Engendering organisational practice in NGOs: the case of Utthan

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Introduction

Although gender issues have been on the development agenda since the early 1970s, it is only in the last decade that development organisations, including NGOs, which have traditionally been other-centred, have begun to address the question of gender within their organisational boundaries. The concern for organisations as 'engendering mechanisms' grew out of the debate on mainstreaming women/gender in development and the need to look critically at gender-inequitable structures, procedures, and policy outcomes, which both determine and are the result of gendered organisational practice.[1] 'Mainstreaming' is the term used to describe strategies aimed at integrating a gender perspective into all decision-making aspects of an organisation, i.e. policies, strategies, programmes, and administrative and financial activities, thereby contributing to organisational transformation.

This paper begins with a conceptual overview of the gendered hierarchy of organisations before looking at how Utthan, as a development organisation, is 'gendered'. With its headquarters in Ahmedabad, in the Indian state of Gujarat, Utthan is a registered NGO working on natural-resource management through community participation in three districts of the state. Underlying its participatory approach to development, Utthan seeks to strengthen gender equity in natural-resource management by facilitating rural women's participation in decision making at the household and community levels. Drawing on in-depth interviews with one district team and with Utthan's senior management in Ahmedabad, this paper examines Utthan's willingness and capacity *as an organisation* to address gender equity in development practice. The research for this paper was undertaken as part of a larger study on rural change, gender relations, and development

organisations which looks at the role of NGOs in negotiating spaces for addressing gender equity in water-management policies and practice.[2]

Understanding the gendered hierarchy of development organisations

> *To say that an organisation, or any other analytical unit, is gendered*
> *means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action*
> *and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a*
> *distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender is*
> *not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it*
> *is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be properly understood*
> *without an analysis of gender.*
> (Acker 1990:146)

Feminist concern about gendered organisational practice originated from bringing ideas about sexuality, authority, and power out of the private sphere of 'intimate relations' into the 'domain of the public organisation of control' (Acker 1992:249). Drawing on economics, sociology, and organisational theory, social scientists have looked at gender, work, and the division of labour in organisations as well as the relationship between organisational structures, authority, and power. They have analysed how the different positions of men and women within organisational hierarchies affect the nature and valuation of their work (tasks, segmented opportunity structure) and their access to resources and decision making. In addition, the growing debate on sexual harassment in the workplace has highlighted how reproduction and sexuality, particularly in relation to women's bodies, are often objects of, and resources for, control. If the feminist vision is to make organisations more democratic and supportive of humane goals, then it is important to understand the social construction of gender by organisations in order to challenge gender inequalities.

It is in this context that development practitioners have begun to look at the 'archaeology of gender' (Goetz 1995) within development organisations, including donor agencies, bureaucracies, and NGOs (Plowman 2000). Not only do these organisations reflect and are structured by the values articulated within the larger institutional arenas in which they are embedded, they produce gendered outcomes and personnel who, whatever their sex, reproduce gender discriminatory outcomes (Goetz 1995:3). However, since NGOs have some degree of autonomy from patriarchal structures and play an important

role in renegotiating gender relations through struggles for social justice and gender equity, they can also be seen as 'en-gendering' organisations (Murthy 1998:204).

Organisations can be gendered in a number of ways, and recently organisational change-agents have developed several tools for analysing gender and organisational practice (Lingen *et al.* 1997). One such analytical framework is constructed around three interdependent levels or elements within an organisation (Sweetman 1997:3) namely: the substantive (organisational mission, ideology, and policies); the structural (procedures and mechanisms for enforcing its goals and objectives, its strategy); and the cultural (shared beliefs, values, and attitudes). While we look at these levels separately in the context of Utthan, it is important to understand the linkages between them. Before doing so, the next section sketches out a brief organisational profile of Utthan.

