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Strategies of Feminist Bureaucrats: Perspectives from International NGOs

Ines Smyth and Laura Turquet
with Preface by Rosalind Eyben
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Summary

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities for feminists working as women's rights and gender equality specialists in international non-governmental development organisations, as analysed from an insider practitioner perspective. Part 1 identifies the strategies used and the challenges encountered when Turquet lobbied DFID on its gender equality policy while struggling to avoid marginalisation within her own organisation, Action Aid. In Part 2, Smyth describes how she left Oxfam for a year to work in the Asian Development Bank and uses this experience to consider the strategic opportunities available to a gender specialist working in an NGO such as Oxfam as compared with working in an international finance institution.

Keywords: INGOs, gender mainstreaming, feminist activism, gender and development

Ines Smyth is Senior Gender Advisor in Oxfam Great Britain, where she is responsible for developing strategies and policy positions on women's rights, and working closely with programs across the many countries in which the organisation works. She recently spent an interesting year as the Leading Gender Specialist at the Asian Development Bank, as this paper testifies. Before joining Oxfam she was a lecturer and researcher in various academic institutions, focusing on various aspects of gender and development. Ines considers herself a feminist and a development practitioner.

Laura Turquet is currently the manager of UN Women's flagship report, Progress of the World's Women, and she was also the lead author of the last edition which focused on women's access to justice. Laura has worked for UN Women and its predecessor UNIFEM in New York for three years. She has worked on women's rights for 10 years, including at the international NGO ActionAid UK (which she draws upon in this paper), at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex and for a UK feminist campaigning organisation, the Fawcett Society.

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Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
CGA	Country Gender Assessments
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAWN	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Year
EFG	External Forum on Gender
GDCF	Gender and Development Cooperation Fund
GENDERNET	OECD Network on Gender Equality
GEST	Gender Equality Sector Team
IFI	International Financial Institution
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
WB	World Bank

Preface

Rosalind Eyben

Every day, in international development organisations feminist bureaucrats make use of strategy, tactics, wisdom and skill to act for their principles. Most of their strategies are invisible and their tactics subtle. They draw on networks of friendships and relationships that create ripples of effect in enabling their organisations to be pathways of women's empowerment.

Feminists' potential to convert any bureaucracy into an instrument of social change remains a matter of debate. It is a particularly piquant question in relation to the complex bureaucratic architecture of international development whose shared normative discourse is, as the World Bank puts it, 'working for a world free of poverty'.¹ This question was the basis of a collaborative project between 2007 and 2010² in which I brought together a group of feminists working inside the head offices of multilateral organisations, government aid agencies and international non-governmental organisations. From my prior experience as a policy practitioner and a bureaucrat in large international organisations, I knew that feminist bureaucrats find it difficult to communicate their experience: they are busy in their jobs, often unfamiliar with academic discourse and possibly even cautious about revealing to the outside world the realities of their workplace. Hence, it made sense to design the project as participatory action research, offering them a safe space to reflect upon and improve their own practice. The project had a conversational approach. I was doing research *with* instead of *on* my subjects (Pillow 2010). Towards the end of the project, some of those involved decided to write their own accounts of their experience. The present working paper contains two of these accounts from an international NGO perspective.

The paper contributes to a stream of research that has examined the nature and challenges of gender mainstreaming in international development organisations (Goetz 2003, Prugl and Lustgarten 2006, Rao and Kelleher 2005). Klugman (2008) and True (2003) emphasise the significance of the role of supportive individuals positioned within the bureaucratic system for action on gender justice. However, since most scholars have had little or no regular informal access to the organisations they were studying they have been unable to describe and analyse the political processes of everyday bureaucratic life in which people assert their agency and creativity. Thus the micro-political strategies of feminist bureaucrats have received little attention in the wider literature about what makes change happen in global policy spaces (Tickner 2001, Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002, Parpart et al 2002, True 2003, Moghadam 2005, Molyneux and Razavi 2005, Sen 2006). The knowledge that *is* available is rather dated. A collection of brief memoirs from those active in the 1970s and 1980s provides some fascinating insights into the challenges of establishing 'women in development' sections in organisations such as USAID, the World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat (Fraser and Tinker 2004). Jain (2005) and Skard (2008) recount how those who established the Commission for the Status of Women were former WW2 resistance fighters, who used that experience to fight their corner in the newly formed United Nations. And an analysis of the 'bureaucratic mire' (Staudt et al 1997) provides a perspective on the years between the 1985 Nairobi and 1995 Women's Conferences. However, since Miller's and Razavi's illuminating edited volume of case studies (1998), little has been published about what happens inside development bureaucracies, including in international NGOs, the subject of the present working paper.³

¹ See the home page of the World Bank, www.worldbank.org.

² The project was within the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme (2006–2011) funded by the UK Department for International Development, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Norway and Sweden, and UNIFEM.

³ Other than an interesting study of gender specialists in Canadian development agencies (Hendriks 2005).

Laura Turquet analyses the strategies used and the challenges encountered when she lobbied DFID on its gender equality policy while struggling to avoid marginalisation within her own organisation, Action Aid. She argues that building relationships with feminist activists has to be a two-way process. Those on 'the outside', women's organisations and feminist campaigners, need to appreciate what the insiders are trying to do and reach out to them; and those on the inside must be frank about the challenges of their own bureaucratic location. Thus, Laura emphasises the importance of establishing relationships of mutual trust and respect.

Ines Smyth works for Oxfam and spent a year as the leading Gender Specialist at the Asian Development Bank (ADB) an institution with very different ethos and priorities. She explores how the character of the two organisations shapes their commitment and approach to promoting gender equality in their programmes. Her experience at ADB helps her look at the world of international NGOs in a new light. She concludes that feminist bureaucrats must persist in tackling obstacles and areas of resistance – not a popular approach in NGOs, she comments, where immediate and simple solutions are expected for social problems of intractable complexity.

Much of the debate concerning the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming is about whether it is understood as working within or changing existing paradigms. Is it possible to secure the desired policy action 'infusing' gender into existing ways of doing and organising things – and by so doing to incrementally secure real gains for women? Or will transformative policies for women's empowerment only be achieved through discursive and organisational transformation? (Rao et al 1999; Rao and Kelleher 2005; True 2003; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; Walby 2005; Daly 2005). One recent conclusion from these debates is that gender mainstreaming, understood as integrating women's issues into existing ways of working, has only made modest gains, while the more radical approach of transforming the paradigm and thus the policy agenda has had even less success (Porter and Sweetman 2005). However, I suggest we approach this debate from another angle. Gender mainstreaming can be effective when it is both about working within *and* changing existing paradigms at one and the same time. Through their every day experience of successes, failures and compromise as they navigate complex arenas of power, politically astute feminist bureaucrats, like Laura and Ines have learnt to be effective strategists. If we want to understand better how gender mainstreaming works in practice we need to pay closer attention to analysing what they do and how they do it.

1 Neither a proper feminist, nor a proper donor: negotiating the middle ground

Laura Turquet

This paper is about the challenges and opportunities that presented themselves to me as a women's rights advisor at ActionAid UK. It highlights how feminists like me, working in international development bureaucracies can work together to advance a women's rights agenda within their organisations.⁴ But it also underscores that in order to be effective in doing so, it was essential to understand how I and others are positioned and to recognise the room for manoeuvre that exists. It is also important for those in the women's movement to trust feminists working from 'the inside'. While of course that trust has to be earned, for those who are politically committed, but choose to work within large international development organisations, doubting our intentions, or treating us as somehow less authentic as feminists is frustrating both on a personal level, but also because it closes down the many strategic opportunities to work together for a shared goal.

I grew up in a family where, under the Thatcher government in the 1980s, politics was a constant source of conversation around the dinner table. My mother brought me up to be a feminist, although I didn't actually study gender until I did my masters degree, when I was encouraged to apply a feminist critique to mainstream international relations theory. After I left university, I worked for nearly two years at the Fawcett Society, a small feminist campaigning organisation named after Millicent Fawcett, one of the UK's early nineteenth century suffragist campaigners, lobbying the three main political parties to take steps to increase women's representation in parliament. I would have stayed longer, but the funding for my post, always precarious because the work was 'political' which meant that most charitable trusts could not support it, ran out.

After a stint at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), I then joined ActionAid. As a women's rights advisor, my task was to raise women's rights up the agenda of the UK government, through lobbying the Department for International Development (DFID). When DFID was founded in 1997, the Labour government made a conscious effort to engage with the international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) headquartered in the UK, recognising that they were a gateway to large numbers of the general public who cared about overseas aid. The unprecedented 2005 public campaign, 'Make Poverty History' raised the profile of international development further and engaged the public in not only giving money to charity, but in campaigning for rich country governments to do more to tackle global poverty. Lobbying DFID therefore became a full-time job for many people in INGOs and a whole infrastructure of networks and joint lobbying meetings, letters and public campaign actions developed as a result.

During this time, gender equality had fallen off the agenda of most of the INGOs, if not in their programming, certainly in their lobbying and campaigning in the North. The gender mainstreaming approach had made the issue 'everyone's business, but no-one's concern'. For most lobbyists, the message they got about gender was that whatever issue they were working on, the situation was probably even worse for women. So gender was simply tacked onto whatever issue they were campaigning on, often through the addition of the statement 'especially women and girls', but without much thought about what it actually meant.

