



**Development  
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## Gender and Development

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# Gender mainstreaming: Getting it right in the workplace first

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## Introduction

This paper is a brief response to the keynote speakers at the IWDA Gender and Development Dialogue who were 'taking stock' of gender mainstreaming. The paper focuses upon two things: firstly, some observations on the ideological climate in which we have worked to mainstream gender, and, secondly, issues for working women, especially the implications of the women's experiences in unions for women workers in development organisations.

## Background

I first started working on WID (women in development) in the mid 1980s, whilst doing an independent evaluation of the participation of women in a five-year bilateral project water and sanitation project. It was the first time I encountered the work that had been done by the Nordic and North American agencies in developing comprehensive gender analysis strategies and tools. Already the field was being critiqued, as women theorists and practitioners sought to make development work for women. The organisation Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and others were protesting the lack of inclusion of the voices and perspectives of Third World women and, in Australia, the Women and Development Action Network (WADNA) was seeking to include women around our region. Around the same time, the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) was founded in response to the frustration experienced in trying to get women on the agenda with government, commercial and non-government agencies.

Several years later I moved into academia and started teaching and writing in gender and development, GAD as it had then become. I was also intermittently involved in advising, training and education on gender with governments, businesses and development NGOs. So, compared with most participants in this symposium, I have had a watching brief rather than a practitioner role over more than 15 years. On the basis of this experience I would like to make four observations.

### First observation

Looking back I would argue that there have not been huge changes in the basic theory and practice of gender and

development. The analyses have continued to draw upon developments in feminist and other theory, including the 1990s' focus on identity politics. There has been refinement and finessing and moulding and targeting — all in an effort to get the problem of gender to fit with the program, the mainstream development program. However, it is about time we looked instead on transforming the program to fit with women. Like many of us here, I have watched and critiqued the moves from WID to WAD to GID to GAD (and WED came in for a while, but unfortunately seems to have dropped off lately.) In the last decade we have seen the wholesale adoption of mainstreaming as the strategy.

### Second observation

What has to be remembered and reiterated is that mainstreaming is not a strategy that comes out of the particularity of the gender and development experience. It is a more broadly applied strategic approach, which arose in response to the stranglehold of neo-liberal economic ideology through the 1990s. Mainstreaming was seen as the way to keep gender on the agenda, as gender-targeted projects, affirmative action and women's programs were cut back until they collapsed.

### Third observation

The focus on gender relations, rather than women's rights to equality, was probably strategically sensible in a backlash climate, but only partially successful in keeping the women on the agenda. Ideologically, the gender relations argument has not been that successful. Whilst it is arguable that the 'gender agenda' should include men and that the objective is changing the relations between men and women, this approach has backfired at times. The focus goes back to men far too easily. A local Australian example is in the way that after pioneering work on improving education for girls, it is now virtually impossible to get resources for research and action on gender unless it is for boys. As soon as girls started to gain some advantage from gender equality strategies, the pendulum swung back, and boys are now perceived to be missing out at schools.

This analysis seems to ignore the reality that men still run the world and the corporations, governments and bureaucracies. The (white, middle-class) boys inevitably reclaim their advantage. Another relevant Australian example is in the way

that equal opportunity legislation is used by men against women, such as in the case of the men who alleged gender discrimination when a swimming pool scheduled a separate session for Muslim women and girls.

The other point is that in general, in most languages and cultures, 'gender' translates as 'woman'. Gender is translated as about advancing the rights of and improving the status of women. The language of gender does not fool men who oppose women's rights to equality and justice. Therefore, just using terms like 'gender' does not usually assist in promoting a gender inclusive approach. More problematically, using the terminology of gender can render women invisible again.

#### **Fourth observation**

Over the past two decades, there has not been a significant cultural shift in understanding about gender or gender relations. I am not referring to the resistance to women's empowerment amongst the husbands and sons in some communities targeted by the developers, but to the Australian development community.

Masculinist culture remains pervasive in the attitudes and expectations of the middle-aged and older men who have moved into management and leadership over the past decade. Development organisations, like other workplaces, remain largely unchanged when it comes to work practices. There are more women employed and in a greater diversity of positions, but the gendered culture is still pervasive in work practices and in promotional opportunities. The man with a partner in the background remains the most likely to get ahead, as he is unencumbered at work and has a support system outside of work. Many of the women who have developed careers in development are single, as having children seems to be as much of a problem and career destroyer in the development field as elsewhere in the Australian workforce. Men who seek a better balance of work and family life often also find that their careers stall and opportunities dry up.

#### **Working women**

I would like to further pursue this important issue of commitment to gender equality amongst development organisations as employers. I want to talk from other sites of my experience about mainstreaming, which I think tell some similar stories as we take stock of the progress of gender mainstreaming. I work as an academic in a university. Higher education was recently noted as one industry where some reasonable flexible policies are common, including 12 or more weeks paid maternity leave, provision for double annual leave days through averaging pay over 48 rather than 52 weeks, home-based work, flexible hours and job-sharing. However, there are

still few female role models in senior positions, and many women have found that taking advantage of flexibility effectively stalls their career. Additionally, academic work is the second most casualised field in Australia after hospitality. Whilst our conditions are largely codified and enforceable through our industrial agreements negotiated between the university and our union, the National Tertiary Education Union, the struggle to improve our conditions continues.