Utthan: a background note

Utthan, which means 'upliftment' in Hindi, was founded in 1981 with the purpose of facilitating development action in Dhandhuka *taluka* (block), part of the coastal, semi-arid Bhal region of Gujarat. Under its aegis the grassroots project 'Mahiti' (literally meaning 'information') was initiated to develop information linkages between communities and the state. According to Utthan's founders, knowledge leads to awareness, which in turn leads to self-sustained development action. Utthan provided the support structure and was the 'outsider group', consisting mainly of dedicated development professionals, while Mahiti, the primary 'insider group', comprised local individuals, especially women, who had actively participated in earlier development initiatives. In 1994, as part of Utthan's withdrawal strategy, Mahiti became an independent community-based organisation (CBO) continuing to maintain strong links with Utthan.

One of the critical problems in the Bhal region was the availability of potable water, particularly during the dry season. Conflicts over water were common and women became the major victims, largely because of the gender division of labour whereby women and girls are mostly responsible for domestic water collection. Utthan-Mahiti did not begin with a specific focus on women only, as they did not want to isolate other members of the community, nor did they want to have a 'compartmentalised' approach to meeting developmental needs. However, as the mobilisation process proceeded, they realised that they needed to create spaces for people with different needs and that there were different views emerging from men and women:

Men were saying – look at all this unproductive land, we need to generate employment through reinvesting in the land, while women were saying – there is a drinking water problem in the village which leads to migration. Men saw it as a seasonal problem but not the women, who were able to link it to other aspects of development.
(Interview with Nafisa Barot, Utthan Executive Trustee, January 1999)

Another problem mentioned by the women was the exploitative money-lending system, run by the *Darbars*, the most powerful upper castes in the area, and so Utthan-Mahiti began working on both these issues simultaneously. Through interaction with local communities, alternatives were sought for making saline land productive, for providing women with income-earning opportunities through the formation of self-help groups, and, most importantly, for finding sustainable solutions for the water crisis. Building on traditional knowledge and community management systems, Utthan-Mahiti facilitated the construction of lined village ponds in 20 'no-source' villages to store water, primarily for drinking purposes.[3] These ponds were lined with polyethylene sheets to prevent seepage of saline water and the water was tapped through a hand pump after passing through a slow sand filter.

Although community institutions, with both women and men as members, were formed to manage and maintain these ponds, the degree to which they are sustainable varies from village to village for a number of contextual reasons, which cannot be elaborated here (Barot 1997). However, two aspects or outcomes of Utthan-Mahiti's efforts need to be highlighted. The first concerns the participation of women in the management of community assets in an area where traditionally women's participation in the public domain was limited. The second concerns the growing recognition by the state, policy makers, and donor agencies of the need for decentralised water management with community participation. Utthan continues to work on both these aspects while Mahiti extends its development work in Dhandhuka *taluka*, strengthening local networking and capacity building.

Utthan: organisational structure

Since 1995–96, Utthan has been working in three districts of Gujarat, namely, Dahod, Bhavnagar, and Amreli. Each district has its own field office and there are currently 31 projects spread over 81 villages broadly covering natural resources management, community organisation and

mobilisation, and women's participation and empowerment. Utthan's annual budget is about Rs25 million (approximately US$600,000) and it receives funding from a number of sources including central- and state-level government agencies and donors such as HIVOS, Swiss Aid, the Royal Netherlands Embassy, and the Ford Foundation (Utthan 2000a).

