

## PATHWAYS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

### BUILDING CONSTITUENCIES FOR EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

#### FEMINISTS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS

Report by Rosalind Eyben on the first year of research February 2007-January 2008

"A matter of treating what [we] do in the present as a struggle to create a future out of the past" <sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

This two year long project contributes to the RPC theme *Building Constituencies for Equality and Justice*. Its purpose is to work with a small number of feminist activists working from inside international development organisations (bilateral, multilateral and INGO) that are shaping discourse and supporting or blocking policy action in relation to women's empowerment.

The change the research is seeking to effect is twofold:

- (1) to enable those feminists directly engaged in the research to become more effective practitioners by studying and reflecting on their own experiences and sharing among each other their strategies for change
- (2) through a range of media to disseminate more widely what the project has learnt about these pathways through bureaucracies so as to strengthen the capacity for feminist activists to make their organisations - and the wider system of which these organisations are part - better adapted to promoting women's empowerment.

### Activities

The project commenced in February 2008 with an evening meeting in New York and involving nine participants where the initial set of research questions were discussed and modified (see annexe).

Since that meeting, I have recorded structured conversations with ten persons (more than one such conversation with three of the participants) and have transcripts relating to these<sup>2</sup>. Six of these people (all women) had been present at the New York meeting, plus four others. Participants are head office staff from multilateral agencies, donor governments and big international NGOs.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Abrams 1982 *Historical Sociology*: Somerset: Open Books Publishing:8

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, I was burgled immediately after a return from a trip during which I had recorded a conversation with one participant which I was unable to download before losing my digital recorder.

Some participants have a long experience of working in global policy spaces while others are relative newcomers. Their specific responsibilities and working environments vary considerably. What they share is a passionate commitment to shaping these environments, both within and beyond their organisation so that these support the realisation of women's rights.

In addition to these conversations, I have been a participant observer at meetings or conferences at which one or more of the research participants were playing a leading role. The aim has been to discuss with them thereafter the processes I was observing them involved in. I aim to continue to do this whenever possible in the coming year.

It is hoped to have the majority of those involved able to meet together before the end of 2008. An application for Bellagio is one possibility. A number of participants are interested in contributing to an eventual publication. Another possible output is a training workshop for a wider group interested in strengthening their skills as effective policy activists.

### **Challenges and changes to the research design**

The original proposal aimed to recruit feminist activists both in headquarters and country offices but there are no participants from the latter. All are in Europe or the United States. This is because the confidential nature of the research and the methodology of the structured conversation make it well nigh impossible to involve someone except in a face to face relationship - at least to get things going. Working with people in country offices would require significantly greater resources in terms of time and travel budgets.

As predicted, everyone is over-worked and as far as I know only in a couple of cases has there been any serious effort to keep some kind of reflective record of their experience. The alternative that I have adopted - so far in three cases - is to organise repeat conversations at intervals of several months, using transcripts from the previous conversation as a means of framing things and jogging memory. In other words, I am doing rather more of the research and my co-enquirers rather less. The constraint here is my own time and the cost of travelling unless we find ourselves at the same venue, such as a conference or I am already in the participant's home town for some other reason.

A methodological challenge is the huge amount of diversity in what people are doing. A method that results in a great deal of minutiae relating to what people are doing risks, as one research participant commented, "coming down to personalities and charisma" from which no generic conclusions can be drawn in relation to what supports and blocks structural change.

Nevertheless, while each individual experience may appear unique, in retrospect we may be able to discern the character of that experience as part of a systemic social process of structuring and re-structuring.

I have just completed the final draft of a discussion paper for the RPC concerning policy processes for women's empowerment in global development institutions. In that paper, I propose a simple analytical framework of institutions, discourses and individual actors. The present research and the parallel project on conceptualising empowerment in global institutions begin to explore two of the three elements in the framework. There has been a much stronger track record of institutional research in relation to gender equality and women's empowerment than is the case with the other elements of the framework. Nevertheless, it would be useful to complement the current research and build upon it by switching to an institutional lens in the second phase of the RPC's programme (2009-2110).

Meanwhile, some interesting findings are emerging in relation to how feminist bureaucrats understand policy processes and are able to learn and apply political skills. In the next section I explore these through some common themes emerging from an analysis of the transcripts. I draw on these to conclude the report with some specific questions for research participants to reflect upon as they continue to enquire into their own practice in the coming year.

#### **EMERGING THEMES**

The rather abstract nature of what follows is because the details are confidential, pending participants deciding on how they wish their cases studies to be shared and disseminated. The material has been organised in terms of the following themes:

- A feel for the game
- Alliances
- Relationships
- Co-ordination and networking
- The politics of advocacy
- Defining success
- Achieving change

Common to all these themes is what it means for participants - if anything - to be a feminist in the context of their work and how this plays out. One person commented: "The thing is that we work in institutions which are political

institutions. Unfortunately, many of the people in these institutions are not there because they care about somebody who's living in rural Bangladesh."