The other site about which I want to make some observations is the trade union movement. I have spent my working life as a union activist and much of my focus in research has been on women and emerging labour organisations in developing countries.

Unions have mainstreamed gender too. There are worthwhile experiences that can be exchanged between the development sector and the labour sector, as we do have common ground in our shared commitment to change and improving the lot of the disadvantaged. So advancing the status of women should be integral to both endeavours and does enjoy wide philosophical commitment. The problem, though, arises in the tensions inevitable in really incorporating gender equality in all aspects of an organisation, both at home and abroad. For unions, changing themselves has been as hard as changing the practices of the employers of their members (My experience is that this is also the case for development organisations!).

In Australia, unions had very masculinist structures and, historically, many have been dismissive of even covering women workers. Unions have had to restructure to enable women to become active members and leaders and to prioritise 'women friendly' policy. The strategies and assumptions have been those with which we are familiar and often include in our gender targets and checklists. Such strategies include affirmative action to ensure women's representation, holding meetings when and where it is safe for women, providing child care, and keeping issues such as equal pay and paid maternity leave on the negotiating agenda. When male leaders have to argue for women's rights there is a real shift in gender relations. I believe that we will have mainstreamed gender when these issues stay there at the top of the negotiating agenda.

What have been the breakthroughs from the last 20 years of trying to make the 30-year-old slogan 'women need unions need women' a reality? It is not just getting good legislation and policy, although they are useful sticks to wield. The change to ordinary women's lives starts happening when women trade union leaders can be mothers and carers too, and there are enough women in the top decision making bodies that the 'women's issues' do not fall off the agenda. A significant Australian example is the current Australian Council of Trade Unions test case on work and family. This has only happened because there are feminist women in the leadership of the ACTU to make this a priority, along with

the provision of child care for working parents *and* the campaign to improve the wages of child care workers.

It has also been very important for women union activists to be part of an international trade union movement where women unionists have fought out these issues with their incumbent leaderships. (One big advantage of unions is that they are membership organisations and, while power can be entrenched, it can also be voted out!) Internationally, women unionists have found many shared experiences of the problems of entrenched gendered attitudes, both internal and external to their labour organisations.

Earlier this year, the ACTU hosted the women's conference of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in Melbourne. The conference agenda would be familiar to campaigners for women's rights. Whilst there was clearly a principal focus on women's paid working conditions, the agenda also recognised the fullness of women's lives and the broader social, economic, religious, political and cultural barriers to women being able to earn decent incomes with dignity. The involvement of women has brought the realities of women's lives into the trade union movement. Unions now recognise that lives go on outside the hours of paid work, and that these other lives impact upon our paid working lives. Unions, whether in Australia or the Philippines or South Africa, now have action-based programs on sexual harassment and male violence, on childcare, on sharing the domestic load and so on. Unions also take up HIV/AIDS, racism, religion and ethnic discrimination, the immigration policies of their governments, indigenous rights, children's rights and other issues once argued as not union business.

Women in unions have also challenged the ambit of unions. Most women work part time and casually. Many women in most countries work in the informal sector and are not covered by labour laws or industrial agreements. Many are, in effect, self-employed or sub-contractors. Unions have to acknowledge that they have to change their old ideas of work and union coverage. An ongoing campaign that has involved unions, women's organisations, some governments, the International Labor Organisation, churches and some development NGOs has been the international outworker campaign (see <[www.fairwear.org.au](http://www.fairwear.org.au)>). This campaign is significant both in its achievements and in the successful coalition of many often

disparate organisations. The campaign has worked on a number of levels from the local to international, including organising workers to advocate for them, getting unions to seek industrial agreements and successfully lobbying governments and companies for minimum wages and conditions and for codes of practice for manufacturers and retailers.

Women in unions have still have a long way to go, but, as we know, women do respond to glimmers of hope, we do grab at opportunities to improve the lives of our families and our communities. The objectives of mainstreaming in unions have differed from the objectives in development organisations. The aim has not been about trying to get resources out to women, but to seek women's support by listening and respecting them. Union financial resources come from membership fees, yet if unions are not listening to women members, they will lose them. Unions are learning that they need women in order to be relevant and successful, and that women's rights are workers rights are human rights. I think there are learnings across the development and labour sectors about what is similar and different.

## Conclusion

A major impediment to successful mainstreaming is the attitudes and cultures in our development organisations, which carry the baggage of their own quite traditional male cultures of work and power. These attitudes and cultures continue to be transferred in practice at home and in the field. There is fear that the transformative potential of really taking on gender discrimination and oppression may shake things at home as well as in the field. In terms of what additional steps need to be taken, I would argue cleaning up one's own backyard should be a top priority. A good start for Australian development organisations should be to aim to be a market leader as exemplary equal opportunity employers.

## Note

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