Figure 1: Utthan's organisational structure
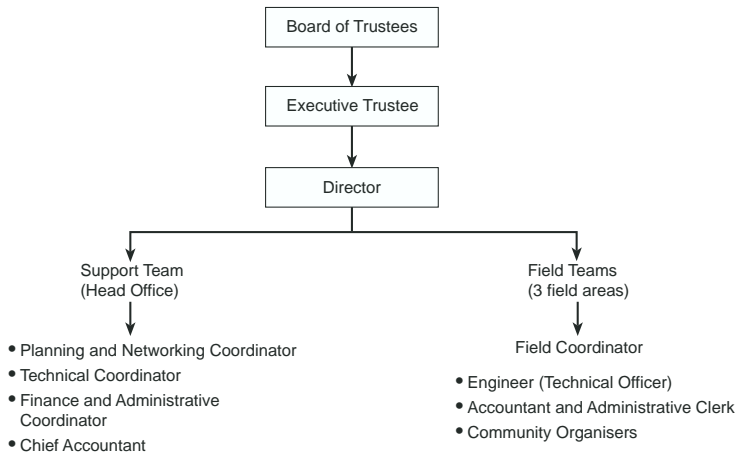
As Figure 1 illustrates, Utthan has three field teams and one programme support core unit based in Ahmedabad which plans and monitors programme activities with the field teams and provides them with training, technical, administrative, and financial guidance. In addition, the core team is also involved in networking with a number of development organisations as well as policy advocacy on drinking water initiatives and the legitimisation of women's role as community natural resource managers.

The Board of Trustees consists of seven members, including Barot, prominent NGO leaders, academics, and development practitioners. Earlier, the Board used to meet annually, but now it meets two or three times a year, partly to enable members to come for at least one of these meetings. Although the Board does not intervene in Utthan's day-to-day activities, the recent expansion in Utthan's work and staff means that it needs more specific guidance in certain areas (e.g. strategic planning). Sometimes this is provided by Board members who are based in Ahmedabad or by Utthan's funding partners.

The remainder of this paper looks at how Utthan is gendered at three interdependent levels – the substantive, the structural, and the cultural. The discussion is based on in-depth interviews with all pre-expansion phase staff at Ahmedabad (core team) and the Bhavnagar field team (Centre for Drinking Water Resources Management). For reasons of confidentiality, all individuals quoted are referred to by their sex and broad designation within the organisation and not by name.

The substantive level: reaching a shared vision for gender equity

The substantive level of an NGO, as defined in its vision or mission statement, reflects its perspective on gender relations and social change. In this respect, Naila Kabeer's typology of gender policies (1994) is a useful tool for distinguishing between different organisational policy approaches. *Gender-blind policies* (e.g. those which claim that 'this is a household programme') reinforce or perpetuate gender hierarchies in society. This is typically the case in the design of community institutions in relation to natural-resource management interventions, where the predominant membership norm is one adult from each user household. Inevitably, this is the male head of the household, and women who are the principal users of natural resources for household subsistence are left with token representation on the management committees.

Gender-neutral policies believe that targeting resources to the 'right' gender (e.g. health and hygiene education to women) will enhance the effectiveness of such interventions and bring more sustainable benefits. In other words, this 'instrumentalist' use of women for delivering community health services, or other welfare needs such as clean water and sanitation, is not only meant to be more efficient, but it further perpetuates the social construction of women as 'natural carers'.

Other development organisations have begun working on gender as a result of their focus on poverty alleviation, wherein women are seen as the 'poorest of the poor'. *Gender-ameliorative policies* favour the targeting of specific resources to women (e.g. microcredit interventions), but, without a transformatory potential built into them, such approaches do not necessarily question the existing distribution of resources and responsibilities. In contrast, *gender-transformative or redistributive policies* seek to move beyond the provision of practical gender needs (water, fuelwood, credit, etc.) to provide spaces for women to articulate and organise around their strategic gender interests. This may require men to

give up certain privileges and take on new or additional responsibilities in order to achieve gender-equitable development outcomes.

In this framework, let us look at Utthan's mission:

To initiate sustainable processes of socio-economic and political development in the communities, which have been exploited and oppressed, through issues pertaining to drinking water, environmental sanitation, natural resource management, community and women's health, economic status that leads to empowerment, and social justice, that leads to gender justice and community empowerment.

