

# Power *and* Process

Geraldine Reardon



*A Report  
from the  
Women  
Linking  
for Change  
Conference,  
Thailand,  
1994*

**An Oxfam Publication**



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A Report from the Women Linking for Change  
Conference, Thailand, 1994

Geraldine Reardon

Oxfam  
(UK and Ireland)

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# Preface

This book is an analytical report of Oxfam UK/I's Women Linking for Change Conference, held in Thailand in February 1994. As the Coordinator of Oxfam's Women's Linking Project, which started in 1992, I felt that the Conference, which was the final stage in the two-year Women's Linking Project, ended with a very strong message from Oxfam staff, Southern women's groups, and other international development agencies. The message is that radical transformation is needed in many aspects of Oxfam UK/I's work, as it moves towards full implementation of the organisational Gender Policy, which was ratified in 1993.

The WLP Conference was a milestone for Oxfam; it provided an opportunity to listen to many different voices, enabling women and men at the front-line of development practice to make their various views heard and acted on. Yet, it is important to remember that the Conference was just one part of a much longer learning process. Oxfam's formal work on gender issues began in 1985, building on the many years of worldwide struggle of women and men to put gender issues on the agenda of mainstream development organisations.

However, despite ostensible commitment to gender issues, the power politics of development have in the past meant that the work of development agencies such as Oxfam UK/I has not, in the main, been shaped by, or even linked to, the women's movement in the South, where Oxfam UK/I's programme is largely based. The WLP was intended to be a first attempt to build a bridge, through beginning a dialogue between Oxfam UK/I and sister organisations from the North, and women's organisations in the South.

Within Oxfam UK/I, the WLP process signalled a significant shift in thinking about the implications of taking on the Gender Policy. We are changing as an organisation, and the vision and direction of those changes has been, to a great extent, inspired and guided by 'women

linking for change'. Clear messages and recommendations from the Conference have begun to make a real impact on Oxfam UK/I's work and culture. Voices in the WLP emphasised the need for a holistic view of development: economic, socio-cultural, and political factors cannot be delinked. Women are asserting their right to development, in all possible spheres of their lives. The WLP called on Oxfam UK/I to build on the work it has begun in hitherto unrecognised areas of legitimate concern to development: violence against women; promotion of women's human rights including reproductive rights; and promotion of women's political participation in civil society through capacity-building and leadership training.

Externally, these messages have been carried forward in extensive lobbying and advocacy work in the build-up to the World Social Summit on Development (Copenhagen 1995) and the United Nations Fourth Women's Conference (Beijing 1995). More than 20 Oxfam UK/I programmes have been actively involved in this work since the WLP Conference, building national and regional forums together with feminist organisations and networks in four continents.

The WLP Conference was a critical springboard for gender policy development, not only in Oxfam UK/I, but in other organisations in Oxfam International; representatives of some of these were present in Thailand. Links with our sibling Oxfams have grown and strengthened since the Conference, through co-operation both on the ground in programme development work, and in advocacy work on gender issues in international arenas. An International Working Group on gender policy and practice now exists across the breadth of Oxfam International, aiming to strengthen and monitor our shared commitment to gender-fair development.

Internally, within Oxfam UK/I, the WLP process highlighted the need to value the diversity of our human resources. This point has resonated throughout fora for Oxfam UK/I staff since the WLP Conference. Oxfam UK/I has now committed itself to a policy of capacity-building and staff development, and to recognising and responding to the cultural diversity which exists throughout the organisation. This means changing working culture to recognise the value of different ways of thinking and working, and taking positive action to promote and support women, and other under-represented constituencies, at all levels of the organisation.

The WLP Conference emphasised the need for Oxfam UK/I to scale up its support to women's empowerment, supporting different kinds of interventions, such as lobbying, and research on development theory and practice. Ways need to be found of linking good practice to policy development; funding across country boundaries needs to increase, to

support regional work, and funds need to be found for thematic work across regions.