### *A 'feel for the game'*

I have used Bourdieu's phrase to capture how newcomers to an organisational milieu learn not only the way things are done but also how to change how things are done. Thus it is much more than learning the rules. Structure and agency are two sides of the same coin because in the game "there are an infinite number of 'moves' to be made, adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule however complex can foresee."<sup>3</sup> The game gets shaped and re-shaped by the way people play it. Generally the game is played at the level of practical (non-reflexive) consciousness but of course the purpose of the project has been to enable participants to stand back and become more conscious of what they are doing.

It is particularly striking how the older and more experienced of the research participants have an enormously strong feel for the game and how to play it while the others reflect on the journey they are making and the lessons they have learnt. According to one participant, some people get a feel for the game more easily than others who she called 'victims' that their organisation squashes. Nevertheless, victims can also learn to find their way around and develop the necessary skills.

Those coming in from non-bureaucratic backgrounds – from academia or grassroots activism may find the milieu particularly challenging but trying too hard to learn the rules and stick to them risks their staying ineffective. By crashing around like a bull in a china shop they can sometimes surprise themselves and others by finding they have changed the way the game is played. Someone referred to this as unintended subversion that can then be exploited as deliberate strategy. Subversion is a concept several participants referred to: "I believe that I have been operating under a guerrilla tactics method ... an underground terrorist cell". Another spoke of "staying under the radar... don't let them know what you're doing".

How do people learn all this? From their previous life experience, from being supported by others or just through painful mistakes: "When I started this job, I believed that if we had a good idea and we talked to enough people about it, then people would just do it."

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<sup>3</sup> P. Bourdieu. 1990 *In Other Words* Cambridge, Polity Press:10

The extent to which being a feminist helps is not that clear, other than the sense of needing to find allies and be part of a network or group working to change things. That commitment can also remind one that it is not actually 'a game' however good one gets at it and enjoys it: "We want to use or break the rules to advance this agenda."

### *Alliances*

Finding allies within one's organisation as well as inside other organisations is considered vital. A relative newcomer said "The knowledge I need is where are my allies? And what's the next policy moment that I can use, and who's making what decisions when and how can I influence that?" Another, reflected on how at the start she was just trying to find out what was going on in her organisation and only then began to create external alliances. External alliances are what will help you hold your organisation's "feet to the fire".

On the other hand, being a woman policy activist when one has children to bring up can be a constraint to building networks because one cannot put in the long hours that these require. "But now my youngest is sixteen so it's not so difficult any more".

Allies come in various guises and quality. The important thing is to go with the flow of their concerns and support them in what they are doing. However, if one needs "all the friends we can get", this means sometimes forging pretty unpalatable alliances. "There's something I need from them or [my organisation] needs from them, we have to think how we get it from them and then we interact so we can get it and leave them alone because they're driving us nuts". This means there are risks when building such instrumental alliances, requiring very careful scrutiny of behaviour and "having sticks that you can punish people with if they violate the terms of the alliance". Nevertheless there is some discomfort in having to have these kinds of allies because of the dissonance between means and ends. "There are lives at the other end of this process".

For this reason, it is always worth looking in unexpected places for allies who share your vision, perhaps someone with a personal commitment to a feminist agenda and is prepared to work behind the scenes. At the same time, even instrumental alliances can turn into something more meaningful: "The way that I come into every relationship... is looking for where are the places that we can connect on a positive side". "I have found out over the years that my worst enemy has turned out over time to be my best ally." Another commented: "You can become so entrenched in your identity as an activist against a dominant structure that you don't see the opportunities... you're

just painting an entire field of people a particular colour". Another commented that change happens through the people who have the capacity to go beyond the limitations and to make an investment in the unexpected relationship.

### ***Relationships***

How one relates with others connects with one's own sense of identity and how we think others see us. Can I be considered an African? Am I the only working class person among this elite group? Does it matter that I am not from the South? Would others see me as an activist? Being a feminist does not appear sufficient to necessarily feel comfortable with other feminists. "Everyone wants to be seen as a subaltern" one person remarked.

The quality of relationships within organisations varies depending on whether the participant sees herself in an essentially supportive organisation working in a wider hostile environment or her own organisation is itself largely unresponsive to a feminist agenda. A very close trusting relationship between two senior staff can work very well. "[They] politically and morally supported each throughout the battles with the executive". This carved out a space for more junior staff pursuing the same change agenda. Nevertheless, such close relationships can exclude others. There are in-crowds and out-crowds and "it is difficult to know how decisions get made". Younger people can feel particularly excluded unless there are institutionalised spaces for bringing them on.