(Utthan 2000a)

The statement describes a process of rural transformation beginning with the provision of a critical livelihood resource, such as drinking water to the communities in Utthan's project areas. In meeting a practical gender need, Utthan's approach at one level could be described as gender ameliorative since it is focused on reducing the drudgery of water collection faced by poor women. And in making potable water more easily available throughout the year, Utthan's interventions also have an impact on the health and economic status of households and communities. However, in its organisation of women in self-help groups for access to credit, Utthan has moved beyond a gender-ameliorative intervention to look at other aspects of social change (e.g. challenging the dominance of the traditional money-lender). Furthermore, in involving women in decision making on water (and other resources) through facilitating and strengthening their participation in community-level institutions, such as *pani samitis* (water-management committees), and providing assets (e.g. roof-water collection tanks) in their name, Utthan is initiating a gradual process of empowerment. In so doing, it is trying to address strategic gender interests (e.g. women's access to, and control over, resources such as water and credit). The question remains as to whether Utthan has the capacity to sustain and strengthen this process of transformatory change in the long term.

The structural level: translating gender equity concerns into action

Social transformation in organisations can be de-railed at the structural level – verbal and paper commitments to a vision of gender have a tendency to 'evaporate' when there is resistance to putting policy into practice through the procedures, mechanisms, and rules of the organisation.

(Sweetman 1997:5)

Looking at gendered structures and practices necessitates an analysis of time and space within organisations, as well as recruitment procedures, promotion policies, the allocation of tasks and responsibilities, the distribution of resources, and patterns of decision making. As Acker argues (1992:255):

> The gendered substructure lies in the spatial and temporal arrangements of work, in the rules prescribing workplace behaviour and in the relations linking workplace to living place. These practices and relations, encoded in arrangements and rules, are supported by assumptions that work is separate from the rest of life and that it has first claim on the worker. Many people, particularly women, have difficulty making their daily lives fit these expectations and assumptions.

Practical arrangements of space (office space, approaches to fieldwork) and time (flexibility of the working day, life cycles, and career management) are essentially expressions of power as they 'reflect the physical and social capabilities of those who dominate organisations' (Goetz 1997:17). Where organisations are dominated by men, a response to legitimate demands raised by women staff are usually seen as 'concessions' rather than as opportunities to promote capacity building of all staff.

Moreover, the presence of more women in an organisation does not necessarily mean that it is going to reflect a greater degree of gender awareness, though it certainly affects its capacity to work on gender issues. This is particularly important in socio-cultural environments where male fieldworkers do not find it easy to approach rural women. But questions need to be asked about where women staff are located in the organisation, and equally, what tasks are allocated to them. Gender parity is also important in drawing attention to a number of practical gender needs of women staff (e.g. childcare provision or flexible working hours). Although this does not imply any structural change in terms of the gender division of roles and responsibilities, it has the potential to stimulate the examination of more strategic aspects of gender inequalities within the organisation (Macdonald *et al.* 1997:88).

Another issue is the structure or 'shape' of the organisation – it is usually assumed that flatter, decentralised organisations are more open to participatory decision making and are therefore more gender sensitive. But research has shown that collective or consensual management does not eradicate problems of dominance – it simply makes them invisible or 'latent' while other ways are found to establish

dominance. Linked to the debate on hierarchy is the issue of management style, that is, is there a distinctively masculine or feminine style of management? Some organisational analysts feel that women leaders and managers are inherently more nurturing, flexible, and sensitive, while men are driven by targets, tasks, and authority. But bringing personal gender attributes into the public domain is highly debatable, and it has thus been argued that these should be seen as preferred styles of working because of the multiplicity of roles and responsibilities that women and men have to manage.

Gender-sensitive leadership

Translating the organisational commitment to gender equity into practice requires gender-sensitive leadership, which is not necessarily vested in one individual, but more broadly includes the head of the organisation as well as those involved in senior management positions who are able to influence the direction, style, and values of an organisation. Barot, as one of the founder-leaders of Utthan, has played a critical role in creating gender-sensitive understanding among the staff members, but she does not link this to her gender:

> What is important is the sensitivity of a person – whenever I talk to one of my employees, whether they are men or women, I always try to put myself in their place, to feel the way they feel about a particular problem so that I can understand them better. But I am sure that other staff members would try to do the same.