The WLP Conference had much to say about gender and partnership; calls were made for the work which Oxfam UK/I undertakes with counterpart organisations to be informed by a gender perspective. The link between feminist organisations and development needs to be recognised, and Oxfam must work with organisations who have the empowerment of women as an explicit goal. Most importantly, the imbalanced power relations that exist between donor and recipient must be recognised and addressed as far as possible, through increasing transparency and accountability in the relationship.

Diversity of experience and view is both the main obstacle to, and opportunity for, dialogue on development issues. Through consultations with women's organisations from Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, we all recognised differences in circumstances, perceptions of the world, and priorities. In spite of this variety, there was a strong message being forged in the different fora provided by the project: women's equality and gender issues can no longer be ignored. Networking and capacity-building of this sort is a powerful tool for development, and funding agencies need to support alliance-building and linking between South-North, South-South, and North-North organisations.

The WLP was launched with support from Oxfam UK/I's Fiftieth Anniversary Fund. Oxfam UK/I is grateful for further support from the Overseas Development Administration (SEADD), and the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which made the Women's Linking Project possible. Finally, I would like to thank all the women and men who supported the project, and put so much work into its success. These include, in particular, the following Oxfam staff members who helped to co-ordinate and administer the WLP: Mercedes Cumberbatch, Kate Hamilton, Caroline Knowles, Sarah Perman, Dimsa Pityana, and Peta Sandison.

Candida March  
Co-ordinator, Women's Linking Project

## Introduction

*Oxfam UK/I's focus is on gender, rather than on women, to ensure that changing women's status is the responsibility of both sexes. It acknowledges that development affects men and women differently and that it has an impact on relations between men and women. A focus on gender is required to ensure that women's needs (set in the broader context of class, ethnicity, race and religion) do not continue to be ignored.*

*Gender and Development: Oxfam's Policy for its Programme, May 1993*

In February 1994, Oxfam UK/I funded an International Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, for Oxfam UK/I staff, staff from other organisations in the Oxfam Family, partner organisations, and international women's organisations, as the final stage of its Women's Linking Project (WLP), initiated in 1992 as part of Oxfam's fiftieth anniversary celebrations. The aim of the WLP Thailand Conference — the first of its kind for any European development agency working in the South — was to enable Oxfam UK/I field staff and Southern women's organisations to contribute to gender-fair policies and programmes that are sensitive to Southern women's perspectives. Specific objectives of the Conference included:

- engaging women from gender-focused Southern organisations and Oxfam UK/I in a dialogue on critical development issues from a gender perspective;
- fostering a dialogue and encouraging North-South co-operation;
- examining Oxfam UK/I's efforts to integrate gender into its programmes in the light of gender perspectives from the South;
- sharing information and cross-regional learning on gender and development issues;



- distilling examples of 'best practice', and consolidating lessons learnt in gender and development work in Oxfam UK/I to date;
- encouraging solidarity and support among development practitioners working on gender and development.

Participants at the Conference were a diverse group of people, representing different perspectives. The majority were Oxfam UK/I staff who work on gender and development issues; these were drawn from all parts and many levels of the organisation. Field offices throughout the world were represented, as well as Oxfam head office, and staff attending were from senior management to programme officer level. Beyond Oxfam staff, valuable input into the Conference came from representatives from Southern women's organisations who had attended the Global Meeting a few days previously, and from representatives of other funding agencies. Those participants who viewed themselves as committed feminists were matched by others who remained wary of the value of a gender analysis to development.

This book has been prepared to bring the main points raised and discussed at the WLP Conference to a wider readership, to encourage discussion of what it means to look at development through a gender lens. This is not a Conference report in the sense of a detailed hour-by-hour record, but attempts to draw on the issues and ideas of the Conference participants, and to reveal some of the tensions that arise in implementing a gender policy in a development agency like Oxfam UK/I. These tensions can be found at many points: between the demands made by Southern partners and the resources available; in attempting to reconcile an overall strategy for development with a plurality of needs; and, finally, in the resistance within organisations to personal and institutional change.

