

EDITORIAL
CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY TO BUILD WORKPLACE GENDER EQUALITY¹

Aruna Rao, Ph.D.

Co-Founder and Executive Director, Gender at Work
Research Associate, University of Sussex

If progress for gender equality and non-discrimination were measured in legal and policy advances, the momentum over the past 20 years would be record-breaking. And yet, why do so many hard-won policy and legal reform processes fail to generate any measurable changes for gender justice? Women's workforce participation is increasing all over the world yet we are witnessing persistent inequalities and gender power dynamics that keep women subordinate. Sexual harassment, for example, involving high profile individuals from the full spectrum of workplaces –United Nations, business, media, and civil society organizations– is front page news everywhere. In Australia, despite being outlawed for 25 years, sexual harassment is the top complaint received by its Human Rights Commission; in EU countries, 40-50% of women reported that they experienced sexual harassment in the workplace; in Japan, in 2013 the Equal Employment Office had 9.230 sexual harassment cases and in the US, one in three cases before the Equal Employment Commission are sexual harassment cases².

Despite a range of policies and programs to address gender inequalities, women are underrepresented at the highest echelons of power and decision making across sectors and across countries. For example, a 2015 study by LeanIn.org and McKinsey and Co. covering 118 companies in the United States found that women are still vastly under-represented at every level³. The same story is repeated in different kinds of organizations around the world. For example, a 2015 survey of 328 not-for-profits carried out in India, by DASRA, a philanthropic foundation, suggests that while women constitute close to 53% of employees, their proportion drops dramatically when it comes to managerial positions –34%. In women-led NGOs this number jumps to 75% and in men-led NGOs, it drops to 15%⁴. The survey

¹ I am grateful to Joanne Sandler, David Kelleher and Carol Miller for their insightful comments on this paper.

² Catalyst. Quick Take: Sex Discrimination and Sexual Harassment. New York: Catalyst, May 25, 2015.

³ Lean In and McKinsey, *Women in the Workplace*, 2015.

⁴ <http://www.livemint.com/Companies/busG56HnYK2a6TeU9xcuSO/Even-in-the-nonprofit-sector-women-are-getting-left-behind.html>

Ibid., p.2

found that as NGOs become larger, “*the chances that they will be led by a man double.*” This data is congruent with Guide Star’s 2015 Nonprofit Compensation Report⁵ which surveyed over 1,000 organizations globally: the share of women CEOs is 43% among non-profits with inequality rising in number and compensation the larger and wealthier the organization.

Women also continue to dominate in the lowest paying jobs and earn 77% of what men earn globally, according to a 2016 ILO report on women in work.⁶ Lack of statutory rights to maternity protection affects 60% of women worldwide who do not have access to maternity leave. In OECD countries, a range of factors account for the rise in female labor force participation including tax incentives and flexible working-time arrangements but the most significant are generous childcare subsidies and paid parental leave⁷.

Elsewhere, in the search for new solutions, numerous options are being debated ranging from the need to change individual choices (“lean in”) to the need for cultural change. Some management consultants concerned with gender equality are pointing to ‘unconscious bias’ – a bias that happens automatically, that we are unaware of and that is out of our control – as accounting for gender biases in the workplace. Others, questioning the numbers game are asking if we need to change the culture of workplaces as well and involve men in the process. More recently, the issue of work-family balance has come to the fore and the need for balancing women’s double work burden is being debated. In Gender at Work’s 2016 survey of women in the workplace in India, women cited their double work burden as the main reason for dropping out of formal employment⁸. In the United States, Anne Marie Slaughter re-ignited this issue in her 2012 article in the Atlantic⁹ in which she addressed the half-truths fed to women about balancing professional and personal lives. At the core of this discussion are the baseline expectations about when, where, and how work will be done, and the devaluing of child care and family. As Acker pointed out, feminists have long identified the division between commodity production in a capitalist economy and reproduction of human beings as a fundamental process in women’s subordination. This particular form of masculine cultural/structural form of dominance has travelled through colonialism and globalization

⁵ <http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/733304/docs/2015CompReport-sample.pdf?t=1457718990129>

⁶ ILO, Women at Work Trends 2016, ILO: Geneva, 2016

⁷ OECD, Female labour force participation: Past trends and Main determinants in OECD countries, May 2004

⁸ Sudarsana KUNDU and Swaha RAMNATH, “Gender Equality Issues in the Workplace, Gender at Work India”, unpublished paper, 2016.

⁹ Anne Marie SLAUGHTER, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All, The Atlantic”, July/August 2012 (available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>).

forming the blueprint of modern institutions including bureaucracies, corporation and labor markets¹⁰.