⁴ The author would like to thank Rosalind Eyben and Rachel Moussie for their very helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

In 2005, ActionAid International was one of the first INGOs to have moved its headquarters to the global South, to Johannesburg. At the same time it adopted a new strategy, 'Rights to End Poverty', and together these two steps marked a new phase for the organisation. The strategy was rights-based, with six thematic priorities, of which women's rights was one. The international head of the women's rights theme made a very conscious move away from a gender mainstreaming strategy, towards a more political women's rights approach. Although the headquarters of ActionAid International had moved to the South, ActionAid UK in London retained the biggest policy and campaigns capacity, as well as raising the majority of funds for the organisation.

The Director of Policy and Campaigns in the UK at the time, a feminist, therefore decided that having women's rights capacity in her team was very important and she set in motion the internal discussions needed to put that capacity in place. She made two strategic decisions – since there was only money available for one post, she decided to recruit two part-time women's rights officers, rather than one full-time person, who might end up isolated and ghettoised. She also calculated (correctly) that once in place, the part-timers could probably have their hours increased, whereas it would be difficult to make the case for a whole new post. It also fitted with her commitment to create high quality part-time posts within the department, making these jobs more accessible to those with family responsibilities. Secondly, she decided that the two women's rights officers would report to the head of policy, rather than be in their own small team, again vulnerable to marginalisation. Being in this position also meant, in theory, that no policy product would leave the organisation without being approved by the head of policy, who was also the person in charge of managing the women's rights work.

In addition, some of the responsibility for mainstreaming and carrying out the watchdog role lay with the head of policy and not with the women's rights officers themselves. In so many cases, gender officers in INGOs become demoralised by constantly having to insert themselves into others' work, usually once important decisions have been made, usually without the budget or influence to make a real impact. The mainstreaming role also positions these gender officers as the 'gender nag', or the gender police, wearily having to 'gender proof' documents, rather than spending their time energetically making a positive case for a women's rights approach.

So, I joined ActionAid UK in August 2006 as one of the two women's rights policy officers. I had wanted to work for ActionAid for a while. The organisation was very well regarded by colleagues at IDS, whose opinions I trusted, as it was seen as the INGO that led the field when it came to supporting social movements, including the women's movement. My job at IDS was a communication role and although elements of it enabled me to pursue my own particular interests, what I really wanted was a political campaigning and lobbying role on women's rights. I looked for positions in some of the smaller NGOs, but they rarely came up and when they did, they asked for five years' experience working on the issues, which I didn't have at that point. I suppose, unconsciously, I also chose an organisation that was relatively much better resourced than Fawcett and therefore offered better job security. When I was offered the job at ActionAid, I did not perceive the organisation as a bureaucracy and did not think I was becoming a bureaucrat. I thought I was simply continuing my career as a women's rights activist.

So, I started at ActionAid and set about my job of both integrating women's rights into the existing work of the Policy and Campaigns Department, and also developing 'standalone' women's rights work. The work was essentially about advocacy and lobbying, mainly targeted at DFID and other UK government departments, as well as corporate targets for our women workers campaign; and public campaigning, whereby we mobilised ActionAid supporters to lobby their MPs, by writing letters and taking other campaign actions.

Just before I had started, DFID had received a critical peer review from the OECD-Development Assistance Committee about its gender policy. It said that while DFID had once been a leader on gender equality work, it had ‘taken its eye off the ball’. This finding was also backed up by an internal review of DFID’s gender work, which came to similar conclusions. Around this time, a new gender advisor was appointed to DFID and she set about exploiting this opportunity to develop a new internal strategy for DFID, called the ‘Gender Equality Action Plan’, as well as a glossy booklet, making the case for gender equality. This booklet was mainly aimed at an internal DFID audience, and through the drafting process gave the gender advisor a chance to engage the minister and get him to buy into the new plan.

In this context, I write about four separate but linked events, which illustrate how feminists working from different locations – in women’s organisations and networks, in large INGOs and in donor organisations – can work together to mutually reinforce each other’s work and advance women’s rights agendas within large bureaucracies. The stories are about a public event, a lobbying opportunity, a letter and a women’s rights strategy meeting. Together they show that when these relationships work well, it is possible to open up opportunities for change. But they also show that this is only possible, when there is a clear understanding of one another’s positions and the particular opportunities and restraints that each individual operates under. Sometimes, a lack of understanding and a sense of moral one-up-womanship from those working in women’s rights organisations closes the door to strategic partnerships that could be very fruitful.

1.1 The public event: putting words in the minister’s mouth

The first story is about a big public event that we planned for International Women’s Day 2007. Before I had joined ActionAid UK, the Director of Policy and Campaigns had asked a feminist consultant to advise on how to strengthen the organisation’s work on women’s rights. Aside from recommending the women’s rights officer posts, the consultant also suggested that once they were on board, ActionAid UK work across teams on a big project, to make the work more visible internally, as well as externally, to build confidence within the organisation and create some buzz and enthusiasm about women’s rights.

So, we decided to organise a large public event on International Women’s Day. We not only wanted to create a buzz internally, we also wanted to demonstrate publicly that many people cared about women’s rights and wanted the UK Government to do more to support them around the world. We organised the event in partnership with a small women’s rights NGO, in recognition of the fact that while ActionAid had recently discovered its interest in women’s rights, this smaller organisation had been consistently working away on this issue all the while. So we thought we should share this opportunity with them, along with our greater resources to back it. We hoped that it would also make clear our feminist credentials and commitment to working with the women’s movement. This strategy to some extent mirrored the approach taken by the head of the international women’s rights team, which was to bring several established women’s rights activists into ActionAid International and to partner with women’s organisations to build trust and credibility.

The rationale for our event in the UK was also bolstered by the fact that our colleagues in the women’s rights team in ActionAid International had been putting together a new coalition focusing on violence against women and HIV and had produced a report to launch it. The report analyzed spending on women’s rights, HIV and violence against women, criticising donors for not placing enough priority on these issues. They also wanted to launch the coalition and the report on International Women’s Day. While ActionAid UK did not always align its work with ActionAid International, as a new women’s rights team, we wanted to support our international colleagues, especially given that in their new report, one of the donors they focused on was DFID.

I knew that the gender advisor at DFID was also working on the new gender equality action plan, aimed at reinvigorating the ministry's work in this area. It seemed to me that by inviting the Development Minister to speak at our public event we could achieve a number of different aims: it would give the minister his first major platform on women's rights, since he had taken up that job several years before; it would give DFID's gender advisor the opportunity to write a speech for the minister and get his buy-in for the new Gender Equality Action Plan; it would create opportunities for ActionAid's new advocacy work on women's rights, because once the minister had publicly stated his commitment to these issues, the door was then opened for us to hold him accountable for his promises; if the event was successful, it would also generate energy within ActionAid UK for women's rights work, demonstrating that there was an exciting and positive agenda in this area. So, I started talking with the gender advisor at DFID, to discuss this opportunity and work out how we could make the most of it to advance our shared goals.

Of course, the Development Minister had many invitations to speak at NGO events on a weekly basis, so we had to think about how to make our event stand out. The fact that DFID had been criticised by both the OECD-DAC and in an internal review of their work on gender equality provided one source of impetus: here was a chance for the minister to demonstrate publicly his commitment to women's rights. But, we had another factor in our favour. About a year before, ActionAid UK had published a report, which had been very critical of DFID and it had been a surprise media hit, featuring on the front page of *The Guardian* and as the top item of the BBC's influential 'Newsnight' programme. DFID had been furious with ActionAid UK for, in their eyes, undermining the case for aid with an already sceptical UK general public.

With a new ActionAid report being published for international women's day, the gender advisor was able to suggest to the minister and his team that there was another potentially critical report coming out and the best way to mitigate the risk that this presented was to be on the panel for the launch, to acknowledge that DFID had fallen behind in this area and to highlight the new Gender Equality Action Plan as a sign that the ministry was ready to 'up their game' on gender issues once more.

In fact, the gender advisor knew full well that the report was not particularly critical, but the minister didn't need to know this. The head of my department, a much more experienced lobbyist than me, also recognised that the gender advisor was an ally, so suggested we share an advance copy of the report with her. Having the report enabled the gender advisor to tailor the minister's speech, to support the key messages of the report and to open up space for our future lobbying efforts.

So, the minister came and we had an audience of more than 500 people. The event had quite an uplifting celebratory feel, despite the serious subject matter. The minister gave the impression of enjoying the event – he eventually had to be dragged off by his officials – but he had stayed long enough to hear all the other speakers and take questions. He came with a positive approach and went away feeling good about gender equality issues.

The next day at DFID, there was apparently a buzz about the event. It showed that the minister was interested and serious about addressing this area and created ongoing momentum for the Gender Equality Action Plan. Meanwhile in ActionAid UK, people also felt good about this very successful event and we had a strong basis for the work going forward.

Through working together, we managed to achieve all of our aims. It worked well because both the gender advisor and I recognised that we were 'on the same side'. It was clear that I didn't have to persuade her to support women's rights, she already did: the task was to get the minister on board. We both understood our respective positions very well and saw that we had different things to bring to the table, in pursuit of our shared goals. I couldn't have persuaded the minister to speak at our event on my own, or have drafted a speech for him

supportive of our lobbying aims, but neither could the gender advisor organise a public event, or launch a new civil society report. Our professional relationship built on mutual trust, respect and political understanding enabled us to work together very effectively.

