy was a way of life would have reacted with such emotion and collective resistance. There is no recipe for gender awareness that can assure this level of mobilization.

Dominant male cultures affect the possibilities of social transformation but “challenging women” (Maddock, 1999) can initiate and sustain a process of active negotiation of gender relationships by developing a consciousness of power and gender oppression through the inclusion of excluded voices and creation of supportive organizational environments for women and all staff considered as “Other”.

## **References**

- Gurung, J.D, 2004. Narratives of Resistance: Enacting Gender in An International Development Organization. Unpublished thesis, School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia.
- Maddock, S., 1999 Challenging Women: Gender, Culture and Organization, London: Sage.
- Ortner, S. 1996 Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ortner, S. 2006. Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject. Duke University Press. Durham and London