Women can also "cut each other off at the knees; the highest stalk is the one that you have to make sure gets flattened, so it's the same height as everybody else". There is an expectation that feminists are meant to manage staff in a certain way and there is "a discomfort with power and our perceptions of women with power". This discomfort with power is one of the challenges in terms of leadership of inter-organisational co-ordination and networking.

### ***Inter-organisational co-ordination and networking***

Everyone agrees in the value of co-ordination for policy advocacy in terms of visibility, impact and credibility. Yet, there is also suspicion and resistance to those who have good ideas and strategic skills. It can make things very difficult and frustrating, particularly because "there is a feminist element to this idea that as women we should work together, we should see eye to eye, we should pool our resources and pool our energy". Inter-organisational co-ordination may be particularly difficult if the organisations concerned are to some degree in competition with each other. At the same time, some people in

a network really like each other and do work well together but then may feel guilty when they seek to establish an inner circle that excludes those who are not on the same wave-length.

Global networking presents its own challenges with the felt need to express symbolic solidarity with other women's agendas. "We have to express solidarity as a matter of course. One does that unreflectingly and unthinkingly because we're feminists and we're women. And if we didn't automatically express solidarity it would be a problem. This unreflective automatic solidarity isn't necessarily getting us somewhere... it uses up scarce time and money".

### *The politics of advocacy*

All research participants are working as advocates, either within their own organisation and/or within the wider international aid and development system. Advocacy skills are judged as very important but there are significant challenges.

The first of these is defining the message around which to get your allies and networks to mobilise. Because it has to be clear and simple, one risks organising people on an issue that may be inappropriate or worse. "We needed something concrete to ask for... It was a topic that others were keen about so I went along with it... I included it to make them feel included".

Not only may more important matters be side-lined because they cannot be easily turned into a message, issues that do matter may become transmuted by communications people who are good advocates but know nothing about the subject they are communicating. They risk turning the message into something which may be highly objectionable to many of those closer to the 'field' whom the policy activist wishes to mobilise in support of the campaign. This raises serious concerns about accountability. One person said, "Being a feminist is about being active but also responsible and accountable and so I can continue to be a feminist as long as I am responsible and accountable to these other constituencies."

Someone wondered whether so much effort at advocacy is a result of feminists in global bureaucracies not having direct access to resources for large-scale programming while another saw the purpose of her advocacy as getting resources to those working at the grass roots as well as "trying to ensure that the needs and interests that those kinds of organisations are talking about get reflected in the work that [her organisation] does".

Advocacy may also be concerned with shifting discourses, for example by influencing what gets written in official speeches or policy documents. One person volunteered to take over the writing of the boss' speech from someone who was "obviously over-worked" to make sure the speech included the right messages. There is always a risk in sticking your neck out but a good internal advocate should be able to make tough decisions and look for political support, even if it means going over the heads of her immediate colleagues: "What I am good at is reading politicians... And I am good at seeing where the limits are". But where are those limits? One person reflected on how her skills at getting agreement - her 'feel for the game' - led to her not getting as strong a statement as she would have wished. "I was trying to model good professional behaviour, by compromising, you know, by suggesting ways through which we could reach agreement, and I think we could have had a much stronger women's empowerment/gender equality focus in it... I should have been able to push back a little harder".

### *Defining success*

A vexed question for some participants is whether they are making any difference in the lives of 'rural women in Bangladesh'. There are so many links in the chain that it seems impossible to discern whether their actions have any real impact. One can get caught up in organisational politics, spending all day "just answering emails and reading stuff. And six months will have gone by and you won't ever have - or you'll have forgotten what it's like, the reality on the ground for women." Another said, "At the global level it is so intangible and remote".

The idea of making plausible theoretical connections between their actions and the reality on the ground seemed the best way of defining success as always an intermediate achievement on the way to something more substantive beyond their reach. Setting success goals in advance and then trying to reach them may be problematic. In my first conversation with them two participants gave me a goal they would try and reach as part of this enquiry. However, with both of them, when we met again several months later, they had changed their minds and thought this goal was no longer relevant to how they now understood success because meanwhile both they and the environment they were working in had changed. Perhaps success can only be defined retrospectively?

Nevertheless, some participants do have a clear idea of what they are aiming for in terms of a quantitative target: "I want more money for women"; "The real sign of success is getting money to the women who need it". "Success is getting more money for women". "Success is determined in terms of explicit targets of how much gets spent on gender equality".