(Interview, Ahmedabad, 1999)

However, she admits that women probably respond to and confide in other women more so than they would do with men, a fact that is corroborated by some of the women staff members who still feel more comfortable talking to her about their problems. Most of the staff, particularly the older ones who have been with Utthan for at least ten years, agree that having a woman as leader meant that they could have a clear focus on gender-equity issues right from the beginning. But now that gender equity is beginning to be institutionalised within the organisation, some staff contend that it does not make a difference if, as is the case currently, the executive director is a man.

As the founder-leader of Utthan, Barot articulated a vision motivating other professionals and local people to work with the organisation. Although she may not be able to travel to the field as extensively as she used to, Barot continues to provide the critical

interface with the external environment. Today she is involved in policy advocacy on decentralised alternatives for water management, networking with other organisations working on gender issues in Gujarat, and mobilising funds, despite having to use a wheelchair as the result of a car accident in 1998.

Staff recruitment: the question of numbers

In the patriarchal context where Utthan works, the practice of *purdah* (seclusion) makes it difficult for male staff to reach out to women beneficiaries. The process of social mobilisation requires considerable time and interaction, often in the privacy of women's homes, which male outsiders cannot access easily:

> In the beginning, women [in the village] did not trust us because they had had a very bad experience with another organisation. So they told us to talk to the men only. But now they talk and discuss things with us – for example, they have suggested a place for the standposts.
> (Male community organiser, interview, Bhavnagar, 1999)

Over the years, Utthan has tried to make a conscious effort to hire more women, especially because in the areas where the Darbar community is strong, interaction with women is constrained by cultural barriers. In September 1999, as a result of its growing activities, Utthan went through a major expansion from 14 to 44 full-time staff with various roles and responsibilities as indicated in Table 1. Presently, 36 per cent of the staff are female, which is one of the highest female:male ratios enjoyed by the organisation and certainly compares well with other mixed NGOs working on similar issues in the country. As Table 1 shows, the number of women in management positions is equivalent to the number of men, but interestingly there are no women in any technical positions. Women staff tend to dominate in process-oriented roles such as community organising, even if they come from technical backgrounds and/or are exposed to technical training at Utthan.

Apart from gender parity, Utthan is also sensitive to the ethnic diversity of its staff and encourages representation from disadvantaged groups, including minorities, scheduled castes and tribes, and the physically challenged. Currently, just under a quarter of the staff are from these groups, though they tend to predominate as community organisers, partly because of their educational background, skills, and experience.

Table 1: Full-time staff at Utthan in March 2000			
Category	Women	Men	Total
Managerial	2	2	4
Technical	0	4	4
Prog. Coordinator	1	2	3
Administrative	1	4	5
Accounts	2	3	5
Computers	0	1	1
Comm. Organiser	10	12	22
Total	16	28	44

Source: Utthan (2000b:11)

An effort is being made to hire more local staff, in the hope that they would be retained and that women in particular would be able to be closer to their families. All new staff go through an induction period of six months in which they learn about the organisation's work and approach as well as attend workshops to develop skills and knowledge in specific areas related to their proposed work (e.g. gender awareness). Staff performance review is an annual process, which determines salary increments. It involves self-assessment as well as peer-group review by the director, programme coordinator, and monitoring-in-charge.

Gender and space: women, mobility, and life-cycles

As is typical of many other NGOs, it is difficult for Utthan to retain women staff, particularly at the field level. Not only are there societal pressures (e.g. from their families) which prevent young, single women from doing extensive fieldwork, but marriage (patri-local) and motherhood also restrict women's mobility. Apart from restrictions because of their place in the lifecycle, women face added physical constraints in terms of doing fieldwork. Public transport is minimal in the areas where Utthan works and not all women feel comfortable about using a motorbike. One of the women staff members in Bhavnagar recounted how in the early days they often walked 2 to 3km to reach villages, or hitched rides on local trucks and jeeps, but now that they have access to office motorbikes, albeit via their male colleagues, it has saved time. As it is not safe for women staff to go to villages at night when most community meetings are held, the Bhavnagar field office has asked male and female members to travel together in pairs.