1.2 The lobbying meeting: one step forward, two steps back

We had a chance to capitalise on our success in influencing the minister soon afterwards, but this time, we were much less successful. To accompany the launch of the Gender Equality Action Plan, the DFID gender advisor decided to invite the Gender and Development Network (GADN) to an afternoon meeting at the department to discuss the plan and input ideas. The gender advisor had even managed to persuade the minister to attend the last half an hour of the meeting, to hear our deliberations and proposals for strengthening DFID's work on women's rights.

The GADN was probably one of the first, but networks of this kind had proliferated (Eyben 2007), with a large number on different aspects of development – aid, trade, climate change – which brought together mainly INGO staff to agree joint lobbying and campaigning positions. Many of these networks were well resourced by the INGOs and the members had plenty of time to devote to joint working. Increasingly, DFID said that it didn't want to have multiple meetings with individual NGOs, but preferred to hear one civil society message. So, these networks were an important channel for influence.

However, my experiences with the GADN up to that point had not been that positive. I observed a rather flagging network, with little money and a steering group made up of very good, but overworked and demoralised women working on gender and development from various different places – big INGO mainstreamers, policy and programme people from small women's rights organisations, a couple of individual academics and consultants.

Steering group meetings tended to be poorly attended with low energy. A lot of the discussion was around the trials and tribulations of either gender mainstreaming in an INGO that sidelined and marginalised gender issues, despite ambitious public proclamations; or of working and overworking in small underfunded women's rights organisations, the staff of which were sick of repeating their gender messages to a disinterested DFID. Aside from regular meetings with various people at DFID and information sharing about our work, we didn't really have much of a plan to influence the gender agenda.

So here was our opportunity to deliver some sharp, well thought out lobbying messages to the minister, and we even had a couple of hours together in advance to prepare ourselves. But, the meeting was a disaster and as a lobby we totally blew it. The hours of preparation were devoted mainly to people taking it in turns to express scepticism and doubt that the new Gender Equality Action Plan would make much of a difference – why would it, when so many previous plans had failed?

There was little engagement in how to gain traction, just much exasperation as to why DFID couldn't just get on with the job it was committed to do. For some of the more experienced advocates, there was a real sense that they'd been here before and weariness in having to repeat the same old arguments. I had also encountered this at another meeting of women's rights people from NGOs and universities, one of my first meetings at ActionAid, where I arrived full of enthusiasm and hope and was greeted with heavy cynicism – the view was that ActionAid had discovered 'gender' again, but it wouldn't be long before the cycle turned again and it was out of vogue once more.

One of the problems, on reflection, with lobbying DFID on the Gender Equality Action Plan was that it was mainly focused on DFID's internal arrangements, its capacity to 'do gender', which meant that it was quite hard to get fired up with passion about, essentially, the mechanisms for gender mainstreaming. Nevertheless, it was important for us to perform in

this space, to demonstrate to the minister that this well organised lobby was holding DFID accountable for its commitments on gender equality, to enable the gender advisor to follow up and continue to build support for the agenda internally.

But, when the minister came in to hear our thoughts on DFID's efforts to strengthen its work on gender equality, he was greeted with an incoherent mix of complaints and grumbles, with a few big sweeping statements and nothing much very concrete. The only thing that got picked up was a proposal that the new UK gender equality duty, which requires public bodies to promote equality between women and men, be applied to DFID's overseas work, as a lever to generate more consistent commitments and focus. The idea never stuck, but it was the only concrete proposal that anyone made.

The gender advisor was shocked and later reflected that she should have done more to prepare the external lobby. Maybe so, but it was also very clear that we had to get our acts together. The view from others in DFID who were in the meeting was apparently summed up by the statement: 'well you can't trust the NGOs on this issue, they'll just come up with a shopping list of demands'. The contrast between the feel-good optimism that the minister had got from his experience of the public event, even though he was tasked with making a speech on a difficult issue that was beyond his comfort zone and faced some critical questions from the audience, and the negative atmosphere at the lobbying meeting was stark.

Another problem we had at this meeting, but also more generally within both the network and in our work at ActionAid, was the frequent accusation that we didn't have strong enough 'asks'. These 'asks' are the things that you go into lobbying meetings with – concrete, deliverable, policy proposals that are aimed at achieving the outcome that you want. According to various people in ActionAid, women's rights 'asks' were, apparently, too 'fluffy'.

I was told that the idea that aid should be used to support countries to meet human rights commitments, including women's rights, was 'motherhood and apple pie'. No one could disagree with it, but it wasn't meaty enough to put in a briefing. It certainly wasn't adequate to counter the accusation that we couldn't advocate for aid to be used for gender equality, because that would constitute conditionality, not much different from donors demanding that recipient countries spend money on northern consultants or arms. Instead, we needed 'asks' that were the equivalent of 'reduce the proportion of aid spent on technical assistance by x per cent by y date'. The ability to engage with DFID on this kind of technical level was seen as essential for an NGO lobbyist. It was ironic that the demand that aid be spent in ways that supports women's rights was seen as fluffy, compared to the much more conservative demand of tweaking the amount that donors spend on consultants.

This was curious since it seemed to me that NGOs, as part of a broader radical civil society agenda should be engaging much more on the political level, rather than this detailed technical one. In recent years, the advocacy departments of big INGOs have become increasingly detached from their programming activities. Without the political legitimacy of their programming, perhaps technical engagement is all that's left. If DFID is able to occupy INGOs with thinking through the technical details of their aid programme, or their gender mainstreaming arrangements, a great deal of the political space is lost that enables lobbyists to argue: this is a matter of justice, I don't care exactly how you do it, just find a way. This is not to say that lobbyists shouldn't have a robust political analysis of what is and isn't possible and base their strategies around this, but it's also essential not to lose the political ground that constitutes civil society's legitimacy.

Indeed, the gender advisor at DFID commented that ActionAid's more political women's rights stance, as opposed to the blander gender equality agenda was helpful to her because it is this political ground that those feminists working *within* donor organisations often cannot

occupy. This makes it all the more important that those on the outside do so, thereby creating more political space for allies on the inside to make the case.

1.3 The letter: marginalised in our own organisations

The third incident showed that, even if the women's rights advisors had better 'asks', we would struggle to get them heard or accepted by our own colleagues. While my colleagues and I had been beavering away organising the international women's day event, little did we know that our manager, the head of policy was working on a joint agency letter to DFID outlining the development lobby's priorities for the next G8 meeting. He had negotiated a letter which was (true to form, if you believe the DFID staffer) a long laundry list of 'asks' that we wanted to see taken forward, as these joint agency letters often are.

It covered aid, trade, HIV, water, governance, climate change and more. And it included not one single mention of gender equality or women's rights. I had not seen this letter before it was sent, but it was signed off by the head of policy and also seen by the Executive Director of ActionAid UK. Because ActionAid was alphabetically the first agency on the list and the letter was drafted by ActionAid, despite being a joint agency letter, it was very closely associated with us. Coming after our big public display of commitment to women's rights at the event the day before, it looked rather ridiculous.

This letter landed on the gender advisor's desk at DFID, because she was tasked to respond to some of the points it raised as part of her broader brief on equity and rights. She was profoundly disappointed to discover that the letter offered no opportunity for her to respond on gender equality (although she in fact did manage to get some references into the response). The point was that the letter gave her no opportunity to say to the minister, look there's a big vociferous external lobby on this issue and we need to respond, to reinforce what the public event had achieved.

The gender advisor sent the letter to a number of people including the chair of the GADN and the advisor also gave me a call to let me know what had happened. She recognised that the letter had gone out while I was embroiled in organising the event and she knew that had I seen it I would have tried my hardest to get some gender language into it. She recognised that I would be as disappointed as she was, as well as a bit embarrassed. The gender advisor was careful to make sure that in making a fuss about the letter, I understood that she wasn't trying to undermine me or make me look incompetent. She sympathised with my position and together we recognised the opportunity to use this incident as a way to open up space for me and the women's rights agenda within ActionAid. The gender advisor sent an email to ActionAid UK's chief executive, flagging the issue, and in turn the head of policy was asked questions and had to concede that the episode was, at the very least, highly inconsistent. The gender advisor also asked the chief executive for a meeting, which gave me the opportunity to brief him and to get further buy-in and profile for women's rights at this senior level.

By contrast, the reaction from other members of the GADN was very different. An email was sent by the chair to the steering group, of which I was a member, flagging the letter and notifying the group of her intention to write to all the signatories, most of whom were chief executives of organisations that were members of the network, in protest. While I thought this was a good idea, and right that my organisation was being held accountable for its commitments, there was no recognition or concession to the women's rights advisors at ActionAid, even on a personal level, that we would clearly not be happy about what had happened and that it had obviously been beyond our control. While I had felt solidarity and trust with the DFID gender advisor, I felt much less understanding from my own fellow women's rights activists. There was a slight feeling of *schadenfreude* at the fact that the day after our flashy event, we had become unstuck, entirely unsurprisingly for those who had lost

faith that the big INGOs would really take women's rights seriously. Again, there was a slightly weary sense of 'we told you so'.