Interestingly, getting more financial resources for women is more often seen as a real world outcome than mobilising more human resources. However, one person saw an increase in staff in her unit as a success and another referred to achieving good inter-organisational co-ordination.

There are also process indicators related to discursive shifts: “Success is getting people to say things that you didn’t think they were going to say...I love getting (her DG) to say things and then we repeat it ever after.” And another: “It’s trying to get the key policy moments and the key political people within the organisation to back you up and to say things and commit themselves..., and you can then use that and shift the discourse and shift the priorities.”

Yet discursive success can seem very sterile: “Other types of achievement which are called successes, things like changing a line number, the placement of a paragraph or a comma in a UN resolution, again that’s much weaker. You have no idea what impact that can possibly have, and yet the institutional incentives drive you to focus a vast amount of energy on the placement of a comma. If anyone else says, ‘That’s my definition of making a difference,’ I will find that hard to swallow”.

What is success then varies from person to person and from moment to moment. It is when you feel you’ve made a difference, that you have exercised the power of agency – that you have somehow managed to change the game in a way that would not have happened if you had not been there. How does that happen?

### *Making change happen*

Effectiveness appears to be associated with understanding and getting the most out of the environment one is working in and secondly, at a more psychological level, not being discouraged but rather energised by one’s mistakes.

In terms of the first, working strategically within the political environment, one person noted the helpfulness of a positive discursive climate. But that climate is insufficient without the passionate femocrat to push things forward. This is where alliances come into play to create a critical mass, with people pushing for the same change from different locations in the system – “to have a sufficient number of people who keep plugging away”.

In addition to a favourable discursive climate and having mobilised a sufficient number of people, is the crucial factor of timing – or what the social movement literature refers to as a ‘political opportunity window’. However, there are always choices to be made: “Do you look around for process that is in full – and ride with it and turn it into something else, or do you say, well this isn’t our agenda and go off and do something else”. Another commented that the first thing she does when spotting an opportunity is to think about “what are the widest range of possibilities around this opportunity that we can generate. And what’s going to give us the biggest bang for the buck and what’s going to be the most possible.”

However, the overall climate is far from favourable. One person felt that all the participants are “working against a very oppressive bureaucracy that’s hostile to their agenda with an indifferent public.” This can lead to people being cautious because “in bureaucracies people are afraid of doing anything”. Trade-offs have to be made in order to survive. One person talked about the production of a policy paper as either ‘substantive’ or ‘political’. The former takes the risk of stating things that are problematic and real whereas the latter aims to provide room for manoeuvre “without too many questions being asked”. Yet in finding room for manoeuvre, people can waste their time on organisational arrangements, possibly as a means of avoiding making strategic choices.

Such choices can be very difficult when one feels obliged to play the game in such a way that one is contributing to perpetuating the very structures that one is seeking to change. “I am definitely contributing to rebuilding and regenerating this present structure. There’s no question about it. And at the same time to get anything done, I subvert it. I break the rules and I subvert it”.

At the more psychological level, participants noted that persistence, learning from mistakes and picking oneself up and starting all over again appears to be crucial for making change happen. One person compared herself with those of her colleagues who get more frustrated and downcast than she does when they hit resistance. Another commented that it was important not to be despondent but to take the learning and be creative with it, using something that went wrong to leverage open a door that was shut. But does everyone learn to do this? Sadly, one reason why change may not happen is because a lot of people, for whatever structural or personal reason, do not go about doing it as well as they could.

#### **CHECKLIST FOR CRITICAL ENQUIRY IN EVERY DAY PRACTICE**

Below is a list of specific questions arising from the themes presented in the previous section and identified during my conversations with participants:

- **Who** are you learning from and what is it you are learning from them?
- **Can** you identify and observe other passionate people you encounter at work? What are *their* strategies and tactics? How similar or otherwise are their ways of working from yours? Is there something about your being a feminist?
- **Is** there or was there one other person with whom you are working strategically on a daily basis in a relationship of total trust and mutual accountability? What are the effects of such a relationship?
- **Informal networks** – who do you know and why do you want to know them?
- **Who** do you choose to form alliances with and why them?
- **How** does your choice of allies connect with your definition of success?
- **When** you are invited to participate in or contribute to a certain event or policy process what are the criteria you are using to guide your decision?
- **How** do you know when you have transgressed the limits? What is your response?
- **When** are you frightened and why?
- **Can** you identify occasions when you have gone along with your superiors' requests and other times when you have resisted? What was driving your decision in each circumstance? What was the outcome?  
**When** are you aware that you don't know the rules of the game and you purposively play to your ignorance i.e. break the rules?
- **What** do you do when you find you've made a mistake through ignorance of the game? How do you capitalise on your mistake?
- **What** are the mistakes you have made that proved to be fruitful?