Childcare and child-support facilities

The issue of childcare and child support is emerging as critical, particularly as the number of women in the organisation has increased and older women are having their first children. As women struggle to cope with their home responsibilities and work commitments, support from male colleagues is mixed. Sometimes, women bring their small children (especially nursing infants) to the office if there is no home caretaker. But interviewed male colleagues said that they often find this practice disturbing: small infants crying or older children running around and shouting – this is not what 'office space' is meant for in their opinion. One of the female programme coordinators discussed the difficulties she was facing while working with Utthan after her first child was born:

> Earlier I had no problems with the management as such and I enjoyed being in the field, but after my son's birth I have been facing a lot of difficulties. It is not easy for me to commute daily, 30kms each way in a public bus with a small child. There is no creche facility here [referring to the place she currently lives in and where her husband works] so where can I leave him? Sometimes I reach the office late, but I usually compensate for this by bringing work home. However, the organisation, particularly my male colleagues, does not seem to understand this and they have begun to cut (my time) from my annual leave. We may shift to Ahmedabad so that he can go to school there and I will have the support of my parents too. Then I could visit the field for 1 or 2 days and he could stay with them.
> (Interview, Dahod, 2000)

Utthan is in the process of developing a gender policy for the organisation, and one of the factors under consideration is a creche facility in each office. Although there is no explicit flexi-time arrangement, women are given 'time off' to attend to sick children or other family members and if they are not feeling well themselves, or have their monthly period, they are not compelled to go to the field.

Roles and responsibilities: gendered tasks?

Utthan encourages all its staff members, whether male or female, to be involved in both technical ('hardware') aspects, such as water-related infrastructure, and social ('software') aspects of its programmes, such as the process of forming community groups. However, while some women staff have been trained in the technical aspects of watershed and water-resources development by Utthan, their participation is not always forthcoming for a number of reasons. Male staff members feel

that women lack the self-confidence to deal with technical matters ('they are self-doubting') and given the choice they would prefer to stay in the office and do deskwork. In this respect, they cite the example of the last receptionist at Utthan who was a highly qualified civil engineer: but she preferred to take up an office job, rather than go to the field, though this was more due to family compulsion than to personal choice. Similarly, Utthan had a part-time woman accountant for a short period, but in 1997, based on arguments raised by senior staff, they decided to hire a full-time male accountant who would be able to help the field offices with their accounting processes.

Men maintain that while women are competent in administrative work, they are hesitant to carry out certain tasks in the field by themselves. For example, in the neighbouring project area of Amreli, women staff were reluctant to be involved in the purchase of materials for watershed programmes, while in Bhavnagar women are part of the materials management committee. In contrast, male staff members readily join in the process of community institution building, attending meetings of the *pani samitis* and *mahila mandals* along with their women colleagues. As a result, they have an understanding of the problems faced by rural women in the project area and the factors affecting their participation in community meetings.

Resources for sustaining a focus on gender

Perhaps the most critical factor, before the staff expansion, was the sheer shortage of human resources, particularly women staff, to cope with the growing amount of work, both geographically and in terms of Utthan's focus on gender equity. Although the recent addition of staff will meet this need to some extent, they will need to be trained and sensitised to the organisational perspective. Moreover, Utthan still requires a full-time trainer to handle organisational training and human resource development as well as another person to look after research, documentation, and dissemination.

In terms of financial resources to sustain its focus on gender equity, Utthan is fortunate that most of its funding partners share a similar perspective and are supportive of capacity building for community institutions. One of the problems which Utthan, like many other NGOs, faces is the late approval of funds and the time-lag between the sanctioning of a grant and the actual flow of money. These two factors affect the smooth functioning of the organisation and it is compelled to arrange funds for the buffer period, borrowing from other commercial agencies with a high rate of interest, or to fall back on its own reserves.

