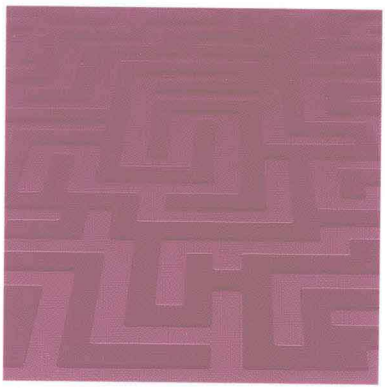
Everywhere/Nowhere

Gender Mainstreaming in Development Agencies



Rebecca Tiessen

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EVERYWHERE / NOWHERE

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

REBECCA TIESSEN

Everywhere/Nowhere: Gender Mainstreaming in Development Agencies

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Acronyms

AWLI	African Women's Leadership Institute
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
APW	Association for Progressive Women
BRAC	Formerly known as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CHRR	Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CILIC	Civil Liberties Committee
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAGG	Development Assistance Group on Gender
DFID	Department for International Development
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council (of the UN)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the UN)
GAD	Gender and Development
GBIs	Gender budget initiatives
GEM	Gender empowerment measure
GQAL	Gender quality action learning
HBC	Home-based care
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
Novib	Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Bijstand
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAW	Society for the Advancement of Women
SSHRC	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
SWAPs	Sector-wide approaches

UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	United Nations AIDS Committee
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
VCTs	Volunteer counselling and testing centres
WID	Women in Development
WiLDA	Women in Law and Development in Africa
WLSA	Women and Law in Southern Africa

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1
INTRODUCTION

"So, you know, it's not child's play, this gender thing. People think you can just do things overnight."
—interview with a woman NGO staff member, 2005

Tackling gender inequality is a long process involving a range of initiatives and the commitment of many individuals. So how do efforts to promote gender equality happen, and where do they begin? Is gender mainstreaming an effective strategy for the promotion of gender equality? Or is it a failed project? Does it offer the potential to promote gender equality? And what do we know about the development agencies that claim to be committed to gender mainstreaming? This book answers these questions by analyzing how, when, and where gender mainstreaming is adopted by development organizations. Underlying these questions is a deeper analysis of the day-to-day struggles individuals face as they negotiate gender relations in their daily work. The information presented here about the adoption, manipulation, or rejection of gender mainstreaming strategies is framed within a feminist analysis of the gendered organization and organizational masculinist cultures.

The term "gender mainstreaming" is gaining currency in a range of development entities, from donors to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Governments are also adopting gender mainstreaming as a tool for integrating gender concerns across diverse sectors. The increased adoption of the term suggests substantive changes to the ways in which organizations address gender issues. In this book I examine whether the adoption of gender mainstreaming language has signaled a shift in how development agencies, especially NGOs,

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operate, and, more precisely, whether they are better placed to address gender inequality because of it.

I begin this book by exploring the definitions and use of the term "gender mainstreaming." In general, gender mainstreaming is concerned with making gender equality central to all activities. It is important to note, however, that the term is adopted by a range of actors with diverse strategies for its implementation. Despite a widespread commitment to gender mainstreaming and achieving gender equality—as highlighted in numerous international and national policies—gender mainstreaming has been slow to translate from principles into practice. Furthermore, the day-to-day struggles for gender equality within organizations suggest that gender mainstreaming has a long way to go. Ultimately, gender mainstreaming strategies must move beyond superficial technical solutions or quick fixes that give the appearance of addressing gender inequality but do not address the causes of inequality or lead to transformative change. Real change through gender mainstreaming involves attention to the distribution of power and is harder to achieve because it requires a deeper commitment to changing organizational norms and procedures.

The material presented in this book draws on a growing body of feminist scholarship on gender and development, as well as research on gender mainstreaming from around the world. Primary data presented in this book is based on research conducted between 1996 and 2006 with development NGOs in Malawi and international NGOs based in Canada. The research builds on a number of case studies from other parts of the world, as well as several key texts, namely, *Gender at Work: Organizational Change for Equality* (Rao, Kelleher and Stuart 1999); *Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development* (Goetz 1997); *Women Development Workers: Implementing Rural Credit Programs in Bangladesh* (Goetz 2001); and *Politics of the Possible. Gender Mainstreaming and Organisational Change: Experiences from the Field* (Mukhopadhyay, Steehouwer and Wong 2006). Other scholars have contributed important insights into gender, development, and organizational analysis, and these views are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. The wealth of literature emerging on this topic offers valuable information about why gender mainstreaming is important and discusses the tools and strategies organizations can employ to address gender issues in their programs. Gender mainstreaming literature has sufficiently addressed the question of *what* gender mainstreaming is and,