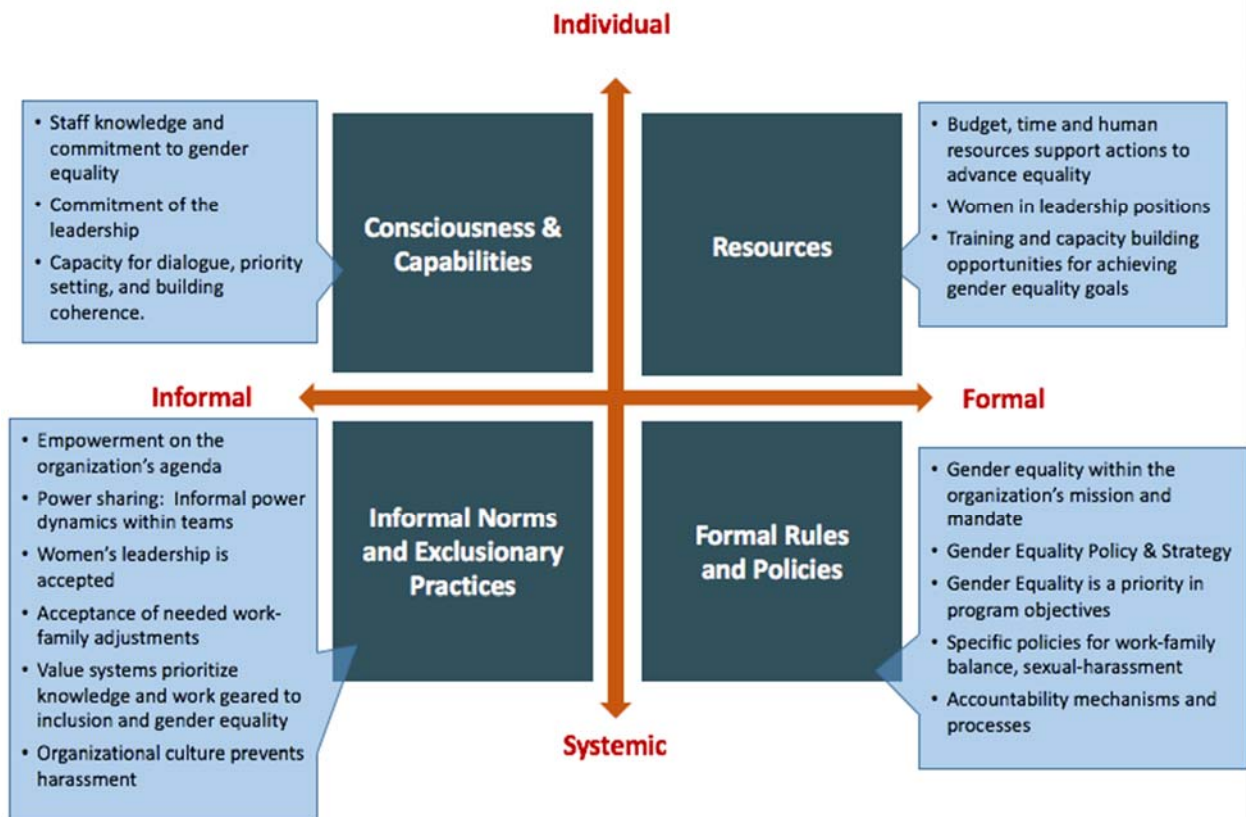
In the 15 years of experience of Gender at Work working on gender equality with over 100 organizations –ranging from large bilateral and multilateral organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and government programs to trade unions, private philanthropic foundations and the private sector organizations to small community-based organizations—we have learned that there is no single intervention that can achieve the desired change. Instead, change in four inter-related dimensions that are both individual and systemic in nature are needed. This is depicted in the Gender at Work Analytical Framework (below)¹¹. They include (i) measurable individual conditions such as increased resources, space and time to address gender issues; (ii) individual consciousness and capability such as knowledge, skills, political consciousness, and commitment to change toward equality; as well as (iii) formal rules as laid down in policies and accountability mechanisms; and (iv) informal norms and practices –including those that maintain inequality in everyday practices.

Change in one domain can trigger change in another but the direction is unpredictable. Often a deep individual aspiration for change coupled with a collective consciousness to assert rights is a necessary first step to action. Sometimes, an explicit policy catalyzes women to demand their rights. It is clear that for an organization to enable gender equality change, it must have certain capabilities and cultural attributes that have both individual and systemic, and formal and informal dimensions. A key contribution of the Framework is that it turns the spotlight on the discriminatory social norms and deep structures that hold gender inequality in place despite apparent political will, policies and regulations to promote gender equality. In doing so, this Framework can be used to analyze and strategize for change in gender relations within organizations.