As well as being disappointing, it was also potentially a missed opportunity. We could have had a useful discussion within the steering group, which included ActionAid, Oxfam and Christian Aid, three of the most powerful development INGOs in the UK, about the best way to capitalise on what had happened. Given that it was our own steering group members who would be drafting the response to the network on behalf of their chief executives, we could have advised on the best approach to get maximum impact. It could have been a moment to leverage more money out of the big INGOs for the cash-strapped network, or we could have tried to get a discussion among the chief executives of the biggest agencies about gender equality and how they intended to integrate it into their broader work towards the G8.

The GADN letter was useful to an extent in that the ActionAid International head of women's rights was on the GADN's mailing list, so also heard about the incident and asked questions of both ActionAid UK and the international head of policy about our approach to the G8 and why we were not taking strong women's rights messages to the summit, which resulted in more integration than there otherwise would have been.

What this incident demonstrated was that as women's rights officers in ActionAid, we had to navigate the territory of intermediaries to some extent. Because of where we were situated within an INGO, we potentially had more power than women's organisations, to influence, as well as more resources, and access and credibility with DFID. But on the other hand, we sometimes struggled to exercise influence over our own organisations. What we needed from the women's rights organisations within the GADN was two things: on the one hand, we needed them to help us to hold our organisations to account for their promises and in this sense, the GADN reaction to the letter was the right one. But, we also needed them to understand that we were their allies in this effort and if we worked together we could do this more effectively. And on a personal level, we wanted them to see us as allies, because we worked hard, sometimes in quite hostile and difficult organisations, for the same goal.

By contrast, there was much greater understanding between me and the gender advisor in DFID – and it worked both ways. On one occasion, for example, I was aware that a colleague of mine at ActionAid was privy to DFID discussions about some important delivery targets. I realised that there were no targets in this framework on gender equality. Recognising that the gender advisor at DFID was either in the dark (as we had been about the letter) or struggling to make the case, I rang her to find out what we could do together. It turned out that she had no idea these targets were being negotiated, but armed with the information I shared with her, she inserted herself into the discussions and DFID subsequently adopted a high level target on delivering on gender equality.

1.4 Straddling the middle ground

Another incident further demonstrated how tricky this middle ground could be. With the High Level Forum on aid effectiveness coming up in Accra in Ghana in 2008, INGOs had been lobbying for more and better aid. This forum was organised to discuss the implementation of the Paris Declaration, which was intended to be a technocratic agenda on aid delivery, which had been seized upon by civil society as well as some feminist bureaucrats as a way to open up debate on aid quantity and quality more broadly.

Colleagues in my department at ActionAid UK were quite involved in these lobbying efforts and we had tried to persuade them to incorporate women's rights messaging into their campaign. But despite our best efforts, we were told either that our 'fluffy' asks were not concrete enough, or (completely the opposite) that pushing for aid to be spent on gender equality was imposing a form of conditionality on developing country governments was that undemocratic and couldn't be supported. We spent a lot of time trying to improve our

analysis, in order to come up with 'asks' that were more acceptable to our colleagues, but on reflection I'm not sure anything would have passed the test.

Since we weren't gaining any traction in our own organisation, we were excited when the international women's rights network, AWID, became engaged in the issue and thought we could support the efforts through this route. AWID saw the aid effectiveness debate as a way of focusing attention on longstanding demands for better funding for women's organisations and more scrutiny of what proportion of aid budgets went to programmes to advance women's rights. When a European women's rights network organised a conference in Spain, AWID decided to hold a meeting directly afterwards to bring women's rights organisations together to strategise on the 'road to Accra'.

My colleague and I were going to the conference and asked to attend the strategy meeting afterwards. We hadn't received confirmation, but assumed no news was good news and made arrangements to stay on. When we got there, however, we were told that we weren't welcome to the meeting because women's organisations wanted to strategise 'without donors in the room'. It was the first time I had been labelled a 'donor' and I was quite surprised.

I think this situation probably reflected a broader concern among women's organisations about INGOs. For many small women's organisations in the South, ActionAid does operate as a donor to some extent, and for them, INGOs had become part of the problem, as they are squeezing the small organisations out of the picture. There was a feeling that INGOs like ActionAid are increasingly bidding for and winning big pots of bilateral donor money, aimed at civil society, because the smaller NGOs lacked the capacity to go through the procurement processes that these require. In this situation, ActionAid does act as an intermediary donor, channelling money into the smaller organisations that cannot access the money directly.

However, as one colleague in ActionAid pointed out to me, it is increasingly the case that these pots of money were being won either by big INGOs like ActionAid or Oxfam, or by the large consultancy companies like KPMG. It seems obvious which is preferable. But, I suppose under these circumstances, ActionAid has to accept that we *are* seen as donors and our input in the strategy meeting was not welcome. However, it was frustrating to find ourselves marginalised from the work on aid effectiveness within our own organisation, by colleagues who said our messages on women's rights and aid were 'motherhood and apple pie', but also excluded from being involved in the issue by women's rights organisations too. It felt strange and a little uncomfortable to be straddling this middle ground sometimes.

Interestingly, AWID formed very effective alliances to influence the aid effectiveness agenda with some feminist bureaucrats, particularly with one working as the gender advisor to the OECD-DAC. I think this was because her position within a donor organisation was more strategic, but also I don't think she would ever have thought it appropriate to attend the women's organisations' strategy meeting and so would never have tried. Whereas, I didn't consider myself a donor and politically felt like I did belong in that space. But, I think AWID were a bit confused about what to do with us in ActionAid – we weren't proper donors, with all the influence that brings with it, but weren't proper women's rights activists either.

I had hoped that by linking up with AWID, we women's rights officers would be in a better position to influence our own colleagues within ActionAid UK. Since ActionAid was recognised as one of the key INGOs in the aid debate, I thought that if we could 'engender' their lobbying, we could play our part in supporting the women's movement's aid agenda. While our colleagues rejected our analysis as too 'fluffy', it would have been harder for them to reject the case made by AWID. This was particularly true given ActionAid's commitment to working with and being informed by social movements and women's rights organisations.

In the end, it wasn't to be. Perhaps I should have made my own intentions and strategy clearer to AWID. Maybe it was clear, but AWID made a calculation that they didn't need to influence the mainstream INGOs to have the impact they wanted. Given their very effective work with the OECD gender advisor, it was evident that they recognised the value of working with feminist bureaucrats, so perhaps a calculation was made that my position inside an INGO was not central to their chosen strategy. By contrast, the OECD gender advisor's position was much more powerful, with much more direct access to where the key decisions were being taken, making an alliance with her much more strategic. It is also possible that AWID had had its fingers burned working with INGOs, the majority of which 'talked the talk' on women's rights, but rarely delivered, but also tended to dominate the political space to the exclusion of women's organisations.

However, at times, it felt like there was an element of one-up-womanship, a certain moral grandstanding, that feminists in women's organisations were somehow more authentic and committed than those in big bureaucracies like ActionAid. It is true that we didn't have all of the same struggles associated with working in small under-resourced organisations, but we had our own battles. In some respects, working for a small women's organisation can be more empowering (aside from the very long hours and poor pay), because you're surrounded by people who agree with you on the basic premise of the importance of women's rights, whereas this is heavily contested within bureaucracies. When you have to deal with this kind of resistance every day on the inside, and then find a lack of understanding from your fellow feminists on the outside, that can be disappointing. I'm sure it was never personal, but because working for women's rights felt, and still feels, like a very personal commitment and pursuit – definitely more than just a job – it was at times difficult and frustrating.

1.5 Conclusion

I have told four stories based on my experience as a women's rights officer working in ActionAid UK. Each of these stories shows the challenges of negotiating the middle ground of being a feminist working from an INGO location. They demonstrate how much of a feminist bureaucrat's skill rests on the effective use of inside-outside strategies, which are a challenge not least because our particular position as feminists within INGOs means that our identities as insiders or outsiders are constantly shifting.

The first story, the one unqualified success out of the four, is about a public event, which worked well precisely because the gender advisor at DFID and I developed a very effective inside-outside strategy. Both of us recognised what was possible from our different positions and we worked together in a relationship of mutual trust and respect. We recognised that our different positioning – she on the inside of DFID, me as the civil society outsider – gave us different strengths and opportunities. By mapping and aligning these different opportunities, we were able to identify the mutual benefits of organising the event, of sharing information at important moments and of leveraging key resources (a large crowd on my part, a positive speech by the Minister on hers). Neither of us could have done it without the other and together we created spaces within our own organisations to influence our colleagues and move our agendas forward.

While the other stories highlight examples of where my work was less obviously successful, in each case it either opened up unexpected new opportunities, or taught me something new about being a more effective feminist bureaucrat. In the failed lobbying meeting, the gender advisor at DFID cursed herself for not preparing the gender lobby better. I blamed my GADN colleagues for not presenting more coherent and compelling messages to the minister. It was an example of where neither the DFID gender advisor on the inside, nor the GAD Network (me included) on the outside, activated the kind of inside-outside strategy that had worked so well at the public event. The gender advisor should have given us more information on what the minister needed to hear and we should have tested out our arguments on the gender advisor in advance, to hone them for better delivery and better likelihood of success. The

lesson for us all was that these strategies need a lot of preparation and careful choreography to make them effective – they can never be taken for granted.