to some extent, *how* it can be accomplished. Missing from this literature, however, is an analysis of the challenges of gender mainstreaming in the day-to-day activities of organizational staff members. The central question addressed in this book is *where* does gender mainstreaming happen? The findings uncover the spaces where gender mainstreaming is applied, including the physical spaces within organizations or communities, the perceptions of spaces, and the privileging of some spaces over others. I am also interested in the daily internal struggles and realities of organizational spaces. What this book adds to the existing literature is an in-depth analysis of the everyday realities of gender mainstreaming within organizations and the voices of those who grapple with gender mainstreaming strategies in their work.

Gender mainstreaming is an important concept that is widely used but not well understood. Based on ten years of field research in Malawi, with examples from case studies from other parts of the world, this book offers some critical insights into the challenges and opportunities NGOs face in their efforts to promote gender equality.

Case Studies and Research Context

Research for this book began in 1996 during a research trip to Malawi. Over a ten-year period I collected primary and secondary data on gender mainstreaming and gender and development. In addition, several other case studies of development agencies in Canada, Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world serve as reference points and comparative examples. I refer to these case studies throughout the book. These global examples involve document review and case study analysis of gender mainstreaming in multilateral agencies and NGOs, as well as national organizations from several less developed countries.

The majority of the empirical information presented here, however, is based on field research in Malawi. The detailed information obtained from research in Malawi is important because it tracks the development of gender mainstreaming activities in development agencies over a period of one decade, highlighting the progress and the challenges experienced by the NGOs. Research was carried out with international and national NGOs in Malawi.

International NGOs are organizations that have a head office, usually located in one of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC)

countries. Money for international NGOs is frequently channeled from private donations, government funding, or multilateral donors to the head office and from there to the field offices. National NGOs are organizations that are specific to one country and do not have a head office in another country. A national NGO may receive its money directly from government or multilateral donors, but it may also receive money channeled through international NGOs. Oxfam UK and Ireland, for example, administers funding to national NGOs in Malawi. Thus, national NGOs often operate in a very similar fashion to international organizations. One major difference, however, is that national NGOs are less likely to have expatriates as permanent staff. It is important to point out, though, that national NGOs do host international staff members, especially short-term interns or development workers from the global North. Nevertheless, these two categories of development NGOs share many similarities. Both international and national NGOs rely (almost exclusively) on donor funds, often from the same donors. Therefore, reporting mechanisms, recommendations for organizational changes, and institutional practices have many commonalities.

The empirical research for this study was carried out with national and international NGOs in Malawi using semistructured interviews, document review, participant observation, and survey questionnaires. The research began in 1996 with a general investigation into the gender activities within NGOs in Malawi. Between 1997 and 1998, with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), I carried out semistructured interviews with representatives (at least two staff members per organization) from ten development NGOs in Malawi. In addition, I conducted a detailed survey questionnaire and had regular contact with staff from thirty-two NGOs in Malawi. A list of the participating organizations in Malawi is provided in Appendix A. I elaborate on each of these research methods below.

Between 1996 and 1998 participant observation was made possible as a result of living in Malawi and job shadowing a staff member responsible for gender mainstreaming in a development NGO. While at this organization, I was able to observe several gender-awareness training sessions. These workshops facilitated opportunities to observe interactions among NGO staff members discussing attitudes toward gender issues in the country. Even more eye-opening was the opportunity to observe the day-to-day politics and entrenched

gender norms within the host organization. These gender norms became apparent through the comments and practices of staff members. Information was collected during staff meetings, lunch hour conversations, and other informal discussions, adding depth of analysis to this study.

During this time, focus group discussions were held with four groups of male and female staff members. The focus groups offered an opportunity for NGO staff members to exchange ideas with each other. As the facilitator of these discussions, I asked the focus group participants to comment on societal perceptions and expectations of men and women, how these perceptions have changed over time, and the impact that attitudes and stereotypes have on girls, boys, education, economic development, and social change. Another important source of information from this period of research was an evaluation of one particular NGO. In-depth interviews were carried out with ten staff members from this organization. Projects, programs, proposals for funding, and reports were analyzed to determine the extent to which gender mainstreaming was practiced.