In 1996, budgeting, which until then was a centralised process, was decentralised to involve the three field teams in the development of project or programme proposals with the finance committee at the head office. Non-financial expenditure earmarked for each project is now deposited directly into the respective account and those involved with the project have the power to take certain financial and administrative decisions.

The cultural level: changing attitudes, changing minds

This is perhaps the most fundamental level at which transformation needs to take place, as it touches on the beliefs and value systems of individuals and is thus the point at which the personal really does become the political in organisations. 'No matter how radically structures and systems may be reformed, if organisational culture is unchanged, the changes will remain superficial, cosmetic and ultimately without effect' (Macdonald *et al.* 1997:20). People do not leave their culturally defined gender perspectives and attitudes at the gates of organisations – they enter with them and this has a significant bearing on the organisation's own gender perspective.

In this respect, the leadership of an organisation, as well as strong, articulate gender-sensitive women and men, play an important role in developing an appropriate value system for the organisation. Such a value system is not necessarily imposed from the top, but needs to evolve gradually in response to organisational processes of sharing and learning. Gender-sensitisation training for all staff is one method increasingly being used by a number of NGOs to facilitate such institutional change, empower women staff, and redefine the power of men within the organisation (Murthy 1998:203). However, training cannot be seen as an end in itself, but needs to be part of a wider process which includes the creation of space within NGOs for staff to share experiences and reinforce their learning as well as network with other organisations that have similar concerns.

It is also important to recognise that organisations do not have a monolithic culture, although they may appear to in terms of their public face. Rather, organisations are made up of a number of 'sub-cultures' and 'counter-cultures' which will either facilitate or resist efforts to integrate a gender perspective in the organisation (Sweetman 1997:7). In the final analysis, the development of a gender perspective, policies, and culture in an NGO is reflected not only at the level of organisational change, but equally in its accountability to its

programme partners, particularly the poor and vulnerable, and in its advocacy efforts towards more gender-sensitive policies. Mayoux (1998) defines this as the 'gender accountability' of development organisations, and she maintains that it is one of the more contentious aspects of accountability, partly because of the complexity of gender subordination, and partly because of the unwillingness and, to some extent, the inability to take it on board fully.

Gender-sensitisation training: assessing organisational impact

Most of Utthan's staff have attended gender-sensitisation workshops and have begun to 'own' the concept of gender equity, though the understanding of gender varies across the organisation. This is partly due to an individual's social background, educational and work experience, length of time with the organisation, and his or her expectations from gender-training workshops.

For one senior male staff member, these workshops did not provide any significant new or interesting insights: 'Women are human beings just like us [men]. If we treat animals with great care why can't we behave nicely with women as they play an important role in life. As a child I was raised to respect women' (interview, Ahmedabad, 1999). Given his years of experience with Utthan, this kind of welfarist attitude towards women is surprising as it equates gender with women, rather than understanding the social construction of gender relations.

Sometimes the content of gender workshops can be too radical and men don't feel comfortable about translating concepts into practice. As one male staff member explained: 'A few days back I had gone for a gender awareness workshop, but the steps they were proposing for achieving gender equity were not practically possible in my opinion' (interview, Ahmedabad, 1999).

It is difficult to assess the impact of gender training on the organisation and its work because of the lack of documentation and analysis in this respect. Qualitative insights suggest some changes in people's attitudes and their behaviour. A number of women employees agree that there has been a change in the organisation as far as understanding the constraints that women staff encounter, both as a result of their biology and social pressures: 'Earlier men never understood women's [health] problems, but now if a woman says she cannot go to the field, they understand that she may not be feeling well', claimed one of the senior female coordinators (interview, Dahod, 2000).