To open the debate, this Introduction will trace the history behind the WLP Conference, giving a brief survey of gender work within Oxfam UK/I. Chapter Two deals with some key issues and perspectives which underly gender and development work in general, and inform participants' views on the issues discussed at the WLP Conference. The rest of the book falls into two sections; the first consists of five chapters in which an introduction is followed by an expert paper addressing an aspect of the external context in which Oxfam works. These chapters offer a glimpse of the 'world outside' the work of development agencies. The 'world within' is explored in the final section of the book, which discusses the implications of taking on a gender policy for Oxfam UK/I as an institution.

Throughout, the book draws on the many case studies from Oxfam UK/I field offices, and reports of the five Regional Meetings and the

Global Meeting, which led up to the WLP Conference. It attempts to cover issues as they were raised at the Conference and as they were responded to, drawing on the records of the Conference facilitators, and the documentation team.

## The challenge of change

Oxfam UK/I has field offices in 77 countries, through which it funds local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in partnership. Oxfam is operational, implementing its own programme, in some countries. It supports education, research and lobbying in the North on policies and issues that affect the South. Over the years, a mountain of evidence from around the world has supported the claim that conventional development has by-passed, alienated, and harmed many more women than it has helped.<sup>1</sup> Just as people's class, caste, ethnicity, and disability affect their chances in life, and the depth and nature of their poverty, so, critically, does a person's sex. Women carry a heavier burden of work, and face social and cultural discrimination on the grounds of sex, which affects every aspect of their lives, including their economic, social and political participation in the processes of development.

Gender analysis in development looks at the different interests and needs of women and men in each community, and seeks ways of correcting the power imbalances in gender relations that deprive so many women of so much. The obstacles to such an objective cannot be underestimated; gender relations are concerned with power, and resistance to relinquishing power is to be expected.

An organisation which, like Oxfam, seeks to work with the 'poorest of the poor' must logically be drawn to working with, and resourcing, women living in poverty. Proponents of a gender analysis of development see a fundamental flaw in imposing a hierarchical and discriminatory order in the name of development. In theory, this is in broad agreement with Oxfam UK/I's approach to development: to provide the means to enable people to find their own power to determine the direction of their lives and decide what sort of 'development' they want.

Oxfam UK/I's Gender and Development Unit (GADU) was set up in 1986 with a brief to offer advice from a gender perspective to Oxfam's overseas programme activities. GADU became a focal point for research, education, and information exchange not only for Oxfam UK/I staff, but beyond the organisation, for development practitioners, academics, and students in the South and the North.

Since then, GADU — renamed the Gender Team in 1993, upon organisational restructuring — has made a strong contribution to the

attempts of inter-agency fora in the UK and Europe to influence official and non-governmental development policy. Oxfam takes an active and supportive role in the Gender and Development Network of the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO) in the UK, and in EUROSTEP, a group of European non-governmental development organisations working in the South.

Within Oxfam UK/I, the Gender Team has developed a programme of work, including staff training and consultation, with the objective of bringing gender and development analysis into the mainstream of the organisation's work. The Gender Team also focuses on issues which are only now being recognised as valid concerns for development agencies, such as violence against women, and reproductive rights, and which link the concerns of women's organisations and development agencies.

## Oxfam UK/I's Gender Policy

In May 1993, during its fiftieth anniversary year, Oxfam UK/I ratified an organisational gender policy, formally acknowledging its concern about the fact that women are disproportionately represented among the very poorest people throughout the world, and that women are poorer than the men in their own social groupings. As Oxfam UK/I's Gender Policy states, 'development affects men and women differently'.