In the case of the lobbying letter devoid of gender equality, this experience highlighted the extent to which feminist bureaucrats are often marginalised – are seen as outsiders – within their own organisations. Despite all the buzz created by the public event, the first opportunity for ActionAid UK to demonstrate some commitment to integrating gender equality into its lobbying work was missed. In this instance, while my ally at DFID completely understood my position, fellow feminists in the GAD Network were much less sympathetic. Both made a fuss, but while the former did so in consultation with me, so that we could work out the best way to capitalise on a bad situation, the latter did so without recognising the difficult and personally demoralising position I found myself in. The trust and respect I was afforded by one, was oppositely mirrored by the other.

Finally, my unsuccessful attempts to play a strategic role in the aid effectiveness campaign, by using my position – this time as an insider – in a powerful INGO, demonstrates the need for greater understanding of those in women's organisations for the potential role that feminist bureaucrats can play in advancing the gender equality agenda. In this instance, I felt that the opportunity for an inside-outside strategy was missed because they did not recognise me as a potential trusted ally, instead assuming that because I was based in the North in an INGO, that I was a donor and therefore not useful. However, the OECD gender advisor worked very effectively with AWID in exactly the way that I did not manage. This suggests that first, with her much greater experience, she was simply much more effective at implementing an effective insider-outsider strategy than I was and secondly, it suggests that perhaps AWID made a calculation that working with me to change the ActionAid's policy messages on aid was not a priority in terms of achieving their aims, instead choosing to focus on influencing the OECD more directly, which is perfectly reasonable. However, if we had communicated more effectively, if I had had the confidence to be explicit about the opportunities I saw and did not feel marginalised as in some way not a proper part of the women's movement, the result would perhaps have been different. Nevertheless, I think that all of these experiences, the positive and the negative, and the process of reflecting and writing on them has enabled me to become and more effective feminist bureaucrat, skills that have been much needed as I have moved into another political space, this time within the UN system.

2 Napping with the enemy: gender equality work in different organisational settings

Ines Smyth

'We seem to be overcoming our fear of power, and have embraced it like a lover'
(Batliwala 2009:140)

2.1 Introduction

This paper is about moving – for period of just over a year – from a large international NGO (Oxfam Great Britain, here referred as Oxfam) to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), institutions with different ethos and priorities, as well as different geographical locations.

My reflections are professional and personal, as I make explicit my positionality as a feminist, middle aged, female 'gender advocate' and activist. I use these latter two terms to reflect on one of the themes of this collection: that there is a difference between feminist activists on one hand, and bureaucrats who happen to work on 'gender issues' on the other. I define myself as a gender advocate and activist because my concern for women's rights spans my private and work life and because I do not perceive my organisation, however large and formally structured, as a bureaucracy where individuals are driven by self interest, as I shall show later.

The focus of the paper is on how I perceived the differences between the two institutions and their respective advantages and disadvantages, through the many filters of my experience, and on how I tried to make use of different opportunities available to pursue my long-term aim: promoting women's rights in the context of development work. I did have additional and related purposes in spending time at the ADB, and they are explored in the next section of the paper.

It should be noted that this article does not attempt to evaluate the achievements of either of the organisations in terms of gender equality. This is certainly not about 'which of the two is better at women's rights work'. Also, as a way of clarification, I should add that my comments are shaped mainly (though not uniquely) by perceptions and conditions at the Headquarters, respectively in Oxford (UK) and Manila (Philippines). Both are large and complex institutions, and thus focusing mostly on Headquarters is a limited but more realistic endeavour. Finally, I should say that my knowledge of Oxfam is considerably more extensive, given the many years (more than a decade) I spent in it when compared with the limited time I have been at the ADB. A year is certainly not long enough to fully understand such a complex institution.

2.2 Structure of the paper

First, I explore my motivations in accepting the post of Leading Gender Specialist at ADB, and the range of emotions associated with this. I then use the framework employed by Miller (1998) that identifies three elements that influence organisational responses to gender equality work: the organisation's openness to external influences, the fit between the gender equality project and the organisation's mandate, and the presence and capacity of gender advocates within it. Second, I look more specifically at the comparative strength of ADB in embedding gender mainstreaming in organisational systems, versus the emphasis Oxfam puts on 'hearts and minds'. Third, I look particularly at the ADB's relationships with women's organisations and networks compared with the situation in Oxfam.

Finally, following my period at the ADB I returned to Oxfam, where I still work as Senior Gender Advisor. The exercise of reflecting, at a distance of a few years, on the experience

and comparing the two organisations for the purpose of writing this paper clarified the sources of the many ambiguities I have in continuing to operate in this large, development NGO. However, the exercise also confirmed that, despite or because of those, I consider it a privilege and a worthwhile career being a gender advocate within this organisation both because I continue to share its overall values and because I am conscious of the positive influence it can have in the lives of women, especially in developing countries.

2.3 The move: emotions and motivations

Rarely do the decisions we take have simple and single motivations. This applies to my decision to join the ADB as Leading Gender Specialist. I believe it was (to use a migration terminology) the result of push and pull factors.

Such factors came together in my desire to reflect and learn more and better, and outside the boundaries that the pressures of daily tasks bring. NGOs give great emphasis to knowledge and learning, and have adopted from the private sector the language of 'learning organisations' (Britton 1998). They often see themselves as the bridge between abstract and theoretical knowledge generated in academic contexts, and the realities experienced by men and women living in poverty. This combination of abstract knowledge and practical experience is considered essential for effective policy making. Working on gender issues often means taking on some of this bridging role, and also mediating between feminist theory and epistemology – often seen as esoteric and not a little alien – on the one hand, and concepts or methodologies that are accessible, acceptable and applicable to development practice on the other. This role also entails translations and compromises that often prevent practitioners – including gender advocates – from exploring and debating relevant issues more openly and fully, and in their true complexity.

Thus the strongest of the motivations behind my decision to leave one organisation for another was the desire to learn and interrogate more in depth and from novel perspectives the issues and approaches I had been working with for so many years. As a gender adviser in Oxfam I had not been operating according to a master [sic!] plan, but developing (with others) strategies according to external and internal influences and adapting them to opportunities and results as they evolved. And while familiarity may not necessarily breed contempt, it does dim ingenuity and initiative.

In other words, reflective practice – a notion central to this collection – is a useful tool that can be sharpened by changing one's environment. Batliwala (2009:140) puts it well with reference to feminists: 'We have been exploring how to reach out, rather than bringing people in – going into spaces where we are not in command, where we must learn, and become the apprentices'. In leaving Oxfam and joining the ADB for a while, I reached out and became an apprentice, and this opportunity to learn was much appreciated.⁵

Having spent many years mostly as a gender advisor in Oxfam, what was encouraging me to leave was the weariness that inevitably accompanies work where – despite progress – steps forwards must be jealously guarded from the backwards slippages that accompany organisational restructurings and personnel changes; where fundamental social transformation is supposed to happen with little resources and within the time span of discrete 'projects' and the boxes of logical frameworks; where ones' beliefs and values must be often adjusted and translated so that they can be accepted by others with different values and priorities (Britton 1998). This is not a categorical and negative appraisal of Oxfam's work in this field, rather the necessary acknowledgment that what we are trying to change – in terms of gender relations and norms – is too large to be contained or achieved by the efforts of a single individual, a single project or a single organisation, however large.

⁵ Though here they are not named, I want to thank the ADB colleagues who became my guides and mentors during this time.

One more reason that pulled me towards the ADB and the more senior position I was to occupy was the desire to move upwards in my career, as gender posts in NGOs are rarely distinguished by their seniority or the power they hold. While the notion of power is amply debated in the feminist literature in fact power is central to its personal dealings with its reality reveal layers of ambiguity and discomfort. Privately, some of us may suspect that the male political discourse is correct, and as women we are not suited to hold position of authority (Naciri 1998). And while relatively little power was associated with my new position at ADB, at the same time the change in status came with a sense that there was something intrinsically improper with my desire to achieve a higher rank. Even the prospect of earning more was somewhat touched by a sense of guilt. As an activist, should I be enticed by selfish considerations such as earnings?

The phrase 'sleeping with the enemy' (or rather, napping, since my union was to be of relative short duration) kept coming to my mind at the time. Its definition made sense, as it 'is used to describe a situation involving a non-adversarial relationship between two individuals or entities that would normally be unfriendly or adversarial... Often, this type of cooperation is met with suspicion from supporters of both parties'.⁶

This may all have had to do with my lack of confidence as an individual, my working class background, or simply the trepidation that comes with any change, but no doubt it was also influenced by certain feminist debates. In fact, as a white, Western, middle-aged woman these dilemmas had additional connotations. Mohanty (1988) argued that the Western gender and development tradition (and more specifically its scholarship) had contributed to reproducing a monolithic notion of women in the Third World, a view detrimental to the promotion of the rights of women in developing countries. Despite the criticisms levelled against it, Mohanty has been influential, including in making many Western feminists in the 1980s and 1990s much more aware of the role they play through their engagement either as scholars or development practitioners. I was not exempt from this, and as I considered the move from Oxfam to ADB, these considerations were foremost in my mind, bringing a sense of apprehension and vague guilt at my own motivations.

2.4 Strong systems versus hearts and minds

It was my expectation that the two organisations would be very different: Oxfam being an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) and ADB an international financial institution (IFI). While the literature (spanning decades) highlights how the term NGO includes a 'huge diversity of institutions' (Edwards and Hulme 1992:14), they are still distinguishable from IFIs. IFIs are bodies with governments' membership, while NGOs are defined by not being governmental. This difference also reflects the source of funding, with IFIs supported financially by member states and NGOs by a variety of sources (the public, foundations, the private sector, as well as donor nations), which determines to whom they are mainly and formally accountable, or at least should be.