Additional interviews were held with key informants in various positions and from different levels within organizations. These staff members included representatives from senior management and program management (middle management), as well as field staff and staff responsible for gender mainstreaming (often junior and secretarial or administrative staff). During the initial research between 1996 and 1998, a total of twenty NGO staff members were interviewed: six women and fourteen men. The high number of male staff is a result of a low representation of women working in management and field staff positions (discussed in Chapter 4). An additional reason for the low number of women is that many female staff members were not comfortable being interviewed and thought their male counterparts would be better capable of answering interview questions.

Document review was made possible primarily through access to a resource center in one of the Malawian NGOs. The resource center held a wide range of literature and documents pertinent to Malawi. Of particular interest were the project reports and summaries conducted by NGOs in Malawi. Additional relevant documents included government and NGO plans of action and reports. The purpose of reviewing existing documents and project reports was to better understand the activities and projects that have been undertaken by development organizations in Malawi.

Follow-up data collection was carried out in 2001 and 2002 whereby the organizations studied earlier were asked to reflect on any changes and developments in the area of gender mainstreaming. With financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), additional research was completed between 2002 and 2006. In 2003 follow-up interviews were carried out with NGO staff to gain information and updates on gender mainstreaming strategies. In 2005 further interviews were carried out with twenty NGO staff members representing ten organizations in Malawi. Additional qualitative data was collected in 2005 through a written interview that was administered to twenty women in Malawi to determine what they perceive to be the challenges facing women in positions of leadership and the obstacles to gender equality they experience in their work and lives. In total, there were forty focus group participants, thirty-two survey questionnaire responses, ten interviews with representatives from one NGO, twenty initial interviews with two representatives each from ten NGOs, twenty follow-up interviews with ten NGOs, and twenty written interviews (via email). The diverse methods employed in this research provide a range of perspectives and insights into the challenges and opportunities for gender mainstreaming and the promotion of gender equality. The adoption of qualitative research tools allowed me to include the voices of the men and women participants.

Efforts were made to reach a range of socioeconomic groups. The beneficiaries of the development projects provided by these agencies are, for the most part, low-income rural families. Informal discussions and semistructured interviews were carried out with community members and project beneficiaries in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 2004. The majority of development NGO staff members working in the urban offices in Malawi come from a middle-class or upper-middle-class background. Many of the NGO staff members (especially extension or field staff) working in rural locations can be classified as lower-middle class by local country standards.

The NGOs participating in this study are all classified as development NGOs, with a focus on poverty reduction/elimination and environmental sustainability. The projects carried out by these NGOs include small-scale entrepreneurship (papermaking), nutrition education, fresh water management, reforestation, maternal and child health care, beekeeping, sanitation management, and health programs. When I began this research, funding for these organizations was primarily earmarked for environmental management and health

projects. In later visits, the NGO staff indicated a reduction in funding for environmental programs and an increase for health programs, especially HIV/AIDS mitigation and prevention projects. This shift reflects, to a large extent, changes in donor priorities but also national concerns.

Malawi-based NGOs operate within a number of networks and coordinating units, and they define themselves based on areas of specialization. The main categories of specialization include human rights, women's organizations, agriculture and food security, education and training, health (including work with the disabled), youth (orphans and street children), relief management, enterprise development and credit management, family planning, and environmental management. The NGOs operate within three major regions in the country (north, central, and south).

Over the course of ten years, I got to know many of the NGO staff members well, and I appreciate their willingness to participate in the repeated visits and interviews I requested for this research. Some NGOs were more open to discussion about gender issues than others. Overall, development NGO workers in Malawi are familiar with the language associated with gender mainstreaming, gender equality, and empowerment. Their familiarity stems from the long-standing requirement by donors that staff members address gender issues in their work. NGO workers talked about donor demands to address these issues in funding proposals, programs, projects, and reports. Some NGO staff members talked about these donor requirements with disdain, noting that they did not see gender issues as relevant to their work, or to Malawi more generally. The people interviewed for this research knew that they were required to discuss gender issues and how their organizations have implemented strategies to address gender inequality. However, NGO workers were not, overall, especially enthusiastic or committed to the promotion of gender equality.

Some staff members, however, were excited to have an opportunity to share their experiences, including a group of engaged, active, and inspiring women (and a few men) who are champions for gender equality in Malawi. The range of perceptions and attitudes toward gender equality reflects the reality of gender mainstreaming: some are committed and some are going through the motions to please their donors. These sentiments are expressed in comments throughout this book. NGOs are required to meet the demands of donors; therefore NGO progress in gender mainstreaming is reflected in the prevailing

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