Oxfam UK/I's Gender Policy committed the organisation to far more than merely ensuring that all its programme work takes women's gender interests into account, and works towards meeting their practical and strategic needs. In taking on a gender policy, Oxfam UK/I committed itself to challenging the status quo in gender relations in its programme work, and to bring about radical change in the way development is analysed and practised. The gender policy challenges Oxfam to assess its own record on discrimination against women staff on grounds of gender, as well as examining the practices and projects of its partners. It stresses that attention must be given to Oxfam's own work culture, and how power is used within the organisation.

Seldom has a policy had such profound implications for the way Oxfam UK/I works: fully to implement its gender policy may prove to be one of the most difficult challenges Oxfam UK/I will ever face. As the single outstanding message from the Women's Linking Project Thailand Conference puts it: 'gender means doing things differently.' The point of taking on a gender perspective in development work is not to apply the current model of development more evenly, but to change the model itself. In order to achieve the aim of development which reaches women and overcomes the structural discrimination which they face, a dramatic

and comprehensive change of perspective and activity is needed, within the organisations which fund development activities (including multilaterals, bilaterals, international NGOs, and government structures), and those who receive funding (including NGOs in developing countries, and individuals and groups who are partners in development).

Addressing gender in development means examining imbalances in relationships, and therefore highlights the issues of power and decision-making within development organisations themselves. Although taking on a gender perspective means that all development work, with both men and women, should take into account women's and men's differing experience of life, there is a need to overcome existing discrimination against women by directing resources to activities and organisations which attempt to address women's current subordination. If women are to gain the capacity to determine their own development, which must include challenging gender discrimination, more resources have to be directed towards meeting their particular needs.

## Oxfam's Women's Linking Project (WLP)

GADU launched the Women's Linking Project in 1992. The three-year project was based on a programme of consultation, with Oxfam UK/I staff and Southern organisations who were addressing gender and development issues in their work.

Initial objectives for the WLP were 'for women in development to exchange ideas on development practice; to network in the UK and Ireland; to publicise Oxfam's work with women and gender, and strategise on gender issues'.<sup>2</sup> The WLP, as envisaged even at this early stage, was a pioneering attempt to raise the profile of gender and development issues within Oxfam UK/I's programme and communications work, and to strengthen the organisation's commitment, at every level, to gender-fair development.

The WLP presented a chance for Southern and Northern women — staff, supporters and members of the wider public — to share experiences and ideas, and to discuss joint strategies. Gender analysis is a relatively new approach to development, and knowledge of the issues, and commitment to them, is not necessarily shared among development practitioners and the organisations with whom they have chosen to work. Those who were already working with a gender perspective needed an opportunity to discuss the issues and practicalities with others.

Genuine consultation between the different interest groups involved is an important part of a gender and development analysis. Throughout

the WLP, Oxfam UK/I staff and representatives of Southern organisations worked together to strengthen links between groups and to develop a body of recommendations for gender and development that is sensitive to Southern needs.

To facilitate such consultation, and to allow for an organic growth of the Project's aims and activities based on consultation, the WLP was designed as a series of stages, each a project in its own right, yet each building on what had been learned from the previous one. This idea of a 'process-oriented' development initiative, as opposed to a succession of discrete fixed projects, was central to the thinking behind the Project. This approach to development is currently part of debates on the practice of development, within and outside Oxfam.

The first stage of the WLP consisted of an exercise in 'North-South linking', involving consultation with Oxfam field officers and project partners in the South about what they themselves considered to be the important gender issues for development. The process of selecting issues to focus on began in the first stage of the Women's Linking Project, when eight women from the South identified issues which they were interested in debating with women in the UK and Ireland. These were: violence against women, health and reproductive rights, culture, and economics and IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs).