¹⁰ Joan ACKER, “Gender, Capitalism and Globalization”, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 1, p. 17-41.

¹¹ Aruna RAO and David KELLEHER, *Is there Life After Mainstreaming? Gender and Development: Mainstreaming A Critical Review*, Volume 13, Number 2, Oxfam UKI, July 2005.

Gender at Work Analytical Framework



At Gender at Work, we pay particular attention to the lower left hand quadrant of the Framework on discriminatory norms and exclusionary practices which are hardwired into the DNA of organizations and play out in their structures and values, artifacts and processes, ways of working and behaving. We define deep structures in organizations as the “*collection of values, history, culture and practices that form the “normal” unquestioned way of working and discriminatory norms as those that are manifestations of structural hierarchies and inequalities*”¹². We know now that these informal norms and structural inequalities manifest in different ways in different contexts¹³. They are often invisible, so “normal” and taken for granted by organizational insiders that they are unquestioned. For example, in many organizations, working long hours is viewed as a sign of commitment and is often necessary

¹² Aruna RAO, Rieky STUART and David KELLEHER, *Gender at Work: Organizational Change for Equality*, Kumarian Press, 1999.

¹³ This summarizes the points made in Aruna RAO, Joanne SANDLER, David KELLEHER and Carol MILLER, *Gender at Work: Theory and Practice for 21st Century Organizations*, Routledge, 2016.

for promotion. These deep structures are layered and mutually reinforcing. Hierarchical power, for example, is so deeply entrenched in organizations, which reinforces discriminatory norms. Women and men “*continue to be slotted into stereotypical gender roles on the assumption that women may be unable to perform in the workplace due to their responsibilities as mothers and wives*” which not only “*impedes the growth of their careers, but also lessens the extent to which diversity is embraced by organizations*”¹⁴. Moreover, these inequalities are constantly being reproduced in every conversation, every process, every decision. In other words, the power of these norms works to produce and reproduce discrimination and structure unequal gender power relations. Fiona Mackay calls this the “daily enactment of institutions”. And these inequalities are highly resilient and emerge in new forms when old ones are stopped¹⁵.

Multiple factors and dynamics shape the form that discriminatory social norms and deep structures take in organizations. As power dynamics interact with deep seated societal norms that perpetuate exclusions which are condoned though silences and enforced by the threat of violence, what results is a “toxic alchemy of institutional power”¹⁶. Patriarchy manifests in many different forms, for example in the cognitive constructs that influence how gender equality issues are framed and in the rules and ways of working within organizations. Perhaps the most pervasive cognitive construct in the toxic alchemy of institutional power relates to the notion of the public/private divide, which we mentioned above. A particularly toxic feature of how power works in organizations is through a culture of silence held in place by the threat of social ostracism in its most benign incarnation to violence in its most hostile manifestation.

Thus, without recognizing and being willing to change the often unspoken discriminatory norms and deep structures of inequality in organizations, and raise consciousness of how these norms are internalized within individuals, simply “leaning in” as Cheryl Sandberg exhorts or adding men to the mix of partial and superficial solutions will not result in lasting change. In our experience, change agents have used a variety of strategies to transform toxic institutional power. These strategies are multilayered and dynamic –and work across the other three quadrants by mobilizing individual consciousness and agency, policy change and

¹⁴ KUNDU and RAMNATH, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Fiona MACKAY, “Towards a Feminist Institutionalism?” in Mona Lena KROOK and Fiona MACKAY (Editors), *Gender, Politics and Institutions. Towards a Feminist Institutionalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

¹⁶ For greater detail see, Chapter 5 in Aruna RAO, Joanne SANDLER, David KELLEHER and Carol Miller, *Gender at Work: Theory and Practice for 21st Century Organizations*, Routledge, 2016.

political strategizing, using resources and opportunities, analysis and reflection, and calling on collective voices to demand, push for and make “another world possible”.