Despite the differences, in the last decades NGOs and IFIs gradually have acquired similar characteristics, for example an increase in their role in development and global governance, and some convergence in language (of participation, good governance, empowerment, etc). The failures of adjustment programmes (and to some extent the pressure from NGOs) have lead IFIs to embrace poverty reduction as a stated purpose, and thus come closer to development NGOs' most defining concern. Nevertheless, the two types of organisations still have very different mandates and agendas: repeated crises and various paradigm shifts have not displaced economic growth and the market from the centre of the IFIs' pantheon, while the needs and perspective of individual men and women and of communities living in poverty and experiencing disasters and marginalisation remain without doubt the central reference points for the thinking and action of NGOs, whatever their size.

⁶ <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-does-sleeping-with-the-enemy-mean.htm>

I became aware that there are other differences between ADB and Oxfam, notably the much greater financial resources and the much more hierarchical structure of the ADB. The latter was particularly tangible: office space and furnishing in ADB reflect a strict hierarchy, with administrative staff (of whom, it should be stressed, the great majority are Filipino nationals) occupying desks in open areas, and mostly expatriate staff ('professional' staff) in offices that become larger and better appointed as their seniority increases. In contrast, Oxfam's offices are on an entirely open plan, and this includes spaces for those in the most senior positions. In Oxfam hierarchies are rather flat and this also means that, at least at Headquarters, it is possible to interact freely across all areas of work and levels of seniority. I am able, for example, to contact Oxfam's Executive Director directly when necessary. In ADB this would be unthinkable and a strict protocol is followed to communicate upwards. An interesting ritual is observed at Christmas, when all staff is given strict instructions on how and when to await the General Director's 'walk about', and whether and where to stand in the official photograph.

It also appeared to me that what Duncan Green concludes (Green 2008) in relation to the World Bank is true for ADB as well: despite many internal differences of opinions, the overall liberal ideology and economic orthodoxy is still dominant among its staff (excepting, as a rule, social development and gender advisors). Staff members in Oxfam, in comparison, seem more diverse in terms of background and qualifications (few are economists), and tend to espouse a very different ideology. In my many years in Oxfam I have often been in staff recruitment panels, for positions that have varied considerably in seniority and technical fields. Very frequently, however, candidates seemed to be genuinely attracted by the values of the organisation, and often were prepared to accept positions below (in pay and rank) what their qualifications may have allowed them to achieve, in order to be able to contribute to social development and poverty reduction. This appeared more often the case for female candidates, for whom a frequent route to 'development work' (dealing directly with communities or doing advocacy and campaigning) seems to be that of taking up administrative positions. In 2009 67 per cent of the Oxfam HQ staff were women, though this fell to 48 per cent in the two highest levels of seniority. Despite a widespread tendency to work long hours, it is possible for staff to seek arrangements that facilitate childcare or other family responsibilities through flexible or part-time work (20 per cent of HQ staff are part-time, and of this 85 per cent are women).

Concerning gender work, fairly soon after joining the ADB it became clear to me that the differences from Oxfam were considerable. The sharpest difference between the two was that the ADB had succeeded to embed its gender work in robust systems (Hunt et al 2007). Such systems were and remain relatively weak and inconsistent in Oxfam. Oxfam, on the other hand, is generally characterised by an environment where people's behaviour, values and language reflect the relevance and importance of gender equality and women's rights, in other words where 'hearts and minds' are mostly (although not totally) committed.

The ADB's commitment to the promotion of gender equality is enshrined in the Bank Policy on Gender and Development in ADB Operations which requires 'addressing gender considerations in ADB's macroeconomic, sector, strategy, and programming work, including studies on the impact of economic reform programs on women; undertaking gender analysis in projects; and ensuring the consideration of gender issues at all stages of the project cycle, including identification, preparation, appraisal, implementation, operation and maintenance, and monitoring and evaluation' (ADB 2006). The ADB 'Operational Procedures on Gender and Development in ADB Operations' sets the procedures to be followed. The main element is the classification of Bank projects in four gender categories (ADB 2010).

Category 1: gender equality as a theme (GEN), applied where there is an explicit aim to promote gender equality;

Category II: effective gender mainstreaming (EGM), applied where the design of the loan includes women's participation and related features;

Category III: some gender benefits (SGB), where there are only some gender features on loan designs;

Category IV: no gender elements, which is self-explanatory.

The processes and decisions that surround such classification represent the cornerstone of ADB's gender systems (other elements are the Country Gender Assessments – CGA – and a number of capacity development initiatives) on which other activities rest. For this reason, I limit my observations to these.

The system clearly has problems. First comes its complexity (my biggest challenge in the first months at ADB was to understand it): different categories (namely the first versus the rest) belong to different Bank systems, the sheer number of the elements that define each category as the ADB 2010 Report states, and finally the fact that categories I and II are combined into an additional category known as 'projects with significant gender mainstreaming'. The system changed in 2008, thus making it harder to track progress. Finally, and perhaps more seriously, the classifications are assigned at and are limited to the approval phase of projects. They do not apply to their implementation or results.

Despite these weaknesses, the system provides a *mandatory*, open door for gender considerations to be included in loans and other projects, and thus it is regularly followed. Another interesting aspect of the ADB system is that for the projects in the first two categories a detailed Gender Action Plan (GAP) is required. This is perhaps one of the most promising tools to ensure that gender concerns are taken into consideration beyond the approval stage of loans: that they are implemented and monitored, and their results assessed – at least for projects that include such a Plan.

By contrast, the impression during my stay was that ADB was far from having achieved the same level of concern for gender issues in its own internal environment. Gender composition of staffing could be considered a tangible demonstration of this: professional women at the Bank by March 2010 were only 28.3 per cent of international staff as against 72.4 per cent of local (usually much more junior) staff.⁷ Various attempts were being made to improve the gender balance in the professional ranks, but it was unclear to me what practical steps were taken or what they were achieving. This was because this 'internal' matter was considered outside the scope of work of the Leading Gender Specialist.

More striking, and more difficult to document, was the quality of daily practices and interactions. For example, staff members at ADB would use a form of English peppered with gendered terminology (more junior female colleagues may be referred to as 'girls') and pronouns ('he' for both 'he' and 'she'). It was not unusual to hear comments on the appearance, dress or age of female colleagues, whether derogatory or complimentary. The Bank seemed to have limited concern for a work-life balance that would accommodate gendered family obligations. Formally and publicly I was told several times that 10 per cent of overtime was obligatory for all. Travel schedules for those with very young children were not less intense than those of others. In private conversations with female colleagues with young children it was clear that they found this as challenging as other professional women in their situation, but that this was made worse by the intransigence of their senior managers.

In a particularly memorable event – ironically, a lunch arranged by the Professional Women Committee – speakers insisted that at the ADB women who wish to advance their careers must simply 'play the game' just like their male colleagues, rather than try to change the

⁷ <http://www.adb.org/employment/gender.asp>

game itself. Anything else was seen as seeking unfair advantages. One of the speakers then compared granting any concession (in terms of flexible time, working hours, travel regimes) to 'women who choose to have children' to doing the same for someone who may 'choose to spend their evenings drinking and taking drugs', i.e. ADB should not be deemed responsible for personal choices of life style. The statement understandably shocked those present; however, with one exception, they felt unable to challenge it.

What may have been the reason behind a situation where workable systems had been developed and had taken hold to support gender work, but where values of gender equality received such little space and recognition? One possibility is that this was the result of explicitly thought out strategies of 'institutional gender entrepreneurs' who, fully cognizant of the hierarchical nature of the organisation, reached the conclusion that focusing efforts on systems rather than attitudes and values would achieve better results. The steep hierarchy would indeed make questioning or resisting organisational systems extremely difficult. I occasionally found myself wondering whether this was also a situation where, as Green (2008:303) says, 'staff concern for career and salary leads to a high level of conformity and conservatism'. This would not be inconceivable for ADB, because of the significant 'career and salary' when compared to employment in NGOs. In what way did such a situation influence my work in ADB? The systems represented a challenge at the beginning, as understanding the classification and other procedures was no simple matter. For the remainder of my stay at ADB I was content with using and promoting such systems to the best of my ability, to ensure that loans and other projects had as many, relevant and realistic gender components as possible, or as a minimum, a gender analysis.

I felt more confident in trying to induce change in the culture of the organisation within my limited sphere of influence. At the very basic level I instituted less rigid and authoritarian relationships with staff and others, these being in my opinion more congenial to debate on gender, and in the hope of modelling less hierarchical values and practices for broader adoption. I also brought from the NGO sector participatory techniques for training and planning. Those are not unknown at the ADB, but the preference is still for formal events where adult learning is passive and participation is limited. At social development training with staff and at a large meeting with government representatives, for example, I promoted methodologies (case studies, videos, role play, group work) that are in standard use in NGOs, and that opened the possibility for a more questioning attitude to the matters at hand hopefully also for the future.

The situation in Oxfam is in some sense the reverse. Oxfam has made only limited attempts to classify projects, programmes or initiatives from the perspective of whether or how they address gender equality issues. The existing system requires information on the percentage of any given project that focuses on one of the five 'aims' of the organisation (in the fields of livelihood, basic services, humanitarian response, governance and gender equality). But there does not seem to be a clear definition of what this refers to and thus it is subject to many different interpretations. The consequence is that, while projects that address women's disadvantage as their primary purpose (what can be called 'stand alone projects') can be identified and counted, the same is certainly not true for the mainstreamed elements of other projects and programmes (where the main focus may be livelihood, education or other more generic aspects of poverty). More recently (at the end of 2010), attempts were being made to introduce quantifiable elements (percentage of projects with a 'gender objective') to our work. But it is too early to assess their potential.

Beyond this, there is no mandatory system that requires separate plans for gender aspects of the other areas of work in other words for mainstreaming. While projects and programmes are obviously monitored and assessed (including those focusing on aspects of women's rights), and occasional gender reviews are carried out, there is no requirement in the organisation for a regular and systematic analysis of the directions and achievements of

gender equality work. Perhaps the much less hierarchical relations and informal structures may mean that existing gender requirements are agreed to but can be ignored without much fear of sanction (or expectation of rewards).

My experience of working in Oxfam for over ten years is that great emphasis is put on establishing that the values it holds are clear and shared across the organisation. Oxfam says in its internal website: '**We truly believe** that a world without poverty is possible. That everyone has a right to a life worth living. And that with the right support people can take control, solve their own problems, and become self-reliant and independent'.⁸ Oxfam has long realised that the values it espouses must apply both to its external mandate of fighting poverty and suffering, and to its internal practices. Moser and Moser quote Oxfam comments that it could not realistically expect to achieve at the programme level what it could not achieve in our own workspace (Moser and Moser 2003).

The in-depth study of Oxfam's organisational culture carried out by Pialek (2008) concludes that the discourse of the organisation indicates a shared consciousness of gender issues: 'Formally sexist language and concepts have been exorcised, equality language is incorporated within all human resources literature and policy, job descriptions explicitly highlight gender awareness as a key quality, policies and analysis incorporate gender terms' (Pialek 2008:173). Despite this, according to Pialek progress has been achieved at the cost of persisting problems: a degree of hidden and passive resistance to the 'project' of gender equality, ambiguities about whose responsibility gender mainstreaming work should be, and the sanitisation of gender issues away from their feminist roots.

Pialek's analysis continues to be valid to this day. There are 'persisting problems' in whether all hearts and minds have been conquered. For example, an initiative – *Let's Talk* – recently implemented to create innovative spaces where personal concerns or questions on gender equality could be openly raised led to constructive and open debates in several countries, but failed to take off at Headquarters. Informal enquiries indicate that this may be due to the inevitable turnover of personnel who may not have been previously exposed to such notions; to a sense among some staff members that inequality between men and women has been overcome in the UK; and that some of the issues raised in this context are considered 'private matters'. This is neither a surprise nor an indication that Oxfam failed in its efforts, rather a remainder that gender equality work – like women's work more broadly – is never done and that we need to remain alert to all difficulties and opportunities as they emerge.

Pialek's overall conclusion is none the less positive, since it recognises that staff at Oxfam generally recognise the existence of gender inequalities and the importance of addressing them. In my opinion there are various reasons for this relatively favourable environment: one is simply the fact that gender concerns, issues and debates have a long history in Oxfam. The history of gender equality work goes back at least twenty years, sufficiently long time to penetrate the language, thinking and overall culture of the organisation. The embedding of such concerns in Oxfam has been helped by other factors beside longevity: its skills and commitment to communicate its values effectively both internally and externally (the in-house journal *Gender and Development* has much to be thanked for this), the persistence of several generations of 'gender entrepreneurs', and perhaps most importantly, as mentioned earlier, the fact that Oxfam attracts staff who often already share core values, including a degree of commitment to gender equality.

It is hard to describe whether and how in my capacity of gender advisor I have been contributing to this environment and encouraging progress, as my approach has changed in time and to suit conditions. A noteworthy recent aspect of this has been the collaboration with other gender advocates on changing the language – which is an essential aspect of the culture – of the organisation from 'gender' to 'women's rights'. There are several reasons

⁸ http://intranet.oxfam.org.uk/about_oxfam/who_we_are/brand/beliefs.htm

behind this, including the need to make explicit the purpose of our work (the promotion of women's rights) and overcome the professed confusion (be it genuine or not) around the 'gender' words that seemed to be preventing action. Accompanied by some interesting debates,⁹ the current slogan of the organisation is: 'Putting women's rights at the heart of all we do'.

2.5 Openness and networking

How different development agencies have included gender equality and women's rights in their priorities have been subject to much analysis, especially in evaluations of gender mainstreaming as the strategy endorsed by the Beijing Platform for Action in 2005 (see, for example Porter and Sweetman 2005; Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002). There seem to be two main channels through which organisations open up to gender considerations: through external influence and through the work of 'internal advocates'. Here I am focusing on the former, as the role of the latter has been mentioned in several instances above.

I agree with Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2002) that international organisations with a neo-liberal agenda – among which I include the ADB – are less likely to adopt gender-mainstreaming concerns as compared with more 'interventionist ones'. I would add to this that both a cause and a consequence of this tendency is the nature of their relationship with and their permeability to their influence of women's rights and feminist organisations. Without embarking in a long exploration of terms, here I am making a distinction between those diverse groups (mixed or 'women's only' groups) that embrace an ideology and undertake activities to promote women's rights (whether they adopt a language of feminism or not), versus groups that are not concerned with equality between men and women, but still may bring women together as women.

The ADB has a long tradition of interacting with civil society. Since 1998 it has formalised this relationship through a policy, and later through instituting the 'NGO and Civil Society Centre'. The latter has the purpose of engaging in dialogue with civil society organisations, integrating their knowledge into the Bank operations and promoting possible collaboration. However, its relationship with women organisations is restricted to a certain type of actors, in terms of the organisations with which it interacts on gender equality matters and who, within the Bank, does the interacting; and by being carried out under institutionalised terms. My experience from the time spent at the ADB was that there is a history of connections and collaboration on gender with the World Bank, and with representatives of bilateral institutions. This is especially through the OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality (GENDERNET), and the links to representatives of those (mostly Nordic) governments that have contributed to the Gender and Development Cooperation Fund (GDGF), since 2003. Such connections were restricted to a small number of individuals within the ADB (for example those who attended the annual GENDERNET meeting in Paris) and regulated by institutional parameters that left little room for open discussions of substantial issues.

A clearer example of institutionalised relationship is the existence of the External Forum on Gender (EFG), similar to the WB Consultative Group on Gender. This is a group of eminent and committed individuals with considerable gender expertise. The group was formed to 'promote and facilitate dialogue between ADB and external experts and advocates on gender and development issues' (ADB).¹⁰ My experience was that the annual meeting at Headquarters in Manila – while useful to a degree – was too carefully choreographed in terms of invitees, conduct and topics for discussions to lead to a genuine and possibly challenging dialogue. Attempts at extending the types of interaction beyond the annual meeting and at moving the meetings to a Resident Mission where the members of EFG could visit ADB programmes did not succeed (apparently due mostly to financial considerations). In

⁹ For example whether Oxfam should focus only on the rights of 'poor women'.

¹⁰ ADB (2009) 10th Meeting of the External Forum on Gender and Development (EFG) Auditorium Zone D, ADB Headquarters, Manila 14–17 July 2009.

addition, the dissemination of and responses to the annual recommendations of the EFG had to go through such slow and elaborate processes that by the time they happened, they appeared to have lost poignancy and relevance.

Other connections with the 'gender community' were through the many consultants that ADB recruits for different tasks (both in countries and at Headquarters), and especially the Gender Specialists (as well as the permanent local staff) the Bank has in some of its Resident Missions. Many such individuals (as well as some staff at Headquarters) consider themselves feminists or have connections with feminist and women's rights organisations in their countries and beyond, and are at times able to bring into the Bank evidence, ideas and actions of a progressive nature. On the other hand, they experience all the challenges familiar to 'internal advocates': their voices and messages are more muted when compared, for example, to those coming from other 'development partners', i.e. multilateral and bilateral institutions mentioned above. In some case this really meant, as Razavi says (1998) that the positions of such internal advocates became watered down, for example by the adoption of an instrumentalist (rather than rights-based) stance that left little room for bringing into the Bank more challenging notions inspired by a feminist tradition. This does not mean that the work of consultants (especially those engaged on a long-term basis and at the Resident Missions) is ineffectual. On the contrary, where progress is made on including in loan agreements elements that are beneficial to women or that aspire to promote gender equality, this is often thanks to the technical and tactical skills of the individuals concerned, their knowledge of government institutions, and their commitment to their chosen field.

Despite these positive examples, formal and strong links with women's' rights and feminist organisations appeared limited, including contacts with key networks through which women's organisations exchange experiences. This applies especially to international networks such as AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development), DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Year), ISIS International (an NGO promoting women's' rights mostly through information and communication), and the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR). For example, the ADB does not participate in the biannual Forum of the AWID as it is not seen as relevant). It is also worth noting that both the ISIS and the WGNRR are based in Manila (ISIS since 1991), while DAWN has a strong representation in the country. Given the proximity, opportunities for dialogue could be better cultivated. An introductory meeting I arranged between DAWN representatives and ADB staff was cordial but did not lead to longer-term relationships.