These issues became foci throughout the first and second stages of the WLP; the flexibility in the process-oriented approach allowed these initial issues to be joined by two additional ones — political participation and environment — for the Thailand Conference. The five papers in Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven were written by recognised authorities on the issues, to provide an up-to-date summary for participants.<sup>3</sup>

In stage one of the WLP, eight Southern women participated in a visit to the UK and Ireland, with the objective of sharing experiences and analyses with organisations who had similar interests, and making the links between women's experience of social, economic, and political marginalisation in South and North.<sup>4</sup>

The second stage started with many of Oxfam UK/I's field offices joining in a review of the organisation's gender and development work, in preparation for a series of international events designed to provide an opportunity for Southern women, working at the grassroots, to bring to the discussions the needs and priorities of the women with whom they work. In late 1993 and early 1994, four Regional Meetings were held in Jakarta (South-East Asia), Harare (Africa), Santiago (Latin America and the Caribbean), and Dhaka (South Asia and the Middle East) for representatives of Southern organisations with which Oxfam UK/I works.

Representatives of these Regional Meetings carried the process forward to the final stage of the project, which consisted of two international conferences in February 1994 in Bangkok, Thailand. First came a Global Meeting of the representatives from the Regional Meetings, which concluded with the participants composing a Declaration from Southern Women's Organisations,<sup>5</sup> followed a few days later, by the Conference for Oxfam Staff.

## The 'Women Linking for Change' International Conference for Oxfam Staff, Thailand 1994

The Declaration from the Global Meeting (see Appendix 2), together with the reports of the Regional Meetings and reviews from field offices, helped to shape the agenda for the final event of the WLP — an International Conference, entitled 'Women Linking for Change'. The Conference process took note of events on the world stage which formed the backdrop to its discussions. In particular, the UN Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in June 1993, had seen the united action of women from all over the world resulting in a belated recognition of women's rights as human rights, and violence against women as a violation of human rights. This perspective also informs the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995.

'Women Linking for Change' was not an ordinary conference. The proceedings were designed by seven women facilitators from the South, knowledgeable in the theory and practice of gender and development, who met in Bangkok for 12 days before the Conference began, to consider the wide range of views and experiences which had been gathered on the main issues identified in the first stage of the WLP.

The facilitators' task was to design a conference methodology based on the principles of a gender perspective. The process of the Conference was important in itself, but the aim was always to propose recommendations for strategic action.<sup>6</sup>

The Conference programme was designed to fulfil two objectives. First, to provide the time and space necessary for participants to be able to voice their concerns, to share these with fellow participants from their geographical region and find common ground as well as links between different concerns, and to formulate recommendations for action.

The second objective was to devise a new way of conferring, which could accommodate both commonality and diversity, in a manner which did not seek to conceal potential areas of dissent or difficulty. To aim for transparency in debate and decision-making was in line with democratic procedures developed by women's organisations in the South, and an

essential part of a vision of a future, more equitable process of development.

As Maria Suarez Toro, one of the Conference facilitators, stated, 'gender-sensitive development requires gender-sensitive methodologies in all encounters where a gender perspective is discussed. In this way, the small-group participatory and democratic methodologies which have been developed by women throughout the South will benefit not only small-scale activities but larger, mainstream events.'<sup>7</sup>

As a result of this philosophy, the Conference programme was not restricted to the conventional line-up of speakers and workshops. Prepared speeches were augmented by an exchange of information and ideas between participants, in smaller groups and plenaries. Role-play — a method for raising issues creatively — was used in discussing the five main issues. Role-play depends on the willingness of the whole group to participate; while in some groups it was very successful, in at least one it was a failure because not all members were willing to participate fully.

The organic and flexible nature of the process of the Conference was a particular challenge to those participants who had only experienced Conferences as events where experts sitting on platforms deliver speeches with a minimum of interaction with their audience. Here, although plenary sessions were used, they were always made lively by varied contributions from participants. Sometimes, indeed, the plenaries seemed too short, because the diversity of experience and opinion among participants meant there was so much to say and hear.

As a whole, the Conference was planned to facilitate the maximum possible interaction and participation from all those who came to Thailand. An essential element in this was to adjust the programme in response to the direction the Conference was taking. To ensure this flexibility, the Conference facilitators not only worked behind the scenes, but attended workshops, spoke on panels, chaired sessions, and observed. Every morning they summarised their own impression of the events of the previous day, to the plenary opening session. By admitting their role in shaping the course of the Conference in this transparent manner, participants could see how everyone's contributions — their own, and those of the facilitators — were informing the daily Conference agenda.

The Conference was planned to have coherence and movement, and required all participants to speak, as well as listen, and learn. Three official languages — English, French, and Spanish — were used at the Conference. This polyphony sometimes tested the skills and patience of participants — for example, where groups were mixed by language and culture the activity sometimes took considerably longer than scheduled.

However, this was outweighed by the knowledge that the conclusions of the Conference were not limited by participants' ability to speak one dominant language, and reflected a multiplicity of views from many cultures.

## The Conference programme

The Conference programme was composed of three 'moments', seen as concentric cycles, each opening from the previous one. The moments were designed to encourage participation and, from that, an understanding of what was common to the group and what could be carried forward.

The aim of the first 'moment', entitled 'The Global Context Through a Gendered Lens', was to discuss the global economic, political and social context for development work, in relation to women's gender interests and needs. This was, perhaps, one of the most revealing parts of the Conference, as participants from different countries spoke of how they had linked their personal experience to the wider issues of gender subordination, and inequalities in national and regional development.

Each of these participants stated that she had become aware of gender issues in development, and was drawn into wider movements, through an initial experience of discrimination as a girl or young woman, and then through her involvement in specific issues. Galuh Wandita (Programme Officer, Oxfam UK/I, Indonesia) and Irene Machado (Project Officer, Oxfam UK/I, Hyderabad) worked with women as victims of violence, Dianna Melrose, as Director of Oxfam UK/I's Policy Department, has a lead role in implementing the Gender Policy within Oxfam UK/I, and Gurinder Kaur (Regional Representative, Oxfam America, New Delhi) worked as a trade union activist.

Two vivid and moving testimonies illustrated how gender relations and gender identity shape our awareness of ourselves and our surroundings, and our capacity to act. Although each woman's life story is unique, elements of individual experiences are shared by many other women. At the Conference, both women who gave their testimonies were able to relate their personal experience to social and political issues — violence, human rights, racism and development. Analyses of these issues often ignore the fact that personal power can be an instrument of repression. Self-realisation — leading to anger or to joy — is a precondition for personal development, which should be related to development of our communities and societies.

The second 'moment', entitled 'Our Practice Reviewed', was designed to look at how Conference participants addressed gender



issues in their development work. Are our organisations capable of meeting the demands created by a gender analysis, and if not, how can they be changed? Working groups looked at development goals, the roles of different stakeholders in development work, working practice, and the institutions involved in development. Three constituencies were represented here: women's organisations in the South, Oxfam UK/I's own field workers and policy makers, and representatives of other international organisations.

The aim of the third 'moment', 'Back to the Future', was to develop a common agenda and direction for future work. Here, the first and second moment were considered together, and participants identified strategies for action to promote women's gender interests, and the links between development constituencies which could foster solidarity and work on areas of shared concern.

Participants came to Thailand with a variety of concerns and expectations, and inevitably there were sometimes disagreements about the aims and agenda of the Conference. Some, who lacked materials or training on gender issues, were hoping to get practical information, and found the process of the Conference demanded, and valued, their participation. Different concepts of what constitutes 'development', and what is relevant to it, meant that some contributions were regarded as too radical or simply inappropriate by some; others found these same contributions almost too tame. Participants' varied reactions to issues previously regarded as concerns for the women's movement, rather development practitioners — for example the prevalence of sexual abuse and violence against women — were themselves catalysts for discussion.

The WLP Conference was an experiment in participation, communication, learning, and decision-making. It was a demanding process, which required full commitment and participation, and, at times, the programme seemed too ambitious for such a short period. Above all, the Conference offered Oxfam UK/I staff and women from the South the chance to listen to each other and together to visualise a strategy for gender and development into the twenty-first century.