For example, when the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), with whom Gender at Work has long been working, was forced into an organizational renewal program aimed at revitalizing existing structures and bringing in more members¹⁷, the Gender Coordinator and the union’s gender activists seized this opportunity to enlist and support women workers with a novel structure to build women’s leadership. This was needed to challenge male power and decision making in the union which was held in place by the threat of violence. So, instead of hitting their heads once more against the wall of the union hierarchy, the women activists built women’s leadership through committees in shopping malls which circumvented the old union structure. Working with the Gender at Work Framework and action learning process the GAL process, the SACCAWU change team encouraged women to stand as shop stewards. This activated the local union. As Patricia Appolis, the union Gender Coordinator said, “*with the new round of elections more women were being elected at the stores... This [helped] build the second layer of women leaders and the mall committee*”. Patricia also initiated new discussions on the roles and responsibilities of shop stewards aimed at setting new standards of accountability and norms of behavior. For example, “*the issue of male leaders having serial affairs with women members was discussed, and for some men there was discomfort as they were doing just that –having affairs. We said there is nothing wrong with having a relationship but having affairs with one woman after another was problematic*”.

All of this injected hope in renewing the union’s own democratic processes, from a gender equality perspective. The model of integrating gender equality work rather than separating it out from regular union work served as a model for the functioning of other mall committees. In the words of one analyst, “[t]hus in the heart of a mall, a neoliberal (privatized, commodified, casualized) cultural space, we have an opportunity to examine how contingent workers themselves may be reconstituting their politics.”¹⁸

Changing deep structures and deeply held norms is not easy. Those who have the most to gain from existing hierarchies of exclusion are not going to invite in structural change. And

¹⁷ This description of the SACCAWU change process draws on Michel FRIEDMAN, Nina BENJAMIN and Shamim MEER in “Bringing Back the Heart: The Gender at Work Action Learning Process with Four South African Trade Unions”, Solidarity Center and Gender at Work, 2013.

¹⁸ Bridget KENNY, “Reconstructing the Political: Mall Committees and South Africa’s Precarious Retail Workers,” in *Labour, Capital and Society*, 44:1, 2011.

transgression often carries a hefty price. But what we have learned is that deep structures *can* change. Gender at Work's experience of working with many organizations suggests that change can start with creating safe spaces to name and question these biases. Participatory process can enable affected groups to test out changes through gender action learning¹⁹, and gains can be solidified through political strategizing with allies inside the organization and out²⁰.

Gender equality in workplace faces an uphill battle. But the context all around us is changing. Increasing economic equality and marginalization are having unpredictable effects. In some cases, in organizations, in the name of retrenchment and scarcity, resources and spaces to explore new ways of being and working are being squeezed. In other cases, violence against women is increasing and in other cases still, old rules are breaking under pressure from roiling dissent. As Cornwall says, “[n]eoliberal economics and governmentality have changed the working, intimate, social and family lives of people all over the planet, in many ways irrevocably. Old certainties have been shaken. Conventions have crumbled. New ways of life have opened windows into ever more uncertain realities, as people fumble in the new order for ways to survive.”²¹

In this shifting context, new identities within a common experience of uncertainty may allow for new formations and new possibilities. Power dynamics may shift to create new islands of change, but these new spaces of change are not fixed. The rise of individual women leaders that we see now in many organizations is a welcome change but individual stories of triumph over patriarchal cultures doesn't change the culture for everyone; it simply shows that in given circumstances, for a mix of reasons, individuals can rise above the norm. At a time when we are celebrating individual leadership, it is equally if not more important to recognize that gender equality policies and programs that focus exclusively on the more formal right side of the Gender at Work Framework will not lead to lasting change. Yet, we keep seeing interventions trying to address deeply tangled inequities manifested in violence against

¹⁹ In a Gender Action learning participants use the Gender at Work Analytical Framework to examine the deep structures that hold inequality in place and create barriers to women's rights and gender equality. Then, they develop a collective project to shift these deep structures. Peer-learning workshops, shared accountability, deep reflection, individual coaching and mentoring from a Gender at Work facilitator and, resources and writing – these are the core tools of the program.

²⁰ The application of these strategies are described in detail through organizational change stories in Aruna RAO, Joanne SANDLER, David KELLEHER and Carol MILLER, *Gender at Work: Theory and Practice for 21st Century Organizations*, Routledge, 2016, *op cit*.

²¹ Andrea CORNWALL, “Introduction: Masculinities under Neoliberalism” in Andrea CORNWALL, Frank G. KARIORIS and Nancy LINDISFARNE (Editors), *Masculinities under Neoliberalism*, Zed Press, 2016.

women disproportionately favoring overt and measurable policy change and access to resources neglecting, to their detriment, those very structural inequalities that are at the root of the problem. What we need are policies and greater resources devoted to bold experimentation and learning in a variety of contexts on ways to challenge and change discriminatory social norms and deep structures of inequality. It is time to bite the bullet and challenge patriarchy head on.