Seen from the other side, many feminist organisations and individuals have been simply unwilling to engage with an agency they see as embodying an ideology and practices that have contributed to increasing and feminising poverty (Dennis and Zuckerman 2006). My understanding from discussions with friends and colleagues is that this is also the outcome of past experiences in attempting to influence and possibly collaborate with the ADB, which have left such organisations unconvinced of the usefulness of investing their scarce human and financial resources for very limited result because of the impenetrability of the Banks.

This particular aspect of the relationship between the ADB and external bodies has been analysed at the country level in Thailand. Pantana et al (2005) confirm what I found to be the case at Headquarters and conclude that there is a reluctance on the part of many NGOs in Thailand to engage with the Bank, which is perceived – despite its professed support for an anti-poverty and pro-rights agenda – as still prescribing the same neo-liberal economic growth model that has historically led to negative social and environmental consequences,.

As mentioned, some of the reasons for such a situation have to do with the institutionalised nature of many ADB's external relationships. It can also be explained by the fact that some of the criticisms, for example by Gender Action, are perceived by the IFIs as unduly strident and irrelevant, thus unhelpful in bringing about internal reforms. Nonetheless, the ADB itself recognises that there are weaknesses in the way it relates to relevant external actors. A 2009

evaluation report emphasises ADB's need to make more efforts to identify potential development partners for gender and development work and to document the joint experience (ADB 2009). It will be interesting to see what kinds of changes this recommendation may bring about, and whether these lead to a broader dialogue with women's organisations locally or regionally.

Joint practical work – for example towards the regular Gender Country Assessments (CGA) that the ADB produces – seemed to provide better opportunities for linking the ADB to other and diverse institutions. The planned preparation of the latest CGA for the Philippines – during my stay at the ADB – was a good opportunity for collaboration across institutions and individuals having very diverse approaches to gender work, including those who define themselves as feminists. This was made possible by several factors: the crucial one was the existing capacities and reach of feminists and women's organisations in the Philippines that made them indispensable partners in such an undertaking. Feminists and their organisations in the country have the maturity and confidence to have already established their own relationships (for example as consultants) with the ADB without feeling either threatened or compromised by such temporary liaisons. The presence in ADB of colleagues – more 'gender entrepreneurs' – with the necessary interest in gender equality matters and knowledge of local civil society, guaranteed the resources and space for such an undertaking. Finally, my own contacts – and I like to think mutual trust – with feminists and my position in the ADB gave legitimacy to the undertaking from both perspectives.

The result was that the CGA report could cover issues – such as reproductive rights – that were of timely concern to the women's movement in the country, as well as representing the outcome of genuine consultations with men and women in communities in different parts of the country. This practical collaboration seemed to reassure some of the local activists who had initially been suspicious of my joining the ADB (perhaps I was being perceived as 'sleeping with the enemy'), and led to more frequent interactions outside ADB's concerns and activities, such as participation in seminars and other events. It is interesting to speculate how much similar practical engagements in other countries are inspired by the priorities of the organisation or by those of the women's movement.

I tried in other ways to establish links with women's organisations and their representatives. Inviting Noeleen Heyzer, then Executive Director of UNIFEM, as speaker at a 'high-level seminar' offered the opportunity to debate publicly and formally relevant issues through the rare presence of someone able to bridge the gap between the institution and the women's movement. The event was extremely well attended and thought-provoking, both because of its theme (trafficking of women) and because of the genuine affection demonstrated in the interaction between speaker and audience, markedly different from the usually detached tone of such debates. I similarly invited other women's organisations (including the steering committee of DAWN) to events at ADB for informal exchanges of ideas.

How does this kind of external collaboration compare with the situation in Oxfam? Its main partners are national and local NGOs, as well as development networks with which it forms alliances for advocacy and campaigning purposes. A 2009 review found that only a small percentage of women's organisations are formally in a partnership with Oxfam (i.e. in a funding relationship, with official agreements). Since then a large programme on women's political leadership and participation (Raising Her Voice) is being implemented in partnership with dozens of women's rights organisations in 17 countries, including networks that operate at regional level (for example in Africa for work on the African Women's Protocol).

The imperfect classification system used in Oxfam – mentioned earlier – still does not capture the many additional relationships that it has with women's rights organisations. While

Oxfam's Global Campaigns¹¹ have not always included a sufficiently large, active and fair presence of women's rights networks, or an adequate consideration for their policy positions, dialogues with a variety of feminist alliances engaged in campaigning are progressing well. 'We Can', the campaign to end violence against women to which Oxfam has contributed in many countries of South Asia and beyond, is in a network of innumerable organisations, most of them focusing on women's rights and violence against women. Feminists representing a variety of institutions are members of the advisory board of Oxfam's *Gender and Development Journal*. As in the case of ADB, consultants with expertise on gender – as well as volunteers and interns – are frequently employed to carry out project assessments and other research. Oxfam has long been linked to AWID, and is an active member of the UK Gender and Development Network (GADN) – the medium through which development organisations, academics and others come together in the UK to exchange information and jointly advocate for women's rights. Similar interactions, if in different degrees and configurations, characterise the relationships between the women's movement and Oxfam in the various countries in which it works.

Cultivating relationship with the women's movement has been a key part of my work, because I believe this is one of the ways in which women living in poverty can be truly heard. My ideas are nurtured and my activism realised through membership in various international networks and by representing Oxfam at events such as the AWID Forum, the activities of the UK GADN and the annual meetings of the Commission of the Status of Women. Another strategy is encouraging Oxfam to enter into collaborations on specific themes with specialised networks, for example with WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organisation) on environmental and climate change matters or with WOCAN (Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management) on issues pertaining to agriculture. Such relationships are important also because they allow us to hold up the more progressive views and practices in gender and women's rights issues for emulation by our own. Writing and publishing on relevant matters have a role to play too, as they influence overall debates that, in due course and at times subliminally, reach Oxfam's thinking and practice.

Strengthening Oxfam's links to the women's movement has been an agreed strategy not only within Oxfam GB, but also among the gender experts and advocates from the various affiliates (fourteen as I write) of the Oxfam International Federation. In fact, cultivating, developing and agreeing on collaboration regarding gender equality work *within* the federation has been a growing component of my work. This reflects both the general trend in the federation and the effectiveness of such cooperation in gender equality work. The personal relationships developed in this context are also among the most valuable sources of support and inspiration.

2.6 Going back

My decision to return to Oxfam was in part dictated by wanting to be closer to my family and by other personal considerations, and in part by what I perceived to be a more familiar and more congenial professional environment, and the possibility to interact more frequently and directly with a community of like-minded people (Oxfam's hearts and minds).

The time spent at ADB as an apprentice was challenging. I had to learn new and intricate language, systems, and procedures and get acquainted with many new people and some new places: an invaluable opportunity for renewal that made the experience itself extremely worthwhile. The opportunity to compare the two organisations was instructive. It led me to reach the perhaps obvious conclusion that all – robust systems, strong values and

¹¹ Global Campaigns are always undertaken by all affiliates of the Oxfam International confederation, rather than by the individual organisations such as Oxfam Great Britain.

convictions, and open channels of communication and influence with organisations supporting women's rights – are essential to effective work towards gender equality.

The comparison also encouraged me, on my return, to use the more congenial environment of Oxfam for pursuing an approach based on the conviction that it is not sufficient to make use of positive opportunities but that we must openly confront persisting obstacles and areas of resistance. In my experience this is not a popular approach in NGOs, where problems are always 'challenges', and where social problems of intractable complexity are expected to have immediate and simple solutions. Criticisms – however constructive – from gender advocates are frequently taken to be a confirmation of their 'negative attitudes', linked perhaps to the fact that feminist-inspired analysis is associated with struggle and contestation, and the demonisation of feminists is still pervasive (Smyth 1999). Challenging these attitudes needs to become part of our efforts towards convincing 'hearts and minds'.

I went back determined to continue not only deepening the transformation of 'hearts and minds', but also renewing efforts for influencing Oxfam to adhere more strictly to existing gender systems and to establish stronger ones, since in Oxfam the apparent consensus on the importance of women's rights remains hostage both to individual interpretations and limited capacities for translating conviction into action and to inevitable structural changes. This is a healthy reminder that despite the fundamental differences in mandate and priorities between the two organisations, both remain 'master's houses' (Staudt 2002) where many rules and structures are male-dominated, albeit to different extents. Because of this, we gender advocates must always remain vigilant and continue to renew our strategies even in contexts, such as that of Oxfam, where the environment is more agreeable and receptive.

A very liberating personal legacy of my experience in ADB converges around less rigid notions of power, and overcoming what Baritteau (2003) calls 'moralism' defined as 'the pursuit and pronouncement of singular, essentialist, righteous truth claims about women's lives intended to convey the rightness of our positions and prescriptions' (2003:69). In my case, I believe I may have indulged in a form of moralism with regard to personal and professional choices and their coherence with our values. When applied to others this may have made me suspicious of strategies that bring feminists closer to 'shaping the use of power', especially in organisations (such as IFIs) where much power seems to reside. When applied to myself, this appeared to be at the roots of the moral discomfort I experienced before joining the ADB.

Being in the ADB gave me the opportunity to appreciate more the gender advocates who continue to work in such a challenging environment, and to respect more their personal commitment and the effectiveness of the strategies they adopt. It also made me kinder towards my own decision and motives for wanting to 'sleep with the enemy', both as a legitimate strategy and as the source of renewed confidence, appreciation and resilience to continue my work in Oxfam.

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