Another senior female employee who has been with Utthan for 14 years explained that when she got married, her in-laws, who are quite

wealthy, did not like her working: 'They did not mind me doing an office job, though personally I prefer going to the field, but they did not approve of it. So after my marriage, I made it very clear to the management that I could not continue with a field placement and they understood' (interview, Ahmedabad, 1999). She added:

> My family members are very conservative. As the daughter-in-law of a joint family there is so much work at home, but I do everything without complaining. Sometimes the situation at home depresses me, but I really want to work [with Utthan] so I struggle hard, usually with little encouragement or support from either my husband or other family members. I did not take any leave during my pregnancy, just the three months of maternity leave which was due to me, and then I immediately re-joined work.

It is this growing perception of the problems that women staff members face that has helped men and women within Utthan gradually support each other more in their work. This bonding, almost as a family, is very visible in the Bhavnagar office, where men and women, often coming from conservative families, share common social spaces and are learning to respect each other's capabilities.

Towards gender-sensitive organisational practice

The analysis of gender within Utthan reveals that as an organisation it is committed to gender equity at the substantive level, that is, in terms of its mission and its overall policy goals. However, at the structural level this process of social transformation has shown mixed results. On the one hand, strong leadership has played a critical role in engendering change, while on the other hand, resource constraints, a target-driven project approach, and social barriers underlying gender discrimination have made it difficult to translate gender equity concerns into sustainable initiatives. At the cultural level, however, it is clear that the understanding of gender varies across Utthan, with more experienced and older staff members acknowledging that it is an integral part of their work and organisational environment.

Male staff members tend to accept a gender perspective both because of their political commitment to social justice as development workers and perhaps more importantly, because they have seen the potential role that rural women can play as change agents. To a large extent this perspective is rooted in the WID (women in development) discourse. Men interpret gender as being exclusively concerned with meeting (rural) women's needs and expect gender workshops to provide them with

'technical' solutions (tools and techniques) for enhancing project output based on strengthening women's participation. They fail to see themselves as 'part of' gendered structures and 'inside' gender relations (Macdonald *et al.* 1997:42). For example, the presence of small children in the office was often termed a 'nuisance' and seen as a 'woman's problem', rather than working towards an organisational response to provide women (and men) employees with a convenient and practical alternative.

Women staff members, on the other hand, are able to draw parallels between the patriarchal structures which govern their ability to work (the family) and those which restrict rural women's participation in the public domain. One employee described how she had broken out of the *purdah* system and was now convincing village women to speak out at meetings, even in the presence of other male family members. But women staff members have not yet collectively organised to demand any specific attention from Utthan, partly because most of them are quite new to the organisation and do not occupy significant decision-making positions. They would prefer to be accepted by their male colleagues first, and whatever gender concerns they share as women they do so privately and not necessarily in the public space of the organisation.

On the whole, it is the management and leadership within Utthan which is more visibly concerned about engendering the organisation and about the *Realpolitik* aspects of promoting this from the point of view of the organisation's image. Staff members tend to focus on gender as an issue which affects the practical running of programmes and projects they are responsible for, as they have little space to manoeuvre around organisational policy. In the final analysis, looking at gender within an organisation raises questions about 'the self', the gendered nature of power, and the willingness to change or at least challenge this. As a development organisation, Utthan has shown that it is committed to putting its own house in order. But it realises that this agenda cannot be pushed from the top, and that staff need the time, the exposure to knowledge, tools and techniques, and, more importantly, collective support to promote gender awareness in relation to their roles and responsibilities. However, the frequent urgency of development work makes it difficult for small NGOs like Utthan that face resource constraints to provide the space for self- or collective reflection. In this respect, the role of donor agencies which are committed to gender, as well as strong and sustained leadership to translate learning into organisational practice, are critical.

Notes

1 'Gendered', in the context of an organisation, refers to the social construction of power within an organisation, while 'engendering' defines a process of changing or challenging this to support women staff and project partners towards gender-just and sustainable development.

2 'Rural Change, Gender Relations and Development Organisations', a study undertaken by IRMA and Dalhousie University, Halifax, through the CIDA-funded Shastri Indo-Canadian Partnership Programme (1999-2000).

3 'No-source' villages essentially do not have an accessible and potable source of water within a radius of 0.